

# CLEARWATER LAKE

By Alan S. Falkingham



*Winter – Trumbo, Minnesota*

## PROLOGUE

Ely Lundgren has died, ice fishing out at Clearwater Lake. His red tent and sled are sitting out in the middle of the ice, which stretches to the horizon line, tight as a drumskin. If you go inside the tent, you can see him there, completely frozen. Fishing wire runs in a tangle, snagged tight around his boots, his chair knocked over. An auger lies on top of his tackle box and, scattered around the tent, are crushed beer cans and an empty bottle of whiskey, not a drop left. The propane in the heater has long since burned out and the fishing hole has frozen back over, sealing Ely's line into the dark, freezing waters of the lake. And, sticking out of Ely's chest, sunk right up to the hilt, is his long handled, fishing knife.

I think it's somehow fitting that Ely died out here. It's so peaceful. Because, God knows, there was nothing else peaceful about his life. I hope, now, maybe he rests easy. The recent, heavy snowfall hangs in clumps on the pine trees that hug the shoreline, and the other side of the lake looks as thin and straight as a knife cut. This is the first time I've been back here since the day Ely died. I needed to come again, just once, part to check that the snow had covered our footprints, part because, in some odd way, I suppose I wanted to be with him one last time. I let the stillness of Clearwater surround me. It's biting cold, but at least there's no wind. A small flock of geese, wings beating hard, fly overhead, moving south to find food. But, otherwise there's nothing: just the silence, the gray-whiteness of the ice and sky and the snow-covered trees. And Ely's bright red tent, sitting out there on the frozen lake, marking his grave.

He may not be found for months, but already everyone around town is talking about how he's missing and what might have happened. Some say Ely took one swig too many, out of that flask he carries in his glove box and wrecked his truck someplace on a backcountry road. Others say his wife Lauren killed him and hid the body, tired of taking the beatings that Ely liked to hand out. I know Sheriff Dewey thinks maybe Ely double crossed his brother and skipped town with the money that was stolen when the M&I branch got held up just after Thanksgiving. But whatever they all think now, once springtime comes and ice melt starts dripping off the pines, then Clearwater will thaw and Ely's going to come home. And when he does, Dewey's going to want to figure out exactly what happened, that day Ely died on the ice, out here at Clearwater Lake.

## CHAPTER ONE

### LAUREN LUNDGREN

"Tommy Lundgren," says Rachel.

I stop drying off the glasses and turn to face her. "What?" I'm not even sure I heard her right.

She finishes pouring the beer she's working on and takes it over to Cody Rasmus who is perched at the end of the bar. A loop of sad looking multi colored Christmas lights flash above his head, like some redneck angel's halo. It's a freezing night in Stig's, but there are a good number of locals in here, either sheltering from the cold or hiding from their wives, or perhaps a little of both. Cody watches Rachel's ass as she walks back over towards me.

"You're engaged to Tommy?" I whisper it. "Since when?" Rachel Delarney had always seemed to make such good decisions. But, this? I spent my whole life wishing I hadn't married into that God damn family.

She smiles at me and shrugs, like it is something that she just can't help.

"You got a ring to show me?" Despite my doubts, how can I not be at least a little bit happy for her? She is brimful of excitement and it crinkles the corners of her eyes.

Rachel slips a small box out of her pocket and we huddle over it. "I don't want to wear it out in public just yet. Not until I've told my Ma," she says.

The ring has a thin band with a single stone. "It's pretty," I tell her, but she can sense my uncertainty. She half expected it, I'm sure.

"He's, well...." She pauses, searches for the word. "Different I suppose."

I look at her and raise my eyebrows. I've known her since she began working as a waitress here at Stig's. I felt like we bonded from the start, despite our age difference. There was something about Rachel Delarney that I liked: a spirit. I recognized her, from my own past. Before Ely had worn me down. Before being a Lundgren had got the better of me.

"I don't know," I tell her. I give her a look. "Lundgren blood is thick." I nod my head towards the pool table, where the third Lundgren brother, Henry, stalks around the table in a cloud of cigarette smoke, his face illuminated by the blue neon glow from the beer sign that hangs on one wall.

I leave her to think about it, and go collect up empty glasses, stacking them at the end of the bar.

"But Tommy's nothing like Henry," says Rachel. "Or Ely for that matter." She stops suddenly, regretting what she just said. She doesn't want to hurt me. But nothing hurts much anymore when it comes to Ely. Even when he comes home drunk and starts swinging. I've even gotten used to that. I feel myself shudder suddenly at the thought of it, tensing up. I've been married to him for more than twenty years and this town has been talking about either one or both of us since the day we came walking down the courthouse steps. I was seventeen. He was eighteen. Nobody around here thought we belonged together then and sure as hell, nobody does now. They know he's a violent tempered sonofabitch. They see how he is. And, they think I cheat on him in return. I've heard them, talking in those drunk whispers in here when they think I'm not listening. Or the church women gathered on the steps of Sam Aldred's General Store, who suddenly all go quiet when I walk by. But, none of that bothers me anymore. There is more to my story than they'll ever know, and so I'll live the way I like. A part of me even

likes it that they all somehow disapprove. This whole town can go to hell. I slip back around the other side of the bar and begin to load the dishwasher.

"I'm sorry," says Rachel. "Still no word? No sightings of him?" She pauses. "No body?" It'll be two weeks this Saturday since Ely slipped out of the house and never came home.

I shrug. "Nothing," I say. "Absolutely nothing."

We are interrupted as the door bangs open and an icy blast of air gusts in from the street outside. Sheriff Dewey stands framed in the doorway, flapping his hands together, sending a shower of snowflakes falling to the floor. He's blowing like a bull, his hot breath coming out in snorts. He slams the door quickly and stamps his feet, flipping back the hood of his jacket and removing his gloves.

"Snow's coming down pretty good out there" says Dewey, to nobody in particular, as he moves to take a seat at the bar. Stig pours him an Irish coffee and they talk, probably about the problem we've been having with some of the local kids spinning donuts in his parking lot in the early hours of the morning. After the two of them are done, Sheriff Dewey sits and thaws a while, watching the pool game. Henry, I notice, suddenly seems distracted, missing an easy eight ball to center.

I see that Dewey has already drained his coffee and so I grab the pot and the Jameson's bottle and head over to refill him. The bad news, or good news depending on how you look at it, is that if you're relying on Martin Dewey to find your missing husband then you could be in for a long old wait. The biggest arrest he ever made in Trumbo was when he caught Curtis Sorensen stripping copper out of the abandoned tool making factory on Bismark Street. His old man was a different story. He was the real deal when it came to police work. I guess it must have skipped a generation.

"How you holding up, Lauren?" he asks me, eyes down, watching me pour.

I don't know how to answer. Mostly, I'm holding up just fine. In fact, it's a whole lot better not having him around. But that feels like the wrong thing to say. So, I just shrug. "OK. I guess. No news?"

He sips his coffee and looks at me for the first time. I can see he feels bad that he has little to report. He thinks he's letting me down. Nobody around here believes he's worth shit as a cop and he knows it. "I got nothing," he says, and I admire his honesty at least. "They found a hunter in the woods way out in Silver County a few days ago which, for a while, I thought might be a lead. Been dead a while. Some other hunter found him up on a deer stand. Died of a heart attack. But the autopsy report said he had a gold tooth and weighed three hundred pounds....." Dewey gives me a look, like even he could figure out that wasn't likely to be Ely. "No calls I suppose?"

"Ely's not the calling kind, you know" I tell him, with another shrug. "Maybe he'll just come walking back in, like nothing's happened." I say this, but I don't believe it, and neither does Sherriff Dewey.

"Maybe," he says, and we fall silent. He swishes his bourbon around his cup, and I leave him to it. Cody Rasmus signals to me from the other end of the bar. He's finished his beer and wants another. Henry Lundgren resets the pool balls and the break sounds like a pistol shot. The yellow ball drops and rolls noisily back into the rack. Eventually, Sheriff Dewey stands and pulls his gloves back on and tells me that he'll stay in touch. I notice there's a small pool of melted ice beneath the stool where he was sitting and, as the door bangs open and then shut, I see that it's still snowing heavily outside laying thick across the blacktop.

"He read you your rights yet, Lauren? Don't you tell him nothin' girl!" calls out Cody once Dewey's gone, flashing me a big dumbass smile.

"It's not something to joke around about," Stig tells him. "Unless you want Henry to shove that pool cue so far up your ass, we gotta put chalk on your nose."

Rachel comes over to me and places a hand on my arm. She can tell Dewey left with as much as he came with by way of news about Ely. But I don't need any comforting. Ely is gone, and that's that.

"So, you and Tommy Lundgren huh?" I change the subject, back to where we started.

"Yes," she says. "I met him when he came to help out at Saint Jude's Festival."

I do the math. "So, nearly six months. You kept that quiet. You told anyone else yet?"

Rachel shakes her head. "No. You know exactly how that'll go." By this, she means her Mom. Or maybe Tommy's Mom too, come to think of it. Jesus, both those women try to control their families like they have them on a short leash. But I've also seen how Rachel has slowly freed herself, pushing the boundaries, no longer asking her parents for permission. Even so, getting engaged to Tommy Lundgren will not be news that Mrs. Delarney will take well at all.

"You sure about this?" I ask her. She's right that Tommy is very different to either Ely or Henry. For a start, he's nearly twenty years younger than either of them. He's never hung with them or their crowd. He even joined the police force, something nobody in this town thought a Lundgren would ever do. But, still, something doesn't quite sit right with me about this.

