



Facing Evil 2nd Edition

Just a Teaser

Prologue

In the misty depth of memory, she recalled an angel that had been sent down to save her, but the dark clouds of her past dragged her back to hell. If she could just hold on, maybe her angel would return, and take her beyond the darkness.

The shrill ringing phone pulled her mind from a distant nightmare. She reached for it with one hand and fumbled at the bedside lamp with the other, causing an empty liquor bottle to fall to the floor.

"Sarah?" Her heart ached as she recalled where she was and why. She sat up in bed and rubbed her gritty eyes as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. "Sorry, Lincoln. Say that again?" She tried to focus as the voice spoke.

"Okay. Hang on." She reached for the pen and notepad sitting on the nightstand. "Why are you calling me? Okay. Who's at the crime scene? All right, I'll be there, but it'll still take me a bit."

Minutes later, Abby Stanfield emerged from the bedroom tucking the folded paper into her jeans. Walking silently, she slipped her borrowed cell phone and the black wallet containing her gold shield into the pocket of her leather jacket.

She reached for her keys and as an after-thought grabbed a bagel to eat on the way. Hearing the pounding of the rain, she turned back and snatched a new ball cap that read POLICE. With the bagel still in her mouth, she quickly pulled her hair through the cap and headed out into the miserable gray of the early morning.

The flashing lights of the gathered police cars directed Abby to her destination. She approached a uniformed officer, lowered the window of her Jeep and showed her ID.

"Park it over there. Quinn's down that path. You can't miss him." The officer raised the yellow tape, allowing Abby to wheel alongside a patrol car.

She climbed slowly out of her vehicle. She was tired and sore and it showed. Slipping a piece of gum in her mouth, she headed for her partner.

"Abby. Down here." She raised her hand in acknowledgment and made her way towards a man holding an umbrella. Even in the pouring rain at a murder scene, she could see his tie and white pressed collar under his dark raincoat. "Morning, Linc."

"Morning. Thought I better get you out here before you heard about it from somewhere else. Down here." He motioned down the path.

"Heard what?" Abby stopped and stood nose to nose with the black man holding the umbrella.

Lincoln Quinn was one of the few people Abby literally looked up to. At six feet one inch, most people were unable to look her straight in the eye, but Lincoln Quinn topped her by several inches. They were more than partners; they were friends. He had taken her under his wing when she had first arrived in the department with her new, gold shield.

"You're not even supposed to be here, so I'll make this quick." He noted the tired look in her eyes and the faint smell of alcohol, but he didn't blame her. She had good reason. He wondered how much sleep she had had over the last few days.

"Lincoln," Abby interrupted his thoughts. "Show me the body."

Lincoln pointed over his shoulder. "It's over here."

They made their way through the tall trees of the park. A winding asphalt path took them down toward the handful of men scouring the crime scene. The rain had stopped, but the sounds of incessant dripping echoed loudly as they made their way toward a small bridge. The creek running beneath was engorged with rainwater, turning its color murky brown.

"Abby — wait."

It took her a moment to realize Lincoln was no longer beside her. Turning back, she looked at her partner.

"What?"

"Abby, before you go down there . . ."

She turned from the concerned features of her friend to the men below them who had stopped working at her approach.

"Abby wait!"

Not waiting to hear what Lincoln had to say, she took the last steps down the path.

There were half a dozen men performing various crime scene investigation procedures, but they all stopped working as she approached. They wanted to see her reaction.

"God damn it, Abby, would you wait?" Lincoln caught up to her and grabbed her by the arm. "Look at me."

Her eyes moved slowly over the men, and fell onto the stained white sheet draped over a motionless mound next to the creek. The noise of the swollen stream made it hard for her to make out what Lincoln was saying. Through her thick jacket, she felt his grasp on her arm tighten, as he gently shook her.

"What?" Her own deep voice sounded distant as she turned to look at Lincoln. "What?"

Lincoln released his hold.

"It's Ward."

"What?"

"It's Billy Ward." Abby followed him as he bent down and pulled back the white sheet.

Abby looked down at the victim. Past emotions pulled at her. *It was unreal; it was untrue; it couldn't be . . .* and then Lincoln's words finally hit her. It was Ward. The reality of it felt distant, but at the same time the pain was so close it almost overwhelmed her.

The man at her feet had short black hair, wet from the rain. His face was battered and bruised, frozen in a grossly distorted mask of death. Something was in his mouth, but Abby didn't look at it closely. Instead, she focused on his arms. They were tied behind his back.

She swallowed hard, but refused to look away. "You fucking bastard – you had it coming," she whispered hoarsely, "you had it coming."

"And they made sure he got it," Lincoln said as he lifted the sheet higher.

There were multitudes of stab wounds, dark and deep, that opened the flesh into wide gapping wounds. Large abrasions and small scrapes covered what was left of his exposed, bruised body. Abby's eyes went down his mutilated and beaten body, but stopped at his bloody and butchered groin. "Jesus Christ," she said quietly as she looked back to his mouth, where his penis had become his gag.

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An older woman in a late model sedan wheeled up to the closed gate of the park.

"Morning, Lieutenant." The young patrol officer nodded at the woman.

"Is Detective Quinn on site?" Lieutenant Banks asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Detective Stanfield?"

The officer suddenly looked uneasy.

"Officer . . . Barker is it? Is Detective Stanfield on site or not?"

"Yes, ma'am," he admitted.

"Thank you." She watched as the gate opened. "Keep that press back. Way back. Understood?"

Officer Barker nodded.

Lieutenant Mary Banks seldom left her desk, but the torture and murder of the city's infamous murderer and rapist was enough to bring her out, even on this miserable morning.

William Daniel Ward was the lowest form of animal, one who preyed on young innocent women. He had a demented reverence for young high school girls; he loved them but he hated them. Using a sap from a dieffenbachia plant, he made a paste that would numb their vocal chord, rendering silent so he brutally and repeatedly raping and sodomizing them, knowing no one would ever hear their desperate screams. When he was finally through with them, he'd cut and dismember them. They died a slow and extremely painful death. Every law enforcement officer in the city was involved in one aspect or another of the case, but Detectives Stanfield and Quinn were the primary investigators. Abby and Lincoln had worked hard, but they couldn't seem to catch a break. Then chance

threw them a name; William Daniel Ward. A spark of possibility grew to a flicker of probability. Abby became fixated on the case, working like one possessed, but Billy Ward had covered his tracks well. Then his thumbprint showed up on a soda can found in the last victim's car. Abby finally had a chance to bring about the end of the fear that held a stranglehold on the city. It wasn't much, but it was enough for a warrant. She made sure she and Lincoln checked every step, crossed every "T" and dotted every "I" before they left for Ward's farmhouse on the edge of town.

The two served the warrant. All the evidence they needed was there for them to find. The room he had kept his victims in, the knives he had used, the clothes he had left behind and all the blood that would forever stain the basement of the house on Elderberry Lane.

Abby and Lincoln had him, without question, without doubt. The evidence had given them all they needed. They were confident and the prosecution was satisfied they had the right man. The victims' mute voices and the extensive evidence found in that basement, had led them to an arrest in the most gruesome case the city had ever seen. The case was about to be delivered to a judge on a silver platter and then it fell apart. A first year law student stumbled across a major malfeasance in the evidence that crumbled the foundation of the prosecution case. The warrant had listed the house, not the basement. The defense argued the basement was a detached dwelling because it had a separate entrance and the judge agreed. He threw out all the evidence and William Daniel Ward had walked out of the courtroom a free man.

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Abby and Lincoln left Billy's corpse to the forensic team and had headed towards the parking lot. A simple statement on Lincoln's part had started a heated conversation, and now they stood face-to-face, oblivious to those around them.

"Not all of it has to make it into a police report!"

"God damn it, Abby, Banks needs to know! They're part of the investigation."

"No, they're not!"

Her patience and emotions were riding on her sleeve. She was exhausted and he could see the events of her life clearly on her tired face. "It's her name . . ."

"Don't! I mean it!" Abby's temper flared and she got up in his face. "Just back off!"

"Abby, you need to back off the bottle. I can still smell the booze on you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Abby fired at her partner as a set of headlights flashed over them.

"It means exactly what it means. You don't trust me!" A car door slammed and Lincoln and Abby looked over to see Lieutenant Banks heading straight for them.

I don't fucking need this right now. Abby lifted her hat and ran her fingers threw her hair.

Lieutenant Banks approached them. "Lincoln," she said nodding. "Abby - we won't go into why you shouldn't be here."

"It was my idea . . ." Lincoln started.

"She's a big girl, Lincoln. She knows she isn't supposed to be here. That aside, tell me the two of you are not standing here arguing while evidence is being trampled and lost."

"No, what evidence there is has been collected," Lincoln replied as his brown eyes shifted to Abby.

"What do you mean, what evidence?" Banks demanded. "Elaborate."

"What there is wouldn't fill a shoe box. It's like Ward fell from the sky. There's nothing, not a footprint, a tire track, nothing. Ward didn't die down there," Lincoln stated.

"Show me." All three turned and headed for the location of the dead man.

Lieutenant Banks was quiet as she examined the crime scene for herself. She had yet to look at the body. Whatever evidence was there for the human eye to see wasn't going anywhere, and any secrets the scene held were for forensics to find.

Abby excused herself for a moment and walked over to the detectives who were doing the measurements.

Lieutenant Banks watched Abby. "She can't be here."

"I had to call her."

"She's not a part of this. I want her out of here. Understood?" Lincoln nodded.

"Was the description of his body true?"

"Very." Lincoln said, thinking back to the placement of Billy's penis. "I think someone was trying to send a message."

"Mafia?" Banks questioned.

"Possible."

"Sabatini?"

Lincoln considered the name, and the man. Frank Sabatini was the father of one of Ward's victims. "He did claim to *have friends*," he answered with thought.

There was a long pause before Lieutenant Banks spoke again. "On a personal note . . . How is she?"

Detective Quinn kept his eyes on his partner as she conferred with one of the investigators. "I don't think it's hit her yet. I mean, I wasn't expecting her to shed tears, but . . ." Lincoln's voice trailed off.

Neither spoke for a while, each lost in their own concerns. Abby wasn't the only female in Lieutenant Bank's squad, and though she tried not to play favorites, sometimes she knew she did. There was something special about Abby. She was a dark shadow of mystery hiding behind a wall few got past.

"I don't want this coming back to bite us in the ass, Lincoln."

"I know, Lieutenant."

"There's going to be a lot of people looking in her direction over this. We need it by the numbers and by the book. Got it?"

"You have my word," he promised and then returned to the job at hand.

Lieutenant Banks waved for Abby to join her. She walked to the creek bridge and waited at the weathered handrail as Abby approached.

"The body wasn't dumped from up here," Abby stated firmly. "With all the rain we've had in the last few days, the ground down there is very soft and would have shown some sign of that amount of weight landing even from this small height."

The Lieutenant nodded as she looked up to see the mortician coming down the trail with Lincoln.

"Abby, after everything . . ."

Abby held up her hand. "I know."

"The press is out there in full force and I don't want this to become a media circus. If your name shows up in a headline."

"It won't."

"It can't."

The two women studied each other. "My hands are tied, Abby. I'm sorry." Lieutenant Banks turned to leave, but then turned back to face Abby. "This case has been your main focus for so long . . . And once before I had to force you to take a step back and take a leave of absence. Don't make me do it again."

Abby's eyes drifted down to the swollen creek rushing below her, but she made no sign that she heard her Lieutenant's words. "Abby, he's dead, and no matter what happens, he can never take another life again."

Abby remained silent as the water churned beneath her. She wanted nothing more than to believe her Lieutenant, but something told her, it wasn't over yet.

"Abby, I'm sorry about Sarah."

Abby's memories swirled with the water below and it took her back to another time — before it all started — to a time when it should have all ended.

Part 1

*Facing evil from our past,
In the shadow our mind has cast,
If we let it – it will grow,
And make you hide all that you know.*

*Innocence lost in the fires of Hell,
I'll take you there and make you yell.*

*When you've seen what I have seen,
The night will never let you dream.*

*Angels weep from up above,
Their sisters killed by tainted love.
Their anger soon turned into rage,
Helpless to watch upon God's stage.*

*I'm here for you, are you for me,
The truth will never set us free.
Look at me – look in my eyes,
Can love withstand a past of lies?*

Chapter 1

The courtroom was out of control, but Abby sat calmly in the last row. The judge banged his gavel, but soon gave up and left for the sanctuary of his chambers. The assistant district attorney threw his papers into his briefcase, his face a mixture of disbelief and anger. Some of the victims' parents cried as they struggled to understand what had happened and why the man who had murdered their

children was about to walk free. Members of the press fell over themselves to be the first to get the news out to the public.

"Abby? Abby . . ." She could hear Lincoln's voice, but she couldn't pull her eyes off Billy Ward. The alleged murderer turned from his lawyer and his intense blue eyes fell on Abby's solemn face. He held up his wrists to indicate they were no longer in cuffs.

You animal! I have seen what you have done with those hands. A lot of innocent people who should be alive right now . . . Abby's mind swirled as her anger boiled below the surface.

"Abby, let's go. Come on." Lincoln's words permeated her hatred as she watched Billy Ward smile a crooked teasing smile as he dared to wink at her. Detective Quinn saw the exchange between the cocky criminal and the silent woman next to him, and he realized he had to get her out of there. Rising, he grabbed a fistful of her leather jacket and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on!"

She rose at his command, but she had yet to break the stare. In the mass exodus from the courtroom, Lincoln attempted to steer Abby away, but in the press of bodies, they were forced closer to the man she loathed.

"Abby, does this mean we aren't going to be having our little conversations any more? 'Cause I'll miss that, just like I'll miss you -- calling out my name in your sleep," Billy laughed.

Lincoln saw the hatred in Abby's eyes. "Abby, forget it. Let's go!" Lincoln warned.

"Mister Ward, how does it feel to be a free man, even though most of the people of this city believe you are guilty of all those charges?" A young reporter pushed a microphone into Billy's face, but Billy kept his eyes on Abby.

"I'm a free man because I'm an innocent man, who was wrongly accused. I'm not a murderer or a rapist, but I am a man, and I do love beautiful young women." He laughed. Some people in the crowd cringed at the sadistic sound.

Lincoln had his hands full, desperately trying to get his partner out of the hallway outside of the courtroom and away from Billy. Realizing that it was almost

impossible with the mob, he pinned her up against the cold marble and wood wall. "God damn it, Abby, stop it before you do something stupid."

Abby pulled her eyes away from Billy and focused them on Lincoln. "We can't do a thing Lincoln . . . Not a thing until that animal rapes and murders someone else and then disappears into whatever hole he lives in. We have nothing, because everything there was just got thrown out." She clenched her teeth. "He's a murdering bastard who gets pleasure out of raping and torturing girls . . ."