"I'm sure," she says.

I look at my friend, her jaw set firm, looking straight back at me. She hears me, but she'll do it her way. She doesn't care what I, or anyone else around here, thinks about whether she should marry Tommy Lundgren. I admire that quality in her. Still, I worry for her too. Because, once you become a Lundgren, there's no turning back.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHARLIE FORTUNE

"They finally released old Hal Christiansen from the hospital," says Amelia wheeling herself over from the window where she was looking out at the falling snow. "He's half blind, on account of the broken eye socket he got when he was pistol whipped, and they say he'll always walk with a limp. But, least he's alive. For a while they thought he might not make it, because of his ruptured spleen." Amelia loves the gory details, the bloodier the better.

Hal Christiansen is the security guard who worked at the bank that got held up a few weeks ago. He must be going on seventy years old and he'd had the job there for as long as anyone can remember. Truth is though, he was a whole lot better at drinking coffee and watching the security cameras than facing down the two hooded men with handguns and baseball bats who paid him a visit at exactly the time the rest of the town was watching the Vikings on Monday Night Football.

The robbers had forced Hal to turn off the alarm to the vault and open everything up. Then, they'd hog tied him while they dumped everything into old mail sacks which they hauled to a getaway car that was waiting outside. But, as they were doing that, seems that Hal somehow managed to crawl over and hit one of the panic buttons; lit the place up like fireworks on the fourth. That made one of the robbers mad and he set about Hal with a bat. Beat him, real bad. Nearly God damn killed him. Cold cocked him. In the end, they got away with quite a haul. Over a million bucks is what they're saying.

"My Ma said Hal should have just let them take everything," says Amelia with an eye roll. "She said, after all it wasn't his money, it was the bank's. Can you believe it?"

I don't look up. "My Dad said Hal Christiansen was a hero for trying to stop 'em," I tell her, and she smiles. We both know this sums up the difference between the two of them perfectly.

"Deputy Lundgren too," says Amelia flicking at her phone, pulling up the local 12 news feed. "They got a photo of him shaking Hal's hand on the steps of the hospital."

Tommy Lundgren is Trumbo's deputy sheriff and was the one who'd responded to the call the night the bank got held up. By the time he got there, the robbers were gone, but while he waited on the ambulance crew, he had performed CPR on Hal which, they say, saved his life.

Amelia shows me the photo. Tommy looks awkward, as if he doesn't really want to be there. At the time of the robbery, I remember them showing him being interviewed on TV, saying how it was nothing and all in the line of duty.

Hal Christiansen, on the other hand, is beaming from ear to ear, even though he's wearing a patch over one eye and leaning heavily on a walking frame. My Dad says this town loves a hero. He says it's because it's never really had any, unless you count the kid who was the Gopher's starting running back for a year. My Dad could've been famous himself. He was the drummer in a rock band. Used to drive to Minneapolis every single weekend to play. But he left to marry my Mom and raise a family, just before the band got offered a record deal and moved to Chicago. My mom says he's regretted that fucking decision ever since. They argue a lot, my Mom and Dad. It makes me sad.

Amelia notices the look on my face and tries to lighten the mood.

"You know they've just started dating?" she says wheeling her chair back to the window.

"Who has?" She's lost me.

“Rachel and Tommy Lundgren.” She drops this on me like it’s nothing interesting. But it definitely is. Rachel is Amelia’s older sister and. I can’t imagine Mrs. Delarney being happy that one of her daughters is dating a Lundgren, even if it is Tommy rather than one of his low life older brothers.

“How’d you know?” I ask her. “Rachel tell you?”

Amelia shakes her head. “No,” she says slowly. “I saw her getting dropped off in his cruiser, a few nights ago.”

This is one of the things I love about Amelia. She gets to see the things that nobody else does. She sits so quietly in her chair that nobody remembers she’s there. That’s how we first became friends, last summer. I’d slashed the tires on the school bus with my pocket knife, while it was parked behind the swimming pool one day. I’d figured: no bus, no school tomorrow. I’d gone around each wheel in turn and plunged my blade deep into the rubber, listening to the long hiss of air escaping, like the noise our dog makes when he’s asleep in front of the fire after eating a big bone. But as I was making my way back to class, I saw Amelia watching me. She’d seen the whole fucking thing. That afternoon, when I’d reached the school gates, Amelia was waiting on me. She’d told me I needed to help her get home because the bus wasn’t running no more. It took us an hour, cause we needed to stick to the sidewalks rather than cut across the sports field. But we finally made it. We talked all the way home. I told her about some of my favorite fishing trips with my Dad, out in the countryside away from everybody, just the two of us. She told me how she’d like me to take her too someday, although we both know that won’t happen. And not once did she mention the school bus or why she hadn’t snitched. This I love about Amelia too. She knows when people don’t wanna talk about something and, with my head the way it is, that’s important.

“What’d you see?” I ask her, giving a sly, little wink.

She gives me a look, like that’s between her and her sister. “Not much,” she says in the end. “He just stopped at the end of the driveway, they talked for a while and then she got out and came up to the house.”

“So, she didn’t invite him in?”

Amelia shakes her head again. “Nope.”

“Then that means your Ma doesn’t know yet,” I tell her. That much is clear.

Amelia shrugs. “I guess Rachel will tell us when the time’s right,” she says, bored with the conversation, now that she’s done revealing her big news.

That I would pay to see, I think to myself. They might need to carry Ma Delarney out on a stretcher.

“They got any leads on where Tommy’s brother is at?” This is the other big story around town at the moment. One that I know Amelia’s been tracking online. “Maybe if you get to hang out with Tommy, he’ll give you the latest scoop on that too.” She looks at me sideways. She had already thought about that. “Not a thing. It’s like he just disappeared.” Ely Lundgren’s been missing now for nearly two weeks, and while there are a lot of rumors, there have been no sightings of him, either alive or dead. “But you already know what my theory is,” says Amelia “Twenty-four-point eight percent of homicides are committed by a family member.” Amelia has a good head for numbers. And, as if to prove her point, we both hear Amelia’s Mom calling her for dinner.

“I’d come visit you if you got caught,” I tell her with a grin, nodding my head towards the sound of Mrs. Delaney’s voice. The sooner someone pops that fucking woman the better is what I secretly think.

Amelia smiles despite herself, although she also wags her finger in my direction, pretending to be mad. “You better go,” she tells me, flipping over the window latch. Amelia’s bedroom is set up on the ground floor, so she can get in and out easily in

her wheelchair, and so the big window overlooking the back lot has become the way we see each other without her Mom knowing. No doubt, she would beat me with a broom handle if she knew I was in here. But nothing's going to stop me seeing my friend Amelia. Most others around school think she's just a geek, mostly because of her being in a wheelchair. I've gotten into more than a few schoolyard fights on her account, although I never tell her. But I think she's kinda special.

I pull on my jacket and gloves, twisting down my black beanie hat to leave as little skin exposed as possible. I smile at Amelia with my eyes, and she giggles to see me so heavily muffled. But, when I open the window, I feel that icy blast of cold air rush at me like water from a fire hose. I swing my legs out and hop down onto the frozen earth outside. Amelia shuts the window behind me and gives me a little wave.

Amelia's situation is not lost on me. Her parents told her how they named her after America's first ever woman airplane pilot. So, the fact she can't even walk, is an added cruelty nobody should have to bear.

I look up into the big American elm tree that grows in the Delarney's backyard. Huddled together in the Y of the uppermost branches, sheltering from the snow, are two raggedy magpies.

I look back at Amelia, framed in her window. "One day," I say quietly, although only the magpies are there to hear me, as my words are scooped up and lost in the swirl of snowflakes. "One day."

## CHAPTER THREE

### MARTIN DEWEY

I've certainly got myself a problem. Everyone around here knows Ely is no model citizen, but this is different. It's two weeks now and no word. My theory is that it's somehow linked to the bank robbery that happened just after Thanksgiving. Word is, that was the work of Ely and his brother Henry. But so far, all I got is talk. I tell all this to my old man, as he sits in his favorite chair watching the fire roar in the fireplace. He listens thoughtfully, chewing on tobacco. He knows this town well enough. He was chief of police in Trumbo for four decades. I feel like I've spent my whole life trying to figure out how to do things even half as good as him. He spits, lost in his thoughts, and I let the silence lay on us heavily. The sonofabitch never would be rushed. On the wall hang pictures of him in uniform: one with him meeting Reagan when he stumped out here in 1980, another when he received the medal of honor for bravery. There's also a framed clipping from the Chicago Tribune of him with Luigi Carbone in handcuffs: his finest hour of all. There's not much of anything else by way of decoration in his living room: one small grainy framed photo of him with my mother on their wedding day. No pictures of me. Even now, with skin grey and thin like rice paper, he's a lawman to his bones.

"Checked phone records I suppose?" he asks after a while. His voice croaks like a door hinge that needs oiling.

I nod. "Tommy got them from the cell phone company. Nothing after the Saturday morning he disappeared."

"And ATM withdrawals, cash? A man like Ely's always gotta have enough for his next drink"

He thinks I'm a lousy cop. "Twenty bucks on the Saturday, early," I say. "Nothing since then."

"Internet, texts, social media, all that shit?" He's kept up with the times it seems.

"I'll check" I say. Maybe he's right after all about my shitty police work. I should have thought of this.

He moves on without commenting. "What'd he take with him?"

This at least I learned from Lauren. "Not much" I say. "Closet mostly still full is what Lauren says. He left early while she was sleeping. They had a big fight the night before, so they weren't talking. Beat her up pretty good. You could still see the bruise when I talked to her in Stig's last night."

"Those two still the same as always?" he says. What he means is don't trust Lauren.

There are facts and there are then there are feelings. He's better at this than me. He could always pick up on a suspect's glance away or catch that moment's hesitation before answering.

The talk is that she sleeps around and that in return he beats her. Back and forth, back and forth; a story as old as it is wrong.

"I guess they're still the same" I say with a shrug. Like how am I supposed to know?

He lets that pass. I know I disappoint him. But it's hard to follow in these footsteps. He policed this town in a way that three generations of folks around here respected. He could be a pain in the ass for sure if you got on the wrong side of him. But he loved Trumbo and its people. I remember one summer evening, when I was ten, he sat me on his lap, and we drove his cruiser around town. He let me steer and, as we crawled along, he pointed out the sights. He told me how Henning Cole ran a betting shop out of his pharmacy store which explained why Mrs. O'Hare had a new prescription to pick up every other day. He showed me the hole in the fence line at the lumber yard that the kids from across the tracks had cut, so they could

steal firewood in winter, but how he turned a blind eye. He told me what it meant when Lois Eisner switched on her lamp and placed it on the ledge of her upstairs window. We drove past the old tumbledown Helgarson place where Sonny Helgarson had taken an ax and killed his wife, hitting her so many times even her own sister couldn't identify the body. He talked to me more on that one night than he had in my whole life before and probably more than he's ever talked to me since. About his town. And my town too, although I think even back then, he knew I would never love it like he loved it or know it like he knew it. My mother left him one spring morning. Made him breakfast, kissed him goodbye as he headed out in his uniform, then went upstairs to the bathroom and hanged herself with her dressing gown belt. When he got the call, he insisted he was the one who cut her down and process the scene. He buried her three days later and then went straight back to work that same afternoon.

"Any sign of the money from the bank heist?" he asks me.

"Nothing," I tell him. "either it's already outa state by now or the Lundgren's have hidden it, at least until things cool down." A log on the fire crumbles and a shower of orange sparks dance for a moment before falling back into the grate.

My old man shifts in his seat, tilting his head slightly like a tiny bird that hears a house cat creeping along the tree branch. Still he chews. More silence. Then staring back off into the fire he says slowly, "If I were you Bobo, I'd go pay Henry Lundgren another visit, ask him about that money. Find out whether Ely might've double crossed him and skipped town."

I nod. It's as good an idea as any. "I'll do that Sheriff," I say. I've called him this since I was knee high and have never stopped. He looks up from the fire and meets my eyes for the first time since I arrived. Maybe there is a half-smile, maybe not.

"Now put the fucking TV on and fix me a drink," is all he says. "Game's started."

I do as he asks, but by halftime I'm beat, so I leave him cussing at the screen and head to bed.

The next morning, I take his advice and pull my patrol car in through the gates of the lumber yard. It's snowing again and getting colder. A line of icicles hangs from the arc lights circling the yard. I finish the breakfast biscuit I picked up on my way and toss the packaging into the passenger seat. The office tells me Henry Lundgren is working out in the far corner of the yard and so I find my way between the huge stacks of tree trunks, piled high in what seems like endless long lines. Henry is working a chain saw breaking logs and I hear it moaning as I approach, splinters of wood flying high into the air. He's dressed in a fluorescent jacket and steel toed boots, hard hat jammed down on his head, feeding the hunks of timber through the saw blade. I see the metal teeth munching the wood, dropping it out the other side with a thud.

"How you doin' Henry" I ask although I know he can't hear me above the sound of the saw. But I can wait, and he knows it. Eventually he switches off the saw and pulls up his goggles. With the saw silent, the yard is quiet, nobody else in sight or even ear shot. The tall timber stacks block out most of what little watery sunlight makes it through the clouds. It's a gloomy place.

"Sheriff" says Henry. It is neither a greeting nor a question. He rubs his gloved hand across his chin, and I see his breath hang in the air. He picks up another log and starts to gently toss it from hand to hand. He is a big guy; arms as thick as the tree trunks he fells.

"I wanted to go over again when you last saw Ely?" I've asked Henry this same question before, right after Lauren reported Ely missing. I don't expect a different answer this time, but it's a place to start.

He turns the log over in his hands. "Like I told you before: Thursday night, 'bout two weeks ago now I suppose, somethin' like that. We played cards out at his place and drank beer."

This was a couple of days before Ely went missing. I already know the timeline. The robbery was the Monday right after Thanksgiving. Ely left the house the following Saturday and never came home.

"And he never told you about any plans he had to leave town?" I ask him. Boy, it's cold I think to myself. The wind drives down straight from the northern lakes at this time of year.

"Nope," says Henry. His face offers no clues. "Like I told you, I've got no fucking clue where my brother is."

Time to change direction. "Folks say maybe you and Ely had something to do with that bank hold up."

He looks straight at me, his eyes as cold as this god damn day. He turns the heavy log then drops it onto the saw bench with a clump. We stand looking at each other surrounded by the high walls of timber. What this town also knows, is that Henry has a temper as fierce as Ely's.

Finally, he speaks. "You shouldn't listen to what folks say Sheriff," he says slowly. "I don't know nothin' about that bank job. And neither does Ely."

"Hal Christiansen's out of the hospital and starting to remember things," I tell him. It's a bluff, and not a good one.

"Oh yeah? They said on TV that whoever did it wore masks." He looks at me and raises his eyebrows, half mocking, half asking me to show him what else I got, which is not a whole lot.

"What about the money Henry? You think Ely took it and skipped town?" I lay out the accusation, see how he reacts. If they did the robbery together and Ely stole Henry's share, then Ely better hope I find him before his brother.

"Like I say, neither me or Ely know anything about that bank hold up, sheriff."

"So, where the fuck is Ely, Henry?" I don't like to cuss, but I need to let him know that I'm not about to give up on getting this thing straightened out. He needs to see I'm determined. I know I'm not the big shot detective my old man was, but I still need to do my job. "He skip town with the money? Or maybe you decided you deserved more than half? Is that it? Killed your own brother and dumped him someplace? Is that how it went down, Henry?"

I have played my cards faster than my old man would have done. Like a poker player who will end the night broke, I'm left with nothing.

Henry shrugs. "I got work to do" he says nodding at the pile of timber he still needs to saw through.

I stamp my feet and the snow falls around us softly. He is done talking, I realize that.

"You let me know if you hear anything," I tell him. He nods, although I can tell I'm not on his speed dial. Then, with a howl, he switches on the saw and I hear the squeal of metal on wood as I walk away back through the lumber yard to my patrol car.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AMELIA DELARNEY

My Ma makes the “hrumph” sound in her throat we all know means she’s not happy. My Da tries to catch Rachel’s eye but she isn’t looking, so he gives up and takes a long drink of milk stout instead. I turn my head from side to side, like it’s a tennis match.

“Six months nearly, and you haven’t seen fit to invite this man, whoever he is, round to dinner, Rachel?” My mother ladles out three massive helpings of chicken pot pie and hands the plate to me. “Plenty of veggies now Amelia, please” she says. I reach for the mashed potato then pluck a couple of carrots from the bowl, hoping she is distracted by the Rachel situation. But she is wily. “Take some more please, now, Amelia. And pass her the cabbage would you Pat.” My father puts down his glass and hands me the bowl, slightly apologetically.

Rachel waits for my mother to finish serving. Both their jawlines are set firm, the family likeness unmistakable. As the years have gone by, I’ve watched the power shifting and they now square off as equals, like hockey players in the middle of the ice. Although my sister still lives under this roof, she is twenty-three next month. My father takes another gulp of his stout and tries to lighten the mood.

“This pot pie is magnificent, Lillian, so it is. Your mother makes the finest chicken pot pie in the state.” He looks at me, trying to recruit help. But, while it is true my mother makes good pie, I want to see the action.

“So, are you going to tell us his name?” asks my mother, spiking a chunk of chicken. Her fork chinks on her plate, like the wind chime on the back porch.

“It’s Tommy Lundgren, Ma.”

Rachel waits to see how Ma will take the news.

“Hrumph. What on earth did you just say Rachel?” She puts down her silverware.

“You heard me right, Ma. Tommy Lundgren, the deputy sheriff,” says Rachel. This is smart. She tries to use the badge to her advantage. My Ma believes that a man’s job tells you everything about his station in life. This is just one of the reasons she doesn’t like Charlie Fortune. His Dad runs his own pest control company and my Ma says catching vermin is no way for a man to earn a living

My Ma, for once seems lost for words, even a little pale.

“That boy was a damn good quarterback in high school,” says my Da. Bless his heart.

“Never mind that Pat, for goodness sake, now” My Ma snaps at him and he falls silent. “What matters is that he’s a.....Lundgren” She can barely bring herself to speak the name. Rachel finishes her mouthful. I’m impressed by her calmness. She has had these fights before. In fact, she’s had them every single time she’s ever dated anyone. My sister is not beautiful, but she’s not exactly ugly either, with pale white skin and red hair. Luckily, she’s inherited my Da’s calm demeanor to take the edge of Ma’s fire and brimstone.

“I really like him,” Rachel continues after a while. “And he feels the same way about me.”

“He’s still a Lundgren,” says my Ma “That family is a bunch of god damn criminals.” She picks her fork back up and skewers another piece of chicken.