At that moment, Billy and his entourage of lawyers and reporters walked by Abby and Lincoln. The throng of moving bodies jostled the detectives just as Billy leaned into Abby. "Thanks for everything, sweetie. Until we meet again." He smiled and to kiss her on the cheek.

All hell erupted as Abby broke from Lincoln's hold as if he wasn't even there. "I'll fuckin' kill you!" Abby roared. Her first punch broke Billy's nose; the second cracked a few teeth.

Flash bulbs popped off in every direction as the ruckus drew the television cameras from outside into the mêlée. Free from Lincoln's grasp, Abby was uncontrollable as she let loose a flurry of powerful punches. Parents of some of the dead women got close enough to join in. People were pushing and shoving, some trying to get away, others trying to get closer. It was chaos.

It took the police and the court officers forever to get control of the situation. Realizing what the scene was going to mean for Abby, Lincoln grabbed her by the back of her jacket and with the help of two other officers dragged her to the rear of the crowd.

"Get her out of here, Detective," one of the uniformed officers said. Winded, all Lincoln could do was nod as he dragged his disheveled partner towards the stairs. They said nothing as they clambered down the cement stairwell, every movement echoing in their ears. They reached the door that read *Parking Garage. Authorized Personal Only* without running into anyone.

When the heavy fire door slammed shut behind them, Lincoln turned Abby around to face him. "Are you out of your mind?"

"He had it coming!" Abby yelled back at him. "We had him dead to rights and because of some . . ." Her breath came in gulps as her anger festered.

"Technicality . . ." She spat.

"We screwed up."

"We didn't screw up, Lincoln, the law did. There isn't a sane person out there who doesn't know he did it." Her head was pounding as she struggled to get the words out. "That . . . That animal is now going to prey on someone else."

"And we will be there to catch him."

"I'm not going to stand around and wait for someone else to become a statistic."

Abby's adrenaline pumped wildly through her body as she shook a fist at him.

"He's killed too many already."

"So you put your entire career on the line and go after him. Jesus, Abby, the whole press gallery saw you split the man's face open as you threatened to kill him."

"Do I look like I give a damn?" she yelled back at him.

"Abby, you're one of the best cops I know, and I'm not going to stand around and watch *you* throw your life out the God damn window, because of some filth like Ward!" he yelled back at her, his own anger exploding. "He won this time, and you let him get to you. He won. You lost." The statement sent Abby over the edge. She collected Lincoln's shirt in her hand, then cocked back with a closed fist.

"Go ahead and hit me, if it'll make you feel better." He watched her eyes and he knew she wasn't going to hit him. "Abby, you're like a sister to me. I don't want to see you throw everything away. Not like this."

She still held him by the front of his shirt, but slowly her grip loosened and she dropped her head.

"It's been a shitty day. Let's just get out of here and go have a drink somewhere," he said as her right fist finally relented and fell to her side. It was then he saw her knuckles.

"Abby, look at what you did. You need to get that . . ." He looked down at her left hand and saw the blood. "You're a mess."

Abby looked down at her bloody hands. They still shook from the rush of adrenaline. From deep inside her jacket came the distinctive warble of her cell phone. "Shit," she said with a dejected sigh.

"Want me to answer it?" he questioned.

She shook her head. "Let it ring."

"You know who it's going to be," he said looking at her and she nodded. "You okay?" he asked as the cell phone rang a few more time and then went silent. When Abby did not answer him, Lincoln looked at his battered and bruised partner. He still had one question. "Abby, what were you thinking about, going after him like that?"

"You want to know what I was thinking about?" She did not attempt to hide her frustration as she turned to face him. "I'll tell you what I was thinking about. I was thinking of all the girls we've let down. I was thinking about Cheryl Lawrence, Traci Sabatini, Anita . . ." The names continued but she no longer had a voice to say them. Abby went quiet for a moment before she continued. "I'm sick of him. I'm sick of having to clean up after him." Abby finally lifted her head. "I wanted this to be over." Lincoln was surprised at the growing shimmer in her eyes in the dim light of the underground garage. It was rare to see her cry.

"Abby . . ." he started, but she stopped him.

"Let's just get out of here," she said as she attempted to hide her tears of frustration.

"The only place you're going is the hospital," Lincoln said as he opened the car door for her.

Abby slid in without a word.

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"Abby? You okay?" Lincoln asked with concern as they came out of the hospital.

Her mood was dark and somber as she looked down at the blue fiberglass cast on one hand and the bandages wrapped around the other. "I can't reach my cigarettes," she said with frustration as he opened the car door for her.

Lincoln smiled. "Don't look to me to help you. Maybe it's a perfect time to quit," he said with a chuckle as he closed the door.

Walking around the car, he slid into the driver's seat with a smile still on his face.

Abby looked over with a glare. "Yeah well. Keep on laughing, 'cause I won't be able to do any of the typing for the reports either."

His smile faded from his face as he realized the truth of her comment.

"I want to swing past my place before we hit the station," Abby said as she stared out the window. "I need to change my shirt."

Lincoln said nothing as he glanced over at the crumpled and bloody shirt she was wearing. He didn't mind. The drive into the canyon was out of the way, but it delayed their return to the station.

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Pulling into the gravel and dirt driveway, they heard the deep bark of Abby's dog.

"I'll only be a sec," she said, sliding from the car.

"I'll wait out here."

"Hey, Buck." Abby greeted her dog as she fumbled with the gate. The huge dog was a wolf husky hybrid they had recovered from a crime scene a few years back, part of a litter of seven that needed homes. Most went to people within the department, but for some reason, no one wanted the pup with one floppy ear, Buck. Abby thought she was only going to take him in until someone else stepped forward, but no one ever did. She hadn't fooled anyone. They knew he had found his way into her heart.

Lincoln opened the gate and reached down to ruffle the immense dog's head.

"Your mommy was a bad girl today, Buck. She has gotten us into a lot of trouble,"

Lincoln said in a playful tone, to which the dog responded with a small howl. "Yes, again, but don't be too hard on her. She only did what I would've done if I could've reached the bastard first," Lincoln explained quietly as he scratched Buck's head and looked up to the top deck and the windows of Abby's bedroom. "You be good to her right now, Buck. She's having a rough time." He leaned back and waited for her to return.

It was a long time before he saw movement in the kitchen window. Abby opened the back door and stood with her black bra showing from under her open denim shirt. "I can't get the buttons," she said in dejected annoyance.

Lincoln smiled at her dilemma as he walked over to help.

"Say one word of this and I'll whack you up the side of the head with my cast."

"Who'd believe me anyhow?" Lincoln retorted as he did up the last button.

Chapter 2

Lieutenant Banks barely looked up when Lincoln knocked and the two partners entered. She held out her hand for their reports as she picked up her glasses sitting on the desk. "Turn on the TV and have a seat."

Lincoln turned the channel until he found one of the news stations. With the volume turned low, they sat and waited as the lieutenant scanned their reports.

When the news came on, Lieutenant Banks reached for the remote and turned up the volume. The newscast showed pictures of Billy Ward's victims before it started to show what had transpired at the courthouse earlier.

"I'll fuckin' kill you!" Abby launched herself at Billy Ward. The news anchor's voice began to commentate on the action on screen.

"The woman you see savagely attacking Mr. William Ward is none other than Detective Abby . . ."

"Savagely attacking?" Abby protested.