Rachel looks at my mother. Her back is ramrod straight and she brushes at a strand of hair that has fallen across her forehead.

“No, Ma. His brothers are a bunch of criminals. Tommy isn’t that way at all. In fact, he’s the perfect gentleman.”

“We’ll see about that” my mother replies. She figures she knows a gentleman when she sees one and she thinks my sister is just plain wrong.

“So, tell us about him Rache. How did you guys meet?” says my father. God loves a trier. My Ma glowers and works away at her meal with a whole new intensity.

“Well, I met him when he came to help out at St Jude’s festival. Father Damian had us both work the same concession stand and we got to talking. He said he thought it was ironic how all Catholic festivals involved more drinking and gambling than a weekend in Vegas.” Rachel grins, and so does my Da, until my Ma tuts at him.

“And you’ve been dating him since then, Rachel?” asks my Da. My mother’s face looks like thunder. Betrayal is a function of many things in her mind, but one of them is time.

“Yes, we decided to take our time before telling anyone,” says Rachel. I can’t say I blame her for that.

“You should invite him over,” says my Da. He has had too much milk stout if he is suggesting this. Hell will freeze over before my Ma welcomes a Lundgren to sit at our dinner table. “Criminals,” she mutters to herself. “Eat more veggies now, Amelia.” She wants to change the subject, but Rachel isn’t done.

“There’s something else I want to tell you.” I look at my sister. This has been quite the day of surprises.

“What’s that,” asks my Da, passing me the carrot bowl. I take it from him, in case it falls. Because I can tell that we haven’t heard the punchline yet and, once we do, carrots will be forgotten.

She’s rehearsed this, no doubt, and once again I admire my sister for her calmness. “Tommy and I are engaged.”

There’s the sort of silence that I suspect only astronauts ever really hear. Then, it is my Da’s turn to say “Hrumph” while, at the other end of the table, Ma speechlessly drops her silverware.

We finish the meal in silence. My Ma doesn’t take another bite and begins to collect the dishes before the rest of us have even finished eating.

After everything is cleared away, I head off to my room to read and Rachel soon joins me, mostly to escape from Ma.

“It’s icier than a Trumbo winter in there,” she tells me.

“They’ll get used to the idea,” I reply, shuffling myself over on my bed to make room for Rachel to sit down. We’ve done this for as long as I can remember. One problem with being in a wheel chair is that it’s hard to sneak around, so my sister always waited until she heard the click of Ma’s bedside lamp before slowly creeping downstairs from her room to mine, smuggling candy or cookies or whatever else she might have managed to lay her hands on by way of a midnight snack. While my sister and I have had our share of fights, I’m lucky to have her. Despite our difference in age, she’s always found time for me and our relationship is somewhere in between sister and favorite aunt.

Tonight, she comes armed with Oreo cookies which she lays next to me on the bed. She asks me if I want her to paint my finger nails and I tell her yes. I’m in a purple mood. Ma will be mad tomorrow when she sees them, but I figure she has bigger problems to worry about right now.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ma like that before,” I tell my sister. “But I’m so happy for you Rache” I add by way of encouragement.

"Thanks," she says in a dreamy kind of way.

"So, when are you getting married? Can I be a maid of honor?" I am excited by the idea of it. I've never been part of a wedding before.

"Well, we haven't fixed a date yet. We'll need to talk with Father Damian. But I'd like to do it in the Fall. It's such a beautiful time of year around here."

"Will we decorate my chair in Fall colors?" I ask her. I already have some ideas.

She smiles at me. "Sure, we will, Amelia."

She shows me her engagement ring, slipping it onto her finger and turning it from side to side, so the light from my bedside lamp catches the surface of the diamond.

"You met his family yet?" This seems to be what bothers my Ma the most: the Lundgrens.

"Well, yes and no. Both his brothers are regulars at Stig's, so I'd run into them even before I knew Tommy." She doesn't look up.

"You know Ely's missing, right? What does Tommy say about that?" I pump her for information and Rachel smiles. She's too smart to be drawn out by such a simple line of questioning.

"We haven't talked much about that at all," she tells me. "Tommy's really not very close to either of his brothers. They're a lot older and he's his own person. I'm sure Ely will show up soon."

She doesn't say whether she thinks that'll be alive or dead. But I let it go.

"So, when can I meet him," I ask her, persistent.

She giggles. "All in good time, Wheelia." This is a name she's used forever. If someone else called me that, I would knock them unconscious with a single punch. But Rachel gets a pass. She first dreamed it up when she and my Da stood at opposite ends of the driveway pushing me back and forth between them. "Want me to do your toes?" she asks, dipping an Oreo in milk and offering me a bite while she blows on my fingernails.

"Yes please," I say, flipping the quilt back to uncover my feet.

"How are you and Charlie getting along?" she asks me as she begins to paint. "He staying out of trouble?" She knows he got caught shooting his BB gun at the statue of Lady Justice on the courthouse roof.

"He's misunderstood," I tell her, like I tell everyone. This is the truth. Charlie Fortune is one of the kindest hearted people I know. He's high spirited and has a taste for adventure, but he doesn't have a mean bone in his body.

Rachel nods. "You're right," she says. "You shouldn't ever judge anyone at face value. People are always more complicated than you think."

She says it in a way that makes me think she's talking about Tommy as well as Charlie. But she just keeps on painting away, a sly little smile making dimples in her cheeks like tiny whirlpools.

There's truth in what she says, but I'm not so quick to put Charlie Fortune and Tommy Lundgren in the same category. For one thing, Charlie is a boy and Tommy is a full-grown man. But now's not the time to get into this with my sister. These moments with her are precious to me, and so I grab another Oreo and lie back on my pillows, admiring my purple toe nails.

When she's done, she fans them dry.

My bedside clock tells me that it is almost half past ten and I'm feeling tired. I yawn, and Rachel takes the hint. She blows on my nails to dry them as best she can and then makes a tent with the quilt using cushions. I snuggle down and Rachel bends forward and hugs me through the covers before planting a kiss on my forehead.

"Night, Rache," I say softly, and she smiles. I love my sister. I'm glad she's happy. I'm glad Tommy Lundgren makes her feel that way.

She gets up and moves over to the door. "Love you Amelia. Don't tell Ma" she whispers, like she's done a thousand times before. Then, she flicks out the light and, ever so slowly, lowers the door handle so the latch doesn't click as she slips back out into the dark hallway and back upstairs, like smoke escaping up a chimney.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LAUREN LUNDGREN

“Shit” I say out loud, as I turn the key and hear the motor cough but not catch. I try again but get the same result.

Snow is falling hard and the temperature is dropping fast. I can’t face walking home. I’m tired after finishing the late shift at Stig’s. It had been busy all night, full of all the Christmas drunks, but the parking lot has mostly emptied out by now and there’s nobody around to ask for help.

It’s been a long day and I need to sleep. Where the hell is Ely when I need him? I think to myself. This going missing thing has gotten old fast. And while I’ve been through most every emotion since he disappeared, I’ve settled on being angry with him more than anything else. How dare that sonofabitch leave me, after all we’ve been through?

“Damn you Ely” I say out loud, as I pop the hood.

I get out into the blizzard that is slanting through the streetlights ring the parking lot. As I prod around in the engine, fingers numbing quickly, a truck suddenly starts its engine in one of the spots straight in front of me. The driver sets the headlights on full beam and I shield my eyes. The truck engine idles away, lights dazzling me. Eventually, the driver’s door opens, and a man gets out slowly. I still can’t see who it is. He’s backlit, but I can tell he’s well built, heavily clad in snow gear. For one short moment I wonder if it is Ely and I’m disturbed by how a brief feeling of relief, even happiness, twists in my stomach. But when the man steps forward, it’s not Ely. It’s Henry. Of all the people in Trumbo, he’s about the last person I want to see. I don’t know how long he’s been sitting out here or why. It’s as if he was waiting for me.

“Want me to take a look,” he says as he steps out from behind his truck’s headlight beam. He walks towards me, his boots leaving heavy prints in the snow.

I hesitate, a little uncomfortable around him as always, especially in this dark parking lot with nobody around. But, it’s not like I have a whole lot of options, and I certainly could use the help.

“That would be great.” I pause. “Thanks.”

“Hop back in and turn it over again,” he says.

I scuttle to my car, glad to be away from him, jumping back inside to get out of the cold. I turn the key. Still nothing.

He walks around to my window, I open it and he leans right in. Snowflakes cascade off his woolen hat and he puts his gloved hands on the window frame; huge paws like a bear.

“I’ll get some jumper cables,” he says. “Looks like you got a dead battery to me.”

“OK,” I say, but he remains where he is at the window, dripping snow into my car. He looks at me, for the longest time, and I fold my arms across my chest, feeling a little nervous. “Need any help?” I ask, eager for him to get moving.

He withdraws his head and steps away then goes back to his truck. He gets back in and pulls it forward slowly until the hood is alongside mine. Next, he rummages around in the back of his cab, before coming back towards me, jumper cables swinging in his hand like a hangman’s rope. He works for a couple of minutes, hidden from view by the hood of my car and then stretches the cables back to his truck, connecting them to the engine block. It must be biting cold out there but, strangely, he seems in no hurry as he works. Finally, he comes back to my window and ducks his head in once more.

“Gimme a minute then turn it over and it should catch.”

I nod and he wanders back to his truck and climbs in. When I hear him gun the engine, I turn the key. Sure enough, the motor coughs into life and the car starts. I press down on the gas pedal, so it won't stall on me. He hops out again and unhooks the jumper cables then allows my hood to fall with a bang.

"You should be set," he says. "But I'll follow you home," he offers, "just to check you get there safe. Maybe we can even have a nightcap and talk about Ely."

This part I don't need. "I'm good Henry," I say. "It's late and the storm's getting heavier. You should get yourself home too. But, hey, thanks. You know. I mean you saved my ass." I give him a lop-sided smile.

He stays where he is, weighing things up. "I'll follow you home," he says again and, this time, it feels like it's more than an offer; maybe even a threat.

While Ely's outbursts of violence were a constant in my life, something that could happen anytime, triggered by nothing at all, Henry had a different sort of meanness to him. He hid it better than Ely, but everyone knew it was there. Like he was always just waiting for the right moment to release it.

"You OK, Lauren?" Suddenly there is another voice, from over Henry's shoulder. He straightens and looks around, surprised someone else is out here in the snow. Standing there, huddled close together, are Rachel and Tommy Lundgren. She had told me that he was planning to come by and pick her up after her shift and, at this particular moment, I couldn't be more pleased to see them.

"How are you brother?" says Henry. He is matter of fact, but I can tell from his face that he's not happy to have the company. Tommy nods but looks straight past him. "You need any help there, Lauren?" he asks me. "Here, go sit in the cruiser," he says to Rachel. "I'll take care of this." Rachel hesitates for a moment, but then she does as he asks, crossing the lot quickly towards his car that's parked out in front of Stig's with its engine running.

"It's OK," says Henry. "Lauren here had a dead battery, but I got her started. So, we're good."

I can see where he's headed with this, but I don't plan to let Tommy leave that easily. "Henry said he'd follow me home," I tell him, "But I told him he didn't need to do that. Not with the storm and all."

Tommy weighs things up. He can sense the tension. "You got that right," he says slowly. Then, to Henry, "I'll see she gets home safe. Rachel told me she needed to stop by Lauren's place anyhow." This isn't exactly true, but I play along, nodding my agreement.

"That's right Henry," I tell him. "You get home. I'll be fine with Rachel and Tommy. Thanks again for your help. Really. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't been here."

Henry doesn't move. He knows he's being outmaneuvered but can't do anything about it. Tommy waits on him without saying a word, like it's about a hundred degrees warmer and he has all the time in the world.

Finally, Henry shrugs and takes a couple of steps back towards his truck. Then he stops and turns back, and I see the menace rear up in him, not hidden anymore.

"You told Mom about her yet?" he points towards the cruiser, where Rachel is sitting in the front seat, warming herself. "Because you better fucking believe that all hell's gonna break loose when you do. You know she ain't gonna fit in well You know what Ma's gonna think of her."

Tommy looks across at his older brother. If he's scared by him, he doesn't show it. In fact, he even cracks a smile. "Night, bro," he says simply. Then, to me, "Let's get you home Lauren. You lead the way. We'll follow in the cruiser. Take it nice and easy. Everything's pretty slick out there."

"I will," I tell him, and I roll up the window, pleased finally to shut out the cold. I slip the car into drive and slowly start to move forward, swinging out of the parking lot onto the road, leaving the two of them standing there, illuminated in the headlights of Henry's truck. I feel the relief drain through me, like a shot of neat bourbon, and, for the first time, it strikes me that maybe Rachel Delarney might not have made such a bad choice after all.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CHARLIE FORTUNE

"He's a god damn. fucking thief. Clear as day. You know, well as I do Deputy. School can't control him. Parents certainly can't or won't. Too busy fightin' day and night's what I heard from Mrs. Jackson. Says she can hear it from clear across the street" Mrs. Aldred is like a river in flood.

Her husband stands beside her, at least a little calmer. "OK, Martha. Lemme handle it."

On the counter are the things Sam Aldred had found stuffed into my pockets after he'd crept along the cereal aisle and then reached straight through and grabbed me by the collar. They say Mr. Aldred served in Vietnam and although he's approaching seventy, he sure moves quick, like he's still in the jungle. He pushes the items forward, like he half expects Tommy Lundgren to put them in evidence bags. There's a can of Red Bull, a pack of gum and some hair ties that I figured Amelia might like for Christmas.

Tommy looks at the things on the counter and unzips his jacket. It's warm in the store. The Aldreds keep the heat turned up high. My Dad says it's their best winter marketing campaign on account of how it encourages folks to linger.

"You take these, son?" asks Tommy. He looks serious and he stoops down just a little, so he is closer to my eye level. This isn't the first time we've met like this. He was the cop who caught me firing my BB gun at the courthouse last weekend.

"I was gonna pay for them," I say. I look down at my feet and toe away at the floor. There is a pool of slushy black-gray snow melt where I've been standing.

"You're a god damn, fucking liar," says Mrs. Aldred. She is a mean lady, no mistake. If I was Mr. Aldred maybe I would have stayed in Vietnam, even after the war was done. Nobody who's served his country deserves this.

"Let's keep this civil, please," says Tommy without loosening his gaze, which he keeps fixed on me.

"He ain't got no fucking money on him, so you tell me how he was gonna pay for those things. You tell me huh? Go right ahead."

I shrug. I know I'm busted.

"See! He ain't got no fucking answer. God damn, thief." She pokes the air with her finger, like she's proved her point, which I suppose she has.

Tommy also has heard enough, but what he does next surprises me. "Mrs. Aldred, could you ring these through the cash register for me," he says. "I could use the gum and the energy drink. And I may as well take those hair ties too, come to think of it, for Rachel."

Mrs. Aldred looks at him crooked. "Aren't you gonna arrest him, Deputy Lundgren?" That's what she wants to happen. "If you do nothin' what's to stop every god damn thief in this town heading straight over to this store and taking whatever they god damn please?"

Tommy takes his time answering. "Could you ring those items through the register please," he repeats.

Mrs. Aldred scoops the three items off the counter top with a loud huffing noise and begins to scan them.

"Eight dollars and a dime" she says, her voice like the sharp edge of a wood saw.

Tommy reaches into his back pocket and takes out his wallet. When he opens it, I see a photo of Rachel flash briefly. He hands a ten-dollar bill to Mrs. Aldred and she punches the register, inserts the bill and counts out his change.

She hands it to Tommy. "So, what you gonna do about this, Deputy Lundgren? You can't let him get away with it. Seems to me folks were right when they said it was a bad idea to let a Lundgren police this town. Seems like maybe that's like leaving the fox in charge of the chicken coop."

Suddenly there is an awkwardness that hangs heavy in the air. I raise my eyes up from the toe of my boot. But Tommy doesn't seem concerned. The words fall off his shoulders and he gives Mrs. Aldred a big smile. "Could you put those in a bag for me, please, Ma'am?" he says.

She hesitates for a moment and then does as he asks, handing the bag to him like it smells bad.

"That your bike outside?" he asks me, and I nod. I'd left it unchained in the rack. "Go throw it in the back of my cruiser," Tommy says. "I'm gonna give you a ride home. I need to talk to your parents."

My shoulders drop a little. But I suppose it's better than him taking me to the police station and throwing my ass in a cell. I head out the store and Tommy follows me. He pops the trunk and watches while I pick up my bike and struggle to throw it in there.

"You can sit up front," he says motioning to the passenger side. I'm a little relieved. I'd prefer not to ride down my street sitting behind the wire mesh that separates the back seat from the driver.

We drive in silence for a few blocks. From to time, his radio crackles and, despite my situation, I take a good look at all the equipment he is carrying up there. I've never ridden in a police car before so in a funny way this is all quite cool.

As he drives, he sneaks a look at me. "You know, you gotta stop this shit, Charlie," he says simply.

I don't say anything. The radio crackles again, something about a fender bender in the parking lot of the American Legion.

"Amelia told Rachel about your parents fighting. She's worried about you. Must be tough to watch." For a moment I'm angry with Amelia for telling her sister, but it passes. I shrug at him. I don't like to talk about what's going on at home, at least not to adults. My teacher, Mr. Parlane tried to get me to talk about it one time, but I pretended my stomach was sick, so I could go hide in the bathroom. Seems to me, most of the problems that get created around here are made by adults. Amelia's the only one whose advice ever makes any sense.

"I know it's tough to talk about," says Tommy. "My Dad died when I was small, so I don't remember him. And my Mom's about as crazy as they come, so we don't get along so well most of the time. But, she's still my Mom."

I've heard the stories about old Ma Lundgren. My Dad calls her bat shit crazy.

"Most people's families are messed up. If you ever take the time to look under the hood. Even the ones who pretend to be happy on the surface. Everyone's working through their troubles, one way or the other."

I hadn't thought about it quite this way before. What he's says is right though. The Delarney's probably look happy to everyone else but, Lord knows, Amelia's Mom is about the most mean-spirited woman alive."

Tommy digs into the grocery bag Mrs. Aldred gave him and pulls out the gum. "Open this for me, will you," he says, "You can have a piece too if you like. Eat the evidence." He gives me a crooked smile. I do as he asks, and hand him a piece of unwrapped gum which he folds into his mouth. I do the same and we chew away. The lights at Third and Sundance show red and Tommy eases to a stop.

As we sit there together, eyes fixed on the light swinging in the wind on the overhead cable, I take a chance. "It's getting worse," I tell him. "It's all the time. And real mean."

The light flips to green and Tommy pulls away before he replies. "Relationships are tough, man," is all he can offer. Like, that much I had already figured out.