"Detective!" Lieutenant Banks warned.

". . . the case against Mister Ward was dismissed earlier. We will show this once again. Since the unprovoked attack came from out of nowhere, it may be difficult to see. If you look to the left of your screen..."

Abby jumped up. "Lieutenant, I'm not saying what I did was right, but they're showing a very slanted view."

"Detective, I'm aware of what happened. We - and by we I mean the Captain, Superintendent Gilmer and myself - saw the raw footage. And I'm unhappy with the way they're airing this, but . . ." Lieutenant Banks stopped talking when Billy Ward came on the screen.

He sat in a wheelchair with his nose heavily taped, his right eye swollen shut, and a row of black stitches along the right corner of his mouth. Beneath it all, a keen eye could see his leering smirk.

Playing the audience for all he could, Billy Ward cleared his throat with a grimace.

"What happened today at the courthouse was . . . unfortunate." He paused and carefully licked his lips. "Detective Stanfield has a tendency to be overly emotional and a little out of control, regarding this case because she has been working so hard on it. My heart and concern go out to her for having exhausted herself while hunting me and making my life so . . . So unlivable." He looked up and stared into the camera. "I hope she never has to experience that kind of . . . Frustrating loss of personal privacy."

"I think I'm going to puke," Lincoln said in revulsion.

"I hold no ill will toward anyone, especially Detective Stanfield. And against the recommendation of my lawyer, I do not intend to pursue any charges against the police department or any of its members. I do hope . . . This issue between Detective Stanfield and I . . . Can be resolved. And I hope," Billy leaned forward just slightly and looked straight into the camera, "she gets the professional help she needs . . ."

"You fucking little . . ." Abby's eyes were wild, her face red with rage.

"Detective!" Lieutenant Banks ordered, "Enough. It's over. Be glad he isn't suing."

"Glad? That's what he wants. He's playing with us. Just like he has all along."

"Then let him play, because sooner or later he's going to make a mistake and we'll be there waiting." The lieutenant dropped her head and looked down at the paperwork on her desk. "Abby," she looked up reluctantly, "you did what we all wanted to do but that doesn't make it right. You're supposed to uphold the law, not break it. I hate to do this, but you've left me little choice –"

"Are you firing me?" Abby looked desperately at her partner.

Lincoln looked at his superior. "Lieutenant, that's not right. If the roles had been reversed, it could've been me taking that swing at Ward."

"But it wasn't you Lincoln. It was Abby."

Lieutenant Banks turned back to Abby as the tall detective sank into her chair. "You're not fired Abby. I want to make that perfectly clear. But Ward was right about one thing. You're too close to this. You need to back away before it consumes you. This is a case, a gruesome one, but it's still just a case, and I should've done something about it long time ago." The lieutenant took a breath. "You've six weeks of banked vacation time and the doctor recommended at least six weeks medical leave . . ."

"You've got to be kidding me? Twelve weeks off just for punching that piece of shit? I can see the six weeks until the cast comes off, but come on, Lieutenant twelve weeks?"

There was a long and dreadful pause before Lieutenant Banks looked up to face Abby. The detective shut her mouth when she saw her boss was not finished. Lieutenant Banks continued reluctantly. "And another twelve weeks in exchange for keeping your badge for that scuffle at the courthouse."

The air in the office grew heavy as Lieutenant Banks and Lincoln looked at Abby. They waited and watched as her mouth opened and closed several times. Lincoln knew his partner and he held his breath waiting for an explosion, but Abby remained silent.

She rose to her feet and moved to the window to look down at the flurry of traffic below. "For a grand total of six months," she finally said softly.

"They wanted your badge, Abby, but I wouldn't give it to them. The only reason we even got Billy Ward in front of a judge was because of your hard work and tenacity. I refused to let you go, Abby. You're too good of a cop."

"But six months," Abby said as she turned from the window. Her face showed disbelief, but her dark eyes danced with anger. "Six months. Those sniveling, pencil pushing bastards are trying to make me the scapegoat because he walked. They're hoping I'll quit, aren't they?"

"Abby, you need a break," Lincoln said. "Take it. Take what they're offering. Give yourself time to heal. Put this behind you."

Abby showed no sign of hearing Lincoln's words. "They want me to quit because I had the balls to do what everyone else only dreamed of doing. We watched while he went from girl to girl, raping and murdering. We did nothing! He was laughing at us then and he is laughing at us now. Six months! They're hoping I'll quietly walk away. Well, you can tell them I don't do anything quietly!" She ripped back her jacket and with a grimace of pain pulled her gun from her shoulder harness. She slammed the gun down on desk, followed by her badge. "I quit!"

Abby stalked out of the office, slamming the glass door that read *Lieutenant M. Banks* so hard the glass exploded and cascaded loudly to the floor. She walked away without blinking an eye.

Lincoln stood stunned as he watched the last of the glass trickle to the ground, and then turned to his boss.

"Don't worry, Detective. I've no intention of keeping her badge or her gun. I spent half the day fighting for her to keep it." Lieutenant Banks picked up Abby's gun and badge and held them out to Lincoln. "She's got a temper. That's no secret, but she's wound too tight right now, it's for her own good and we both know it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go talk to her. Convince her this is a good thing."

Lincoln nodded as he pulled open the remains of the door.

"Detective." Lincoln looked back at his boss when she spoke. "I don't want her hanging around here, is that understood? I want her out of town and not at home talking to you on the phone every hour. I want her gone. Away from Ward, away from the media, away from here."

"Yes, ma'am." He stepped over the glass and started to close the door.

"Why bother?" Lieutenant Banks said sarcastically.

Lincoln nodded and backed away from the mess.

The lieutenant hollered after him. "Tell her she owes me a new door!"

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Abby reached down with her right hand to open the door to the roof of the police station, the thin white line around her lips was evidence of the pain she felt. Stepping back, she put her boot on the handle and kicked open the door. The heavy steel door swung open with a bang.

Clouds darkened the afternoon skies, but the solemn detective took no notice as she made her way down the three stairs to the small covered deck the officers used when they wanted a smoke or just a break in their day. She stood there motionless, except for her long hair waving in the wind. Abby stepped up onto one of the wooden deck chairs and sat down on the back of it, huddling herself deeper into her leather jacket.

She knew her anger had gotten the better of her in Bank's office just as it had at the courthouse. Billy was a free man and she had just handed in her badge. No matter how she looked at it, the day made no sense. She hated how she had handled herself. Abby looked down at the cast that went from her forearm to the tips of her fingers. With a grimace, she managed to wiggle just the end of her index finger.

It had been a long day. With a heavy sigh, she reached into the inside pocket of her jacket with her right hand. A slice of pain went through her hand, telling her it was unhappy with the way she continued to treat it.

With a loud hiss, she pulled her hand back and looked at the bandage. It was all she could do to pull out the pack and remove a cigarette with her teeth. She left the cigarette dangling from her mouth as she pulled out her lighter with a groan. After several attempts, she couldn't even manage to get a spark.

"To hell with it!" She tossed the lighter and cigarette to the ground in frustration.

"I could've helped you with that." The deep voice of her partner instantly curbed her rising temper.

"I've been meaning to quit anyways."

"Smoking or your job?"

"Both." Her voice echoed her disappointment. "How am I gonna afford to smoke without a job?"

"Oh, cut the shit. We both know your parents left you so much money you never have to work another day in your life."

"Lincoln," she warned.