"During their fights, my mom keeps telling my Dad that he's lucky she stayed after what he did." She's used this line a lot, like a boxer using the rabbit punch. "What do you think she means?"

He can't possibly know, of course, and he sighs. "Who knows, Charlie. People make mistakes, do stuff they're not proud of. It's what makes us all human." While it doesn't really answer the question I'd asked, I think about what he's said anyway.

"I figure they'll get divorced," I tell him after a while. This much seems obvious. It's plain that they don't love each other no more.

"That may be, Charlie." Tommy seems pretty straight, and I like that. He isn't gonna tell me things that just aren't so, like most adults do. "Sometimes people reach a point where they just can't work things out and whatever feelings they had about each other just aren't there anymore."

I fall silent. There isn't much else to say. But he isn't quite finished with his advice. "But, you know, whatever happens between your Mom and Dad, doesn't mean they love you any less. You're not the cause of this. It isn't your fault. Hell, I got the most fucked up family in this town, I should know." Despite his cussing, he gives me a grin.

"Amelia says her Mom went flat out crazy when Rachel told her you guys were engaged." I'm not quite sure how he'll react to this and I check quickly to see if I've made him mad. "Amelia told me Rachel and her Ma are like two fighting cocks, circling each other as they move around the house, feathers up, ready to go right at it."

Tommy smiles at the thought of it. Amelia has a way with words. "Yeah. I heard," he says.

"So, what you gonna do?" I ask him. Maybe he has some ideas on how to handle Ma Delarney.

It's now Tommy's turn to shrug. "It'll work itself out, one way or another," he says. "As I told you, every family's different. They need to sort through it in their own way, in their own time."

"You think Rachel and Amelia's Mom will really ever change?" I ask him. "That woman's a fucking she-devil."

Tommy doesn't answer, just looks straight ahead. We turn into the street where I live. "What number you live at?" he asks me.

"Forty-one-thirty," I tell him. It's the white house with the multi-colored flashing lights hanging over the front porch. You'll see my Dad's work truck on the driveway."

He slows a little as we move up the street and stops his cruiser at the end of my driveway. I wait to see what he'll do next. I expect he wants to come in and talk with my Mom and Dad. But he makes no move to get out, just shifts to park and sits there with the engine on.

"Whatever's going on with your parents isn't an excuse for you to do the kind of shit you're doing though Charlie." He switches back to policeman mode. "You know that, right? It's not going to get you heard, not going to get you the sort of attention you want."

I feel myself tense back up as he turns to face me. I'm surprised by how well he seems to understand me. Because I do wanna be heard, above the sound of all their fucking arguments. I look away, out the window. I want to get out and run up to the house, but I can tell we're not done yet.

"I suppose."

He seems to be deciding if what I said is good enough. "Last chance, Charlie. You hear me? Next time you're headed downtown. OK?" It is a threat, delivered quietly. But it's clear enough.

"OK," I tell him.

"I got two brothers who spent their whole lives in and outa trouble. And a mom who thinks they can do no wrong. But, it's no way to live."

"OK" I say again. Then, "thanks," I add, feeling like I owe him that much. I can tell, all of his advice is meant to help me.

"And, Charlie." I turn to face him. "I want you to go back tomorrow before Mr. and Mrs. Aldred open up and offer to clear off and salt the sidewalk in front of the store. Somehow, make things right."

While having to face down Mrs. Aldred is not something I look forward to, I suppose there is something to what he says. So, I nod in agreement. "I will," I tell him. "Can I go now?" I want out.

He holds out the bag containing the things he bought from the store. "Take this and get outa here," he says to me. "And, I hope Amelia likes the hair ties."

I take the bag from him and open the door of the cruiser. He pops the trunk and I haul my bike out the back and jump on it, peddling quickly up my driveway. When I look back, he is gone, his red brake lights bright against the snow as he makes the turn at the end of our street, back towards town.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### MARTIN DEWEY

Clayt Mayweather is dressed head to foot in winter camo gear. Over his shoulder he carries a hunting rifle. Tommy talks to him while I walk around the shell of the burned-out car.

"I saw it when I was stalking that big ol' buck," Clayt tells him. "Hadn't realized he'd led me all the way over to the Andersen Place. Never did get a clear shot," he grumbles. "Just stumbled on this. Thought I oughta call you fellas. Can't be no accident. And it's got Illinois plates.

He's right about all of that, I think to myself. The license plates are mostly unreadable, melted from the fire. But the words "LAND OF LINCOLN" are still just visible on the one hanging from the back fender. The windows are all blown out and the inside is just a mangle of twisted, charred metal, however, I can tell, from the shape of the burned-out skeleton, that it's the remains of Dodge Charger.

The three of us are standing in a small clearing about a half mile down the long bumpy track that leads from the highway to Cole Andersen's homestead, set deep back in the woods, just this side of the county line. Tall pines stretch above us, and the ground is covered in thick snow. There is no evidence of any footprints other than the ones made by Clayt and the buck he was stalking, and I notice just the very top of an empty gasoline can, almost completely buried in the snow. All of this tells me that this thing has been here for days, probably weeks.

"Nobody around when you found it, I guess?" Tommy heads down a similar line of questioning with Clayt who shakes his head. "Not a soul," he says. "You know how Cole is these days, mostly holes up until Springtime comes." Cole Andersen is the biggest recluse as we have in Trumbo. He lives on his own, keeps himself to himself. Mayweather's right. It's entirely possible he hasn't travelled down this track to head into town for the past few months and probably won't until the weather turns. Whoever dumped this car here, knew it wasn't likely to be found in a hurry.

I walk around and take photographs from every angle, capturing the scene exactly how we found it. I take a close-up of a gasoline-soaked rag and then, using gloves, drop it into an evidence bag. When I'm done, I try and pull open the driver's door, but it won't move. Same is true with the trunk.

"I'll go fetch a wrench," says Tommy and he heads back to get one from the cruiser. Although it's cold, there's a real beauty to the woods in winter. A red cardinal flashes somewhere off in the distance, hopping from tree to tree, searching for food. Tommy returns carrying a tool which he levers into the blackened crack that marks the line of the car door. He leans his weight back on it, the metal crumples and the lock pops. He tugs hard at the door and folds it back, jamming his boot against it to force it as wide as it will go. He is looking for the plate that carries the VIN number of the car, hoping that at least some of it might still be readable despite the fire. He takes out his cell phone and holds it up close, snapping a few photographs. After he is done, we walk around to the back of the car and he does the same with the trunk. It gives easily, and creaks open a few inches. The fire has torched the inside pretty good, but not completely, and lying there in what is left of the interior of the trunk are some charred remains of whatever had been left in there when the car was set ablaze. Tommy pulls up the trunk lid as far as it will go to get a better look and Clayt Mayweather leans over my shoulder as we peer inside. It's obvious

we will need to get the forensic team to see what they can reconstruct from all of this, but the one thing that catches my attention immediately are two identical shapes, bent and twisted badly by the heat but still recognizable as baseball bats.

If it wasn't already obvious, it is now. "Well, we found ourselves the getaway car," I say to the others.

"You figure this is what was used when the M&I got held up?" asks Clayt, sounding like he's now some kind of celebrity for having uncovered this particular find.

"I believe so," I tell him as Tommy shoots some more photographs. "We'll need to get Al Olsen out here with a tow truck, get this hauled back into town so we can take a proper look at things." I take out my own phone and start to flick down my contact list. "Where'd you park your truck Clayt?" It's time to get him out of here so we can preserve any evidence we can still lift from the burned-out wreck, although I doubt we'll get anything much given the fire and how much time has passed since it was dumped.

After we have dropped Clayt back at his vehicle, Tommy drives us back to the turnoff, where the track leads into the woods, and we wait there for the tow truck to show. There is something weighing on my mind. Something that has troubled me since the talk I had about the case with my Dad a few nights ago. I'm not sure I know where to start, but it feels like a good time.

"You know, well as I do, where this whole thing could lead us?" I say to Tommy.

He looks across at me and I try to read his face, without much success.

"Where's that Sheriff?" he says, although he must have heard the same things I have around town.

"A lot of people are saying your brothers had some part of this. They say either of them could have been the one who beat the shit out of poor old Hal." With the trail cold, I suppose I had figured that this whole thing would just get added to the list of cases that old man Dewey's son wasn't smart enough to solve. But now we have the getaway car, that gives us a new lead to follow. Maybe if we can trace the car, we can figure out who it belonged to, or at least who was driving it.

"I hear that too," he tells me. "I won't lie. I'm sure hoping that isn't true. But I know my brothers. I know they could be involved in this thing."

My Dad certainly seemed to think so, and he's been right over the years more times than most around here. It would be a step up for them. Over the years they've mostly been arrested for smaller stuff, cashing bad checks, boosting cars and plenty of bar fights. And who knows what else that they haven't been caught for?

"So, seems to me that puts you in a difficult position, Tommy. Real difficult." This is the point. While it's clear to me that Tommy isn't anything like Ely and Tommy, truth is they are still his brothers. And Lundgren blood is thick. "What's more, everyone knows that old Mrs. Lundgren keeps that family so tight, she'd kill stone dead anyone who threatened to break it up."

Tommy looks through the windshield of the cruiser, out along the long straight white road that stretches off into the distance. At the horizon line there is a blinking flash of orange where Al Olsen's tow truck is creeping towards us.

"You asking me if I had anything to do with this?" says Tommy. His voice is quiet, but I can tell he's pissed at me. He's grown tired over the years of everyone judging him by his last name.

But he's misunderstood me. That wasn't what I meant. "I'm not saying that, Tommy," I tell him, anxious to reassure him. I've known Tommy Lundgren since he applied to join the force. I took a chance on him, despite what everyone else around here said about making a Lundgren a lawman. But he's proved himself to be a good cop and I certainly don't plan to give up on

him now. Still, I also want to make sure that both of us aren't blind to this. If this leads us to Ely and Henry, then I need to know that Tommy's ready for that.

"So, you're asking if I could arrest my own brothers?" he says. "If that's what it takes?" He's tracking me now. This is exactly the question on my mind.

"If that's what it takes?" I say. "Yes. That's what I'm asking you Tommy."

He smiles slightly, still looking out the window at Al's approaching tow truck. "You don't have to worry about me, Sheriff," he says. "I can slap the cuffs on Henry and Ely if I need to. They've never cut me a break. In fact, they've done nothing but give me a hard time since they day I came into this world. I don't owe them shit." He says it calmly, but there is a firmness about him. Either he is a good actor, or he means it. "I'll get onto tracing the car from the VIN number just as soon as we get back to Trumbo."

By now, Al Olsen's pickup truck has reached us and Al parks up and jumps down from the cab. He's a big man, dressed in baggy brown work overalls and an old Vikings baseball cap. He looks less than pleased to have been called out on this job, so far out of town on such a cold winter's day.

But there is one last thing I want to ask before we get on with the task of hauling that burned out car out of the woods. "And your Mom, Tommy? How d'you think she'll react if you're the one who puts Ely and Henry in jail? You gonna be able to do that to her? Strikes me that could just about kill her?"

He looks across at me, but this time he doesn't reply, just opens the door of the cruiser and walks over to greet Al, leaving me alone with my question hanging in the air.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### LAUREN LUNDGEN

"Can I come in?" Henry asks. It's late and dark outside. I knew it was only a matter of time. I'd dodged him the other night, but he was unlikely to give up that easily. He looks me up and down, as I stand in the doorway. This has always been his way, even when Ely was around.

I hesitate, weigh up my options. None of them are good, so I stand back and motion him inside where he makes a point of sitting down at the kitchen table without asking.

"You got a beer?" he says, lighting up a cigarette. He blows smoke up at the single strip light that runs across the ceiling while I fetch him one from the fridge. I hand it over to him, but don't pop one myself, even though I sure as hell feel like it. But I don't plan to pretend to be one of Henry's drinking buddies.

"You know, Dewey thinks I got something to do with Ely goin' missing" he says, taking a swig of beer. "Came callin' at the yard the other day."

Dewey's not the only one, I think to myself. Ely and Henry might have been brothers, but so were Cain and Abel. If either of them liked the other much, they sure kept it well hidden. But, despite that, what they both understood, was that they needed each other. Their mother taught them that, before they could even walk. She told them that the only people they could trust in this life were called Lundgren.

Of all the things that Ely and Henry fought about, the most common reason was me. Henry was stronger, Henry was smarter. Henry was the one his mother liked best. But the one thing Henry didn't have was me. Instead, it was Ely I ended up with, all those years ago in high school, before I really knew what I wanted. Or what was good for me.

"What'd you tell Dewey the other night, when he hauled his fat ass into Stig's?" He blows more smoke, trying to read me. What he really wants to know is whether I told him about the argument Henry and Ely had about the money they stole from the bank a few days before Ely went missing. Henry had come around after work one day and the two of them had talked in low voices, out on the back porch despite the cold. I hadn't overheard all of it, but I had gotten the gist. Henry had wanted to keep the stash untouched for a few months, wherever they had hidden it on the night of the hold up. Ely had wanted to move it and split it, so he could start to spend his share.

"I kept things to myself," I tell him. Then, after a deliberate pause, "at least for now" I leave it hanging. Maybe it's the only hold I have left over Henry, now that Ely's gone.

"You think I killed my own brother?" he asks me. He dares me to say it, but I let the silence fall over us instead, just the humming from the strip light for company.

"If you know where Ely hid the money, Lauren, now's a good time to tell me" he says after a while. "You know sooner or later that asshole Dewey will tear this place apart. If he finds anything that links any of us to the robbery, we're all fucked."

It's a big admission, but I suppose he assumes I had worked that much out already. Maybe he thinks that Ely would have told me although, truth is, Ely never told me shit about what he was up to with his brother.

"Ma says we gotta shift it. Before that happens. I can help you do that." He pauses. "If it's here?"

I see what this is all about. Henry doesn't know where the money is. He's been sent here by Connie. Either she thinks Ely double crossed them, or maybe she thinks I killed Ely and hid the money someplace.

"When d'you last have it?" I ask him, like he's lost his car keys.

"We dumped the getaway car in the woods up at the Andersen Place. Then we took the mail sacks and hid 'em in an old shelter up at the lake. The deal was we'd wait until things died down and then we'd slowly start to feed the money back through the business accounts Mom keeps for the farm."

That figures, I think to myself. That wily old bitch will want her share, no doubt.

"But it went missing along the way?" I say. I even give him a tiny smile. He's not just sitting at my kitchen table because he wants to see if I'm lonely with Ely gone. He's also trying to track down a million bucks.

Henry doesn't answer. But it's clear enough.

"News report said there was a third man. The one who drove the getaway car."

He takes a swig of his beer and nods his head. "Yeah. Sol. Buddy of mine who recently got released from St Cloud's."

"You think he took the money?"

Henry looks doubtful. "I thought so for a while. But I don't think so now. He doesn't have the balls."

"So, you think Ely took it and skipped town?" I lay it out there, but he shrugs again, uncertain. He's spent his whole life thinking his brother is the only person he could trust. "Maybe." Is all he can manage.

"Well, I don't know, Henry," I tell him. "Ely told me nothing".

He looks at me, holds my gaze steady. He knows he makes me uncomfortable and he likes the feeling of power it gives him.

"How you doin' without him?" he asks, changing the subject. "You holding up OK? Gonna have to move on, sooner or later. You know that" He tests the water.

"Ely'll be back," I say, and I look over at the door to let him know that Ely wouldn't be happy if he was to walk through it and find his own brother here, hitting on me.

Henry gives me a look. The same one he's given me all the years I've known him. He wants to take Ely's place. He knows it and I know it. But it'll never happen and that drives him crazy.

"Well, you let me know if you need anything, Lauren," says Henry, standing up. "Anything at all, you hear?" He drains his beer and bangs it down on the table. Then he crushes out his cigarette butt and drops it into the neck of the bottle. I get up and move over to the door, holding it open wide. I want him out of here. He pauses in the doorway and turns, his face only a few inches away from mine. I can smell the stale beer on his breath.

"You just need to call, Lauren. I'm always here for you," he says and there is that same old mix of emotions in his voice: part menace, part longing, part desperation. But what's different now, of course, is that Ely is gone.

I stare him down, trying to show him I'm not afraid, even though I am. "You better go, Henry," I say quietly but with all the firmness I can manage.

After a moment, he looks away and moves on through the doorway out onto the front porch. Then he turns. "You call me, if you come across that money. You hear me, Lauren?"

I nod, and he walks back over to his truck, which is parked in the driveway. His boots leave big heavy imprints in the snow. I wait for him drive off down the street and when I'm sure he's not going to loop back around, I close and lock the door, trying the handle a few times to make sure it's shut tight. Then, feeling very alone, I head upstairs to bed.

The next morning, I slink around the house in my sweat pants, moving from room to room, holding the first cup of coffee that I need to kick start my day.

“Where the hell are you Ely?” I say out loud. Sheriff Dewey’s no idea, that’s clear to me. And if Henry knows anything, he’s sure keeping it to himself. I open up the closets and go through Ely’s things for what feels like the hundredth time. If Ely planned this whole disappearing trick, he sure travelled light. I put down my coffee and start to work through the pockets of his pants again to see if I can find anything useful. But there isn’t much: a lighter, couple of crumpled dollar bills, a pack of gum

I think back, again, to the fight we had the night before he left. He picked a fight over nothing, pissed at the way I’d talked to Jay Stahl over the bar. Told me the whole town knew I was a whore. It’s the same thing, time after time, for me and Ely. He yells at me. I tell him we need the money I pull in from working at Stig’s and that if he’s got any better ideas, then I’m ready to listen. On a good night, he just drinks and smokes himself to sleep on the couch. On a bad night, he throws things and starts swinging. The worst nights of all are the ones where I’m woken by the creak of the mattress as he pushes himself towards me. Those are the nights I hate the most.

I grab a couple of thick, heavy blankets and head out to the front porch where I sit on the rocker. I won’t be able to stand the cold for long, but I want to let the fresh air clear my head.

Ely is really gone I think to myself. This is the longest we have been apart since we were in high school. I can’t imagine, any more, that he might suddenly just walk right back in here. I let this thought hang for a moment and draw the blanket up tighter around my chin, shivering both from the freezing morning air but also because I’m strangely troubled by the thought of Ely being dead. For most of my life I’ve either loved or hated Ely Lundgren, and, sometimes, both at once. I’ve wanted to escape him so often I’ve lost count. But now he’s gone, I feel a little lost. I’m the prisoner whose jailor has left the gate unlocked. The beatings have stopped, and I can stay, or I can leave. But rather than running free I sit here, slightly unsure of how to feel and what to do next. I watch my breath fan out in front of me and feel both a little more alive, and a little more dead. Like Ely has stolen something from me that I’ll never get back.