"Fine, be a hard ass. But I'm not packing this around for the next six months." Lincoln pulled her gun and badge out of his pocket. "Come on, take it. Banks said she didn't spend all day fighting for it so you could leave it behind."

She looked at her weapon and shield for a long moment before she finally reached for them. "What the hell am I suppose to do for six months?"

"Learn a second language?" Lincoln offered with a small smile.

"Oh you're funny." She gave him an icy stare.

"How about a nice vacation? Dance on a table in Greece, or go cuddle a koala?"

"What exactly are you trying to say?"

"Banks says you can't stick around here."

"I got that part."

"I don't mean here as in the police station. I mean here as in the city. You have to leave town."

"Oh, for the love of . . ." Abby climbed off the chair and walked across the rooftop. "I feel like I'm being run out of Dodge before sundown."

"Come on Abby, give it a chance. Go away somewhere. Sleep in, get fat, fall in love. I don't care so long as you take a break and come back as the woman I used to know. Abby, you're too young to be burning out this fast."

Back and forth she paced, her long strides digging deep into the roofing gravel as the wind blew her hair. Light rain began to fall but she paid it no attention.

"Will you stop and talk to me? It's starting to rain."

"Do I look like I give a shit? I've months to do nothing. Maybe I'll catch a cold and die!"

Lincoln shook his head as the rain speckled the wooden walkway and the gravel.
"Why can't you just look at it like a rest?"

"Because you big, dumb bastard, no one takes a *rest* for six months."

"You could get pregnant and take a year off on maternity."

Abby stopped her pacing and turned to look at him as raindrops fell onto her face.
"Is your tie on too tight? I don't want *more* time off!" She threw her arms up in exasperation and returned to her pacing. "Men! How the hell you ended up running the freakin' world is beyond me. Jesus Lincoln, you don't think me being gay might make getting pregnant a little difficult?"

Her sharp mind and quick tongue were part of what he loved about her. He stood up and put his hands on his hips to show his seriousness. "Look, I talked to Carla and we'll look after Buck and your place for you."

She stopped again and turned to look Lincoln in the eye. Even from this distance he could see he had said the wrong thing. "I don't care where I'm going, but where ever it is... I'm taking my dog with me!"

Lincoln held his hands up in mock surrender. "Okay, okay, all right. Far be it for me to come between a girl and her wolf."

"He's not a wolf, he's a hybrid. Part wolf. Buck's a great dog and would never hurt a fly, you know that."

"Yeah, I know. He's a big puppy with big teeth," Lincoln said with a small smile.

"And he'd eat you anyhow." Abby looked up at her partner in despair. "What am I going to do and where am I going to do it?"

"Why don't you head to that retreat you sent Carla and me to on our honeymoon? It was a great place Abby, with fishing, hiking and horseback riding." He could see that his words were sinking in. He threw his arm around her shoulder as she gave him a playful jab to the ribs with her elbow.

"You can be such a moron. The proverbial missing link."

"Fine, but I'm a missing link who's surrounded by beautiful and stubborn women. Come on, Carla has dinner on and she'll kill me if I don't bring you home."

Chapter 3

Taking her hand off the steering wheel, Abby flexed her fingers the best she could. The long drive had felt good, except for her hands and her butt. The mountains around her had become high and rugged, and the evergreens thick and tall. It had been a long time since she had been to the Gold Creek Resort, but her memories of it were as clear as if it was yesterday.

Gold Creek Resort was where she had spent most of her summers when she was a child. The secluded resort was on the edge of a small lake nestled between three mountain ranges. The towering peaks were always capped by snow and their rugged terrain carpeted with a thousand different hues of green. The lake was stocked with rainbow trout for fishing. Its pristine waters were great for canoeing, and each small cabin positioned on the shore had its own dock. There were trails for hiking or horseback riding, tennis courts and even a small restaurant. The memories brought a smile to Abby's face. She hadn't told Lincoln and Carla that she had been there before, because it seemed like a lifetime ago. The lifetime of a happy child long since buried by the brutality of the real world.

Abby saw the sign for Gold Creek Resort hanging off the massive timbers that framed the entrance. Pushed off to one side was a gate that had never been closed and the dirt road leading to the resort. Slowing down, she prepared herself for an onslaught of memories. Following the road along the lake edge, she noticed a few changes since she had been there last.

"I guess twenty years will change just about everything," she said aloud. The small cabins along the lake looked bigger and more secluded and the lodge once been built out of post and beam was now a long, log structure. The main building was tall with a high peak roof, and the gables were filled with windows facing the snow-capped mountains.

Pulling into a parking spot in front, Abby barely had the Jeep's motor turned off when the front screen door opened.

"Abigail!" An elderly woman quickly made her way toward the vehicle. "Twenty years or not, I would know those eyes anywhere."

"Helga, it's so great to see you." It took Abby a moment to get the door to the Jeep open and even longer to pull her cramped and tired body out of her seat. The woman, who had known Abby as a child, wrapped her arms around the tall detective. "You are much taller now Abigail, you promised me you would not grow taller than me," she said in a Scandinavian accent, followed by a wink.

"Actually, it's just Abby now," she whispered into Helga's ear as she relished the moment and the hug. Although Abby had not returned to the resort in twenty years, she talked to Helga and her husband Günter regularly by phone.

"Whatever you say, dear. Let me look at you, child." Helga said as she pulled out of the heartfelt embrace for a better look. "It has been a long time, but I see little Abigail. The years have been good to you. I have heard it, but now I see it. Though the cast and bandages are new, yes?"

Abby nodded with a smile as Helga continued her running evaluation. "I still see the pain in those beautiful eyes of yours."

The detective tried to ignore the comment.

"What you need is love. You need love in your life child. You need to let it all go and learn to love. Let the dead rest in peace." Seeing the effects of her words. Helga quickly changed the subject, her round face filled with a smile. "So this must be the young man in your life?"

Buck's tail wagged happily, as he noticed the two faces looking at him. His powerful front legs hung out the window as he waited for his owner's command to release him from the Jeep. "You were right, he is a big and handsome boy, but it's not enough. You need a pretty girl to make those eyes sparkle again."

Not wanting to get into that conversation, Abby called on her companion to change the subject. "Buck, come." She barely got the dog's name out before he came through the open driver's door and landed in a sitting position at Abby's feet. He wiggled and squirmed like a child wanting attention, his tail beating the hard packed dirt.

"I had a hybrid back in the old country. Most are good. Some are not, but I can tell he is good puppy, *ya*?"

"Yes, but this *puppy* is four years old and about one hundred pounds too heavy to be a lap dog," Abby commented as Buck enjoyed all the attention he was getting.

"Günter will love him. Come child, there are so many things I want to show you. Changes we have made, but first I will show you where you are staying." Before Abby could say a word, Helga had Buck back in the Jeep and she was getting in behind the wheel. The tall detective smiled as she walked around to get in the passenger side of her own vehicle.

Helga took them on a slow tour of the resort, pointing out changes along the way. Abby listened, but kept her eyes on the winding trail that was barely wide enough for her Jeep. The large tires made little sound as they compressed thousands of pinecones littering the trail. The wild flowers rising up on either side of the road were so close to the side of the Jeep Abby was tempted to reach out and pick some. The rays of the afternoon sun shot through the trees in a sharp contrast to the shade of the thick branches.

"Here you are, dear, the last cabin on the lake. The best for you." Helga turned down a narrow lane and pulled in beside a small log cabin. Abby noted the driveway, lined with recently stacked firewood, had fresh rake marks where someone had just cleaned off the debris deposited by the forest. Abby looked over her new accommodations as her Jeep came to a stop.

Four wooden steps led up to a beautiful L - shaped cedar sundeck that went along the side the cabin and around the front. Tall evergreen and alder trees surrounded them, giving Abby all the privacy that Helga had promised on the phone. Stepping out of the Jeep, Abby was a little surprised to see smoke coming from the river-rock chimney protruding from the tin roof. As she held open her car door, Abby gave a small nod to Buck to let him know he was free from the confines of the vehicle.

"I will get your bags dear, you have no hands to help. You look around. Make acquaintance with the mountains again."

Abby gave a short whistle and Buck bounded to her side as she began wandering down to the dock. She took a deep breath and the aroma of nature instantly

recharged her tired body and revitalized her memories. The air was clean and crisp as it blew off the high white peaks and a slight breeze rippled the water of the lake. Abby's boots echoed on the wooden dock as Buck walked next to her, his eyes and ears registering all that was new to him. Abby sat down on the bench at the end of the dock and Buck quickly sat next to her feet.

Abby's dark eyes took in all that hadn't changed in twenty years and for the first time in a long time she felt connected to her surroundings. She always had a keen understanding of life and nature and knew a person's time on earth meant nothing to a mountain that would stand unchanged for a million years. The ripples of the lake constantly licked at the underbelly of the wooden dock the floating moss-like algae clung to the submerged pilings and would until time eroded what man had built. She recalled with a sad smile the image of her father in the lake, the water up to his chest and Günter by his side as they built a dock for each cabin.

Buck's head snapped around and his ears twitched, alerting her to someone's presence. Turning around, she saw Günter coming out from the cabin and a smile spread across her face. "Easy boy, he's one of the good guys," Abby said to her dog as she got to her feet and headed back down the dock.

"Ah, my little angel has all grown to be a tall beauty."

"Günter, you and Helga are good for a girl's ego." They held out their arms and hugged each other tightly. His hair was completely white now, but other than that he hadn't changed since she had seen him last.

"You are so tall now, Abby," he said. "You have your father's eyes, my dear . . . And the smile of your mother."

Abby smiled as she gently put her fingertips against his lips. "Please."

He understood without saying a word as his tanned and leathered face clouded with concern. Günter reached for her battered and broken hands. "You are right and we have much to catch up on when you feel you want to. But some I already know," he said with a wink.

Putting an arm around her waist, he directed her to the cabin. "Come, I have left you a treat in the cupboard in your cabin; a bottle of the best Aquavit," he said in

a whisper He looked back and waved at Helga. "I know you enjoy the bottles I send at Christmas, and after what I saw . . . You might need it for medicinal purposes." He turned back and smiled at her. "You have the best left hook of anyone I know." He gently patted her cast as he guided her to the stairs at the front of the cabin.

"You saw that? Even up here?"

"We may be out in the country here, but we are not in the old country."

The inside of the cabin was simple but showcased Günter's Scandinavian craftsmanship. One bedroom opened out onto the deck via a sliding glass door. A full bathroom included an antique tub. There was a countertop with a small sink next to a wooden table with four chairs, and then finally a sofa and a rocking chair in front of the river-rock fireplace.

Helga had the double doors into the cabin wide open.

"The box arrived this morning. You have people who care for you, yes?" she asked.

Abby nodded as she walked over to a large box sitting on the counter behind the table.

"There is a card here." Helga pulled it out and handed it to Abby.

Abby,

I thought I should make sure you had everything you needed to keep your ass in the mountains and away from here. Relax and enjoy.

Linc

Günter lifted out a brand new tackle box, holding it out for Abby to see, but she held up her damaged hands and smiled. "That is going to have to wait for a bit," she said.

In the bottom of the box were several small wrapped boxes. "And three boxes of chocolates and three cases of beer." Abby turned to Günter's chuckle. "I think I'll need one of the fridges."

"I will bring you one," Günter said.

"Come now, Günter. I think Abby needs some rest and some time alone." Helga took her husband's hand. "Let us know if you need anything, my child."

"I will. I can't thank you both enough for everything you've done here . . ." Abby motioned to her surroundings.

"We are just glad to have you back," Helga said with an adoring smile.

After a quick but loving hug from both of them, Abby finally was alone. She stood on the deck watching them until they turned onto the trail and headed back to the main lodge walking hand-in-hand.

The silence around her was deafening as she sat down on the bench on the deck, but soon nature began to talk to her and she felt her body relaxing. Hoping to help it out a little, Abby went back inside and searched for the bottle of Aquavit. Günter had been true to his word and the bottle of nearly pure grain alcohol was where he said it would be. She poured herself a small cup of the golden amber, and then sat down on the sofa.

"Now what?" she asked aloud to no one. It was a question she didn't have an answer for as she took a long drink of the potent alcohol. Looking around the empty cabin, Abby wondered if she would still have her mind in six months.

The fire crackled, its flame drawing her stare hypnotically. Feeling the warmth of the alcohol in her system, Abby leaned back and closed her eyes. Her life had been running at top speed for so long the sudden change of pace was almost more than she could handle. Restless and irritated, the detective paced the small log cabin. She moved back and forth, her long legs striding in no direction as she continuously sipped at her glass of Aquavit. Soon the sun disappeared, taking with it the outside light Abby's world began to change. The log walls closed in and the silence screamed as visions and memories cried out in her mind.

She opened the double doors leading out onto her deck, hoping the cool night air would refresh her thoughts, but it was no use. Pouring another glass of Aquavit,

Abby laid her tired body down on the lounge chair on the deck. Sometime in the night, as the fire's embers glowed red in the ashes, Abby's empty glass slid silently from her hand as she passed into a world of no pain.

Chapter 4

The loud chirping of morning birds crashed through her alcohol-induced fog. Abby squinted and blinked hard as she tried to recall where she was. One look at the mirrored surface of Lake Alouette and all the realities of her life came back to her. She pulled herself up into a sitting position and closed her eyes with a deep groan, only to open them again when she heard the steady thumping of Buck's tail.

"What are you so happy about?" she asked as Buck leaned forward and licked the side of her face.

"Stop it. What's your - Oh my God! I forgot to feed you. I'm sorry. I bet you're hungry?" The large dog replied with a small howl.

"All right, all right. Give me a sec, will ya?"

After she fed her dog, Abby went to the coffee maker, filled it with water and heaped the dark coffee into a filter. Then impatiently she stood over the carafe and waited.

"Hello?" a voice in the distance called out.

"Come on in, Günter," she offered gently through her hangover.

"Good morning, you sleep good, yes?" the tall white haired Scandinavian asked as he walked in carrying a small bar fridge.

Stopping to look Abby in the eye, Günter's expression told her she wasn't fooling anyone.

"You know, grains are good for breakfast, but not the liquid kind." Abby heard the care and concern in his voice, and held her tongue.

"You are all grown up now Abby, and you have had your share of things to deal with . . ."

"I'm a big girl, Günter."

"Yes you are, so I don't have to tell you, alcohol will only mask the problem and then it will make it bigger." He watched her for a moment before deciding what to say. "Abby, you have time on your hands and that can be a good thing or a bad thing. You need to look and see what is around here. It is yours to take when you decide to take it. You have seen so much for one so young, Abigail, but there is a lot of life left in you, life to live."

Standing on the threshold of the front doors, Abby listened to Günter's words as she sipped her coffee and looked over the beautiful view before her. She heard him approach her from behind, but she said nothing as he placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned and offered a small smile and Günter knew she had no response for him.

"Helga will be looking for you for lunch," he said as he made his way across the deck and down the stairs.

"Tell her not to wait, I won't be there." Abby never saw the look of disappointment on his face as she turned back into her cabin.

She hadn't meant to be rude or disrespectful, but she hadn't come here to be lectured or doted on by either of them.

By mid morning, Abby had pulled out a puzzle and left its pieces scattered on the table. She had started a novel but only read the first few pages. She had pulled out her fishing gear, but left it leaning against the wall next to the fireplace. Finally, after a fitful morning, Abby decided maybe a nap would do her good, but then again maybe not. Sleeping was something she didn't look forward to. It left her mind open and vulnerable to nightmares, taking her down dark and shadowy paths. They were far away from the comforting dreams others found in their sleep.

Abby's nightmares concerned murdered girls who had been raped and tortured. Beautiful young girls, who had been cut and carved on while they were still alive, silenced by the leaves of the dieffenbachia plant stuffed into their mouths. Abby saw them whenever she closed her eyes, each one of them, before, during and after their murders. She knew their names, their birth dates, and in maddening detail, their brutal deaths. Their silent screams begging for someone to help them. They would pull at her, their outstretched bloody hands grabbing at her arms, scratching and tearing at her. Their voices cried out her name, pleading for someone to stop their pain as a long thin knife cut deep into their flesh. Abby could hear the sound of the blade as it carved down the bone. She could see the gloved fingers around the handle tightening to cut down harder. Then came the laughter, his deep demented laughter. And he was laughing at her.

Billy Ward's face came out of the shadows, laughing and taunting her as his knife continued to cut away at the flesh of the young girls.

"You can't help them, Abby." He brought up his knife and drove it into Abby's breast. "You can't! You can't! You can't!" With each chant, Billy brought out the knife and plunged it in again. "You can't save them and you can't stop me."

Abby dove at him, her hands aimed at his throat.

The flash of fire in her fist immediately awoke her from her nightmare. A thin sheen of sweat glistened over her muscular body, matting her hair to her face and forehead. Her breathing came in gulps as she looked at her right hand and the dots of blood cracking through the scabs of her stitches.

Going into the bathroom, she ran cold water over her hand then mopped her face with a towel. Looking into the mirror, Abby had a hard time looking at her own reflection; there was guilt in her eyes, in her features, darkening her soul. Shaking the excess water off her hand, she left the bathroom and headed for the bottle of Aquavit. She quickly tossed the first splash into the glass and down her throat. After pouring another, she put the cap back on the bottle and walked outside. Standing on the edge of the deck, her gaze fell on the waters of Lake Alouette. Draining her second drink, she went back inside to pour another and to fetch herself a cold beer from her fridge.

"Come on, Buck." The big husky followed her down on to the dock. Carefully, she juggled the bottle and the glass until she made it out to the bench. Stretching out her long legs, she sat and looked over the lake. She watched a few people out on the water in their canoes while she sipped on the potent alcohol. A flock of ducks flew overhead and loudly made their descent down to the water, causing Buck's head to tilt back and forth as he watched their progress.

The slow afternoon mixed with the power of the Aquavit and soon Abby found herself laying on the dock in a warm relaxed stupor. The sun was slowly making its way towards the rugged mountaintops, but she gave it no mind or thought. Lying on her back, with her knees up and her eyes closed, Abby placed her empty glass on the wooden dock. Feeling around with her right hand, she reached for her beer. It was warm now, but she was too comfortable to go and get a cold one.

Picking the bottle up with the only two fingers working, Abby placed it on her stomach. When she reached with her left hand to hold it, her heavy fiberglass cast clinked against the glass. She opened one eye and looked at the bottle. The cast on her hand made it impossible for her to grasp the slick glass. Realizing the problem, she switched hands and held the bottle with her right as she attempted to open it with her left, but there wasn't enough of her left fingers sticking out for her to touch the bottle cap, never mind grasp it. Abby lifted her head and glared at the bottle.

"Well, this is annoying," she said as she sat up and placed the bottle between her knees. Whatever she had done to her knuckles in her nightmare had made them swell and the tightness of the stitches on her right hand made it impossible for her to get a hold of the cap. Her growing anger and frustration quickly began to wash away the warmth and relaxation she had found in the sun. She had no idea how long she battled the bottle, but as she lifted it to her teeth, she noticed Buck was looking behind her. Abby, with the beer bottle cap between her teeth, turned to see a beautiful red-haired woman walking down her dock.

"Please don't do that," the woman said politely motioning towards the bottle in Abby's mouth.

The detective froze. With the sinking sun behind her, the woman looked radiant if not angelic. Abby was speechless as she sat and stared. The beautiful stranger

now stood on the dock with two bottles of beer in one hand and an opener in the other.

"I come with an opener." The smile that brightened the young fresh face caused Abby's heart to skip a beat. The woman motioned towards Buck. "Please tell me he's friendly."

"Huh?" was all the detective could muster.

"Your dog? Is he friendly? That mountain of hair is a dog, isn't it?"

"Huh? Oh yes, Buck . . . Leave it," Abby commanded and the husky's shoulders relaxed, but he kept an attentive eye on the stranger.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, but I couldn't help but notice your situation." The woman turned and pointed with her bottle opener at the cabin next to Abby's. "I could see... we're neighbors... I wasn't being nosy or anything... well, maybe just a little. I mean I'm not normally a nosy person, but with all the activity around your cabin the last couple days... I mean both Helga and Günter were cleaning up around the place... not that the place was messy or anything. I mean they keep all of the cabins and the resort so neat and all... well I was wondering if it was someone famous coming in..."

Abby sat and listened to her neighbor's nervous ramblings as her own dark eyebrows knitted in question and confusion. Suddenly, the woman realized she was doing all the talking and she stopped with an embarrassed flush to her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. If you'd rather I left..." She felt her cheeks redden further.

"Huh, what no - I - ah - no. Please," Abby finally regained the power of speech and motioned for the woman to sit. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, it's just that I wasn't expecting anyone."

"If you would rather be alone, I understand. I mean a lot of people come up here for time alone. You know, to relax and get back to nature and all. Well, if that's what you want. I'll just open your beer... actually, have one of mine. It will least be colder than yours. I'll just open this up for you and then..." Putting one of her beer

bottles down, she flipped off the cap of the other with an ease that made Abby smile.

"You know, that's not as easy as you would think." Abby said, taking the offered beer. "Please, don't go. Stay."

The woman hesitated as if deciding whether to accept the offer, but then sat down with a smile, offering the opened beer to the detective.

"My name is Sarah," she said with an easy smile.

"Abby, thanks," she received the offered beer and took a long drink.

Sarah took a drink from her own beer and then wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

Abby's gaze drifted over Sarah's face and the detective thought that she had never seen such a friendly smile on such an innocent face. Her eyes were alive and alert as she looked down at Abby's hands. Such a beautiful face, on such a young woman, a young innocent woman very much like one of those in Abby's nightmares. The ones calling out for justice against the evil...

"So what's the other guy look like?" Sarah's question pulled Abby away from the grizzly path her mind was heading down.

"What's that suppose to mean?" Abby snapped back without thinking. She hadn't meant for her tone to be so harsh, but the question caught her off guard.

"I'm sorry, I just meant... I didn't mean to insinuate anything. I just wondered what happened to your hands. But it's none of my business."

Abby silently cursed herself for responding like a cop with an attitude, "No, it should be me apologizing. I didn't mean to snap at you. It's just that... well, it's a subject I'd rather not discuss. Sorry."

Feeling more than a little uncomfortable, both smiled politely to each other before looking away and taking long silent pulls from their beers.

Looking out of the corner of her eyes, Sarah was more than a little impressed with the gorgeous woman next to her. Her dark hair and her dark eyes contrasted with the white teeth displayed in that brief smile. Sarah had watched her arrival with interest and curiosity, and when she had emerged from her cabin, had been

mesmerized by her long easy strides as she walked out on to her dock, her large dog by her side. And as she watched Abby struggle to open her beer, Sarah knew this was the woman she wanted to meet. Now, sitting so close to her, she could feel the woman's intensity just under the surface, like a fire smoldering on the brink of igniting.

Lost in her thoughts, Sarah looked down at Abby's fingers as she picked at the label of her beer.

Sensing Sarah's eyes upon her, Abby turned to meet her gaze.

"So, is this your first time?" the detective blurted out.

"Pardon?" Sarah was startled by the question.

"Is this your first time here at Gold Creek?" Abby felt the thickness of the alcohol in her tongue, but she knew it was the attention of such a pretty young woman that was giving her communication difficulties.

"Ah, yes, yes it is, though you probably wouldn't know it, I enjoy the country, not much of a city girl actually. It's beautiful here isn't it?"

"Mmmm hmmm," Abby agreed as she took another drink of her beer. "This was nice of you. Günter brought me a fridge this morning, but I didn't want to go back into the cabin to get a cold one."

"You obviously know them well, Günter and Helga, I mean for them to fuss over your cabin and your arrival like that."

"Yeah, very well," was all Abby offered.

"So this isn't your first time I take it?"

"Not hardly," Abby found herself struggling to maintain a pleasant civilized conversation. She was too used to being the one asking the probing questions.

Has it been that long since I've talked to another woman on a purely personal basis, that I can't even be civil?

"Well, it sure is nice here. I just got here myself. I didn't know there was fishing here or I would have brought my own gear." Sarah said as she looked out over the still lake.

"Günter has equipment you can rent," Abby offered. "Or there's a small gas station with a store about 4 miles down the road a bit, Flanagan's; they have equipment."

"I was going to make a call today, but believe it or not there are no public phones here. Can you imagine that in this day and age? And my cell phone is totally useless."

"Helga's got her phone, but other than that the only phone is at Flanagan's."

"I brought up my lap top, but I guess the Internet is out of the question," Sarah said with a chuckle and a smile. "It's like turning back the hands of time, coming up here."

"Yeah, but that's part of its charm."

"So you're here for a week?" Sarah's question was innocent enough, but she saw a dark shadow flicker on Abby's face.

"I wish," the detective's eyes scanned the distant mountain, as if looking for an answer. "I've got some time to kill, so I'll be here for a few months," she said bitterly.

"Wow, a few months. Don't you work?"

"Yes, I work."

If Sarah heard the animosity, she chose to ignore it. "What do you do?"

Abby paused for a brief moment. "I ah, I work for the city." Abby didn't see the hesitation on Sarah's face as she changed the subject. "So where you from Sarah?"

"Me? The east coast originally."

"And now?"

"My suitcase," Sarah laughed at her own answer, but Abby remained solemn.

"Why's that?" Abby was unaware her tone was changing and her questions were starting to sound like an interrogation.

"I move around a lot."

"Why?"

"I guess I have a natural curiosity – for beautiful things."

"Really, you just go wherever you want?"

"Not always, sometimes something or someone has to guide me," she paused feeling a little uneasy with her answer. "Or sometimes I just go wherever the winds take me."

"And why did the wind bring you here?"

"I had a - ah, calling, a friend actually. She recommended the place," Sarah said with a smile, hoping to lighten the darkening mood. "She said that I'd like the view here."

"And do you?" Abby's questions kept coming and she missed the flirtations coming from the friendly little red head. Her bitterness at being away from work, mixed with all the alcohol she had consumed in the last 24 hours, brought out an ugliness Sarah did not like.

"Do I?" she asked as she pulled on her bottom lip and then looked away from the darkness in Abby's eyes. "Yeah, I think the view is breathtaking." Sarah threw out the line, but came up empty as Abby continued to fire off questions.

"What is it that you do for a living?" The interrogating tone of the question was unmistakable, but Abby showed no signs of realizing it.

"I ah, I work for myself," Sarah said vaguely, more than a little taken aback by the apparent cross-examination she was being subjected to.

"Doing?"

"What is this? Twenty questions? Look, I was just trying to be nice and neighborly, but I can see you'd prefer to be alone. Enjoy the view." Sarah rose to her feet quickly.

"Wait, look I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come off like that. I..."

"Well, you did! Enjoy the beer, and you can keep the opener." Sarah marched off the dock without looking back.

"Sarah, I'm sorry. I didn't..." Abby could see Sarah had no intentions of stopping as she walked up the stairs and into her own cabin. Abby sat down with a loud audible groan.

"Well, I came off like a super bitch, didn't I? I can't even carry on a conversation with a decent person anymore." Abby was utterly disgusted with herself as she spoke to her faithful canine companion. "What the hell have I become? Don't answer that." After several long self-analyzing moments, Abby looked down at her dog. "I guess a bit of a break wouldn't hurt, huh? If you say one word about Linc and the Lieutenant being right... I'll...I'll neuter you. Again!"

Buck tilted his head to the side, but remained silent as he watched her tip back her beer to drain the last of it. Picking up her empty glass and the other full bottle of beer, she went back to her cabin.

Abby spent the remains of the afternoon and evening out at the end of her dock, returning to her cabin only to refill her glass with Aquavit. One by one she watched as each cabin's lights went out for the night, though most of her attention was on the dimly lit cabin next to hers. Hidden by the cover of darkness, she had watched Sarah leave and return from dinner at the lodge. Then her bright lights were dimmed as she lit candles and a fire, but soon the flickering light of a computer screen replaced the orange glow.

The detective watched with interest as Sarah sat at her table, her delicate fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop. She had sparked something in her hardened heart, something Abby hadn't been expecting. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she rested her chin and made no attempt to wipe the goofy grin off her face. It wasn't the alcohol that made her smile, though she did find it amusing that Sarah held a pencil in her teeth the entire time her attention was on her computer. No, the smile was there because she had done what no one else could. For a brief moment, Sarah had taken Abby's mind off her life and the evil turmoil Billy Ward had created in it.

It had been a long time since Abby had been in a relationship. Though a strict disciplinarian when it came to her schoolwork, Abby had come alive in college. She stopped denying that it was women who turned her head. And when those on campus found out, the line at her door only seemed to grow. She dated but only on her terms, revealing little about herself and always keeping her

relationships from getting too serious. It made her quite mysterious, and together with her dark good looks, earned her the reputation as being the 'catch of the campus'. Abby kept her personal life to herself, refusing to reveal anything about her parents or her family. It had been a conscious decision; no one could hurt her if she didn't let anyone in, and that was the armor she had taken with her into adulthood. Most of the time she was happy with that - until this afternoon.

Abby brought her focus back to the movement in Sarah's cabin. She had finished what she had been doing and folded down her computer. Rising from her chair, she walked over to the window and looked out in Abby's direction, though she couldn't see her, Abby felt Sarah's eyes searching for something or *someone* in the dark.