## CHAPTER NINE

### AMELIA DELARNEY

My parents are going over it all again; talking about Rachel and Tommy Lundgren. Rachel had invited him over to dinner, to meet us for the first time since she dropped the bomb about the engagement. I thought it had gone quite well, all things considered. Tommy had brought over a bunch of white lilies for my Ma and she had acted polite enough towards him, asking him how he liked his work and telling him why the current Sheriff Dewey couldn't hold a candle to his Dad. But I could tell she was faking it and, after he's gone, My Da listens while my Ma goes off on one of her continuous loops. She is fit to be tied. I sit quietly in my chair, beside the Christmas tree, with my book, reading in the soft glow from the fairy lights. Both the best and worst part about my situation is that I'm often ignored. This happens all the time in school, at football games, school plays and the like. They make me take money for hot dogs or sit at the door handing out programs or some other crappy job; like that compares to marching with the band or playing Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz like Rachel got to do. Nobody does it out of meanness. In fact, they do it to be kind. They want me to feel included. But sometimes it doesn't feel that way. The only good part about this though is that sometimes I see and hear things nobody else does, because they don't notice I'm there. Like when I saw Mr. Hammond the Social Studies teacher hold Mrs. Tyler's hand at the very edge of the crowd watching fireworks on the fourth. Mrs. Tyler's married to Mr. Tyler the Court Recorder and they've got three kids, all in grade school. Or the time I saw Mrs. Fisher taking a swig from a flask before Mass because she hadn't noticed I was sitting outside the open door to the vestry. I remember how she gave me a smile and a wink and put her finger to her lips to let her know I shouldn't tell. That's how I first got talking to Charlie, because I'd seen him knife the school bus tires. What I like about Charlie is that he never seems to ignore me, like other people do. He asks me questions and listens, really listens, when I tell him what I think. People say Charlie is trouble and that he'll end up making nothing of his life. But I'm not so sure. Because what I see in Charlie is an incredible spirit. He doesn't care that everyone thinks he's crazy to hang out with someone like me. And I think that's pretty amazing. My Ma has spent her whole life worrying about what other people think. She's mad at Rachel, not because she thinks Tommy Lundgren is going to make her unhappy. Not really, if the truth be told. What she's worried about is what everyone around here will *think*. And it seems to me that's the difference between Charlie Fortune and my Ma. One of them is caged in, one of them is free.

"But what are we going to *do* about it?" my Ma says to my Da. Her voice is agitated.

"It's Rachel's choice," replies my Da calmly. How he remains so patient with her beats me.

"He is a Lundgren," she says. "You know what *they* are like. It's just not....." her voice trails off as she tries to find the words.

".....right" she finally chooses, without much imagination.

"Lil', she's grown. "She's twenty-three next month."

"Pat, come on now" My Ma hisses like an angry goose.

But, in his own, quiet way, my Da knows that he's right. "Our work on our daughter's moral compass is done, Lillian. You know that."

“Hrumph” my Ma says. She wants him to do something about this problem that’s forced itself upon her family like an uninvited house guest. “My work as a mother will never be done Patrick. Never. You hear me?” She barks it out like she is commanding the tide to halt.

“We will never stop loving her,” replies my Da, “but we *will* stop trying to control her.” He smiles. “If for no other reason than she’s your daughter and she won’t be controlled.”

“Hrumph” repeats my Ma then falls silent.

“The more you fight with her about it the more she’ll push you away. And that’s not what you want is it? She’s a good kid. Always has been. We need to leave this to her to figure this out. And, if she loves Tommy Lundgren that much then I, for one, am prepared to give him a chance.” He leaves this to sink in and my Ma stays silent. My Da is the smartest man in the world. “How’s the book Amelia?” he says, suddenly turning towards me. I had not realized he even remembered I was here. I flick at the screen and turn a page. “It’s good,” I tell him. “I like Atticus Finch the best.” It strikes me that my father and Atticus Finch have a lot in common.

He smiles at me. “Me too,” he says. “Long time since I read it, mind you.” And, as he passes me on the way to the kitchen to fetch another bottle of beer, he bends down and softly rests a hand on my shoulder then plants a kiss on the very top of my head. “Time for bed, now” he tells me.

A little later, my Da comes into my bedroom to see if I need anything and to turn out my reading light. But, really, he just wants company. He’s drunk down quite a few milk stouts over the last couple of hours and he’s got that look on his face like he has forgotten how not to smile. I love my Da.

“Your Ma has retired to her sleeping quarters,” he says grandly like she is some Southern Belle. “She’s feeling exhausted and a little faint.” He makes a motion like he is about to swoon then grins like a mischievous teenager.

I put down my book and look up at him. He comes over and sits on my bed.

“Ma doesn’t like him,” I say, starting with the obvious.

He shrugs. “That is true now Amelia. But your Ma doesn’t like most people.”

I smile. “What did you think?”

“You go first,” he says, the same sappy smile wiped across his face like it’s been put there by a washcloth.

“Well, I love that he makes Rachel happy,” I say.

“True, true,” says my Da. “I’ve not seen your sister this happy for a long while.”

“And I am pretty sure he likes her too.” Anyone prepared to meet my Ma like this is not just along for the ride.

“I like that too,” says my Da.

“But he’s a Lundgren. People around here all seem pretty convinced that the Lundgren family are no good. Charlie says even his Dad thinks so. That’s what bothers Ma, isn’t it?” I dissect the problem as best I can, although there’s more to it than that.

“Your Ma worries about a lot of things,” my Da says with a sigh. “Mostly she worries about you kids. About you making mistakes.”

“How so?” I ask him. This is a slightly different take which I have not heard before. With a few milk stouts down him, my Da is more talkative than usual.

“She doesn’t want Rachel to make a mistake that’ll ruin her life,” he says.

“You think marrying Tommy’s a mistake that will ruin her life?”

"I didn't say that Amelia. And honestly, I'm not even sure your Ma really thinks that either. He sure seems completely different to his two brothers by all accounts. Looks like he treats Rachel right and certainly looks like she loves him. But your Ma's not convinced that anyone can change their true nature; their blood, so to speak. And that makes the thought of Rachel marrying him scary for someone like your Ma."

I think about her in her bedroom right now, lying on the bed no doubt her mind turning things over and over, worried about Rachel. Worried that she is about to make a terrible mistake. Thinking about whether she should ever really trust Tommy Lundgren.

"But maybe she has a point," I tell him, then immediately feel a little guilty that maybe I'm as naturally nasty and suspicious as my Ma. "We don't know if we can trust him; whether he's really just as bad and no good as his brothers, deep down."

My Da, it seems, is nowhere near as concerned.

He smiles. "That's surely true now, so it is, Amelia. But I'm prepared to give a man a chance. Heavens, Amelia, you walk this earth long enough and everyone makes mistakes along the way. Even your own Ma. But I think that what defines someone is what they do today and tomorrow, not where they come from, who their parents. That's where me and your Ma disagree. Because in your Ma's mind, a person's upbringing defines them; like something from your past with rattling chains following you around your whole life." He helps paint the picture briefly raising his hands to make pretend claws then lunging his face towards me like some slightly drunken ghoul. We both laugh.

"So, what did you think of him tonight, Da?" I ask him when his chuckling finally dies away. He's not really answered this yet.

"Well, I quite like him actually," he says after a pause. "I like him because he seems like a straightforward guy. I like him because he makes my daughter happy. I like him because, from what I hear, he helped your friend Charlie the other night when he got caught stealing at the Aldred's store. That says something about his nature."

I like the fact that my Da doesn't judge Charlie, even when he does get into trouble. "Is there a but?" I'm waiting for it.

"No, not really," he says "There'll be no prouder man in Trumbo than me, when I get to walk your sister down the aisle. But relationships are complicated Amelia. You'll learn that as you grow older."

I hate it when he treats me like this. I may be the youngest in this family, but it's pretty evident that I'm the smartest.

"You think they are having sex?" I ask him straight out. I do this for effect, so he understands I'm no longer a kid.

He winces. "Now, now," Amelia he says. There is not enough milk stout in this whole state that would make him talk about this with me.

"Time to go to sleep, Amelia," says my Da glancing at the clock. "School tomorrow."

I nod, and he pats down the quilt around my legs.

He leans forward to kiss me and I can smell the familiar mix of his favorite soap blended with the stale smell of beer lingering on his breath.

"You sleep tight, Wheelia," he says softly, and the sound of his voice makes me wriggle.

He gives me a pat and then stands up and walks to the door. Once he kills the light the room is dark, almost pitch, but I keep my eyes open and watch his shape pause at the doorway. Then, with a hiccup, he leaves me to sleep.

## CHAPTER TEN

### MARTIN DEWEY

From where he's sitting in the rocker on the front porch, my Dad watches me pull up the driveway in the cruiser. He's wrapped up like a Packers fan at the Ice Bowl. The morning is cold but clear and the fresh air, no doubt, makes him feel alive. He squints slightly. The sun is watery but lying low, shining into his face.

I get out of the car and go join him on the porch. "Hey, Sheriff" I say as I pull up a chair.

He doesn't say anything, just stares off into the distance. He looks weak today, his skin so thin he resembles a ghost, and I wonder how much longer this can go on. But I've learned over the years, like the rest of this town, that my old man's as tough as they come.

I fill him in on the latest news. "We found a burned-out car. In the woods, out at the old Andresen place. Been there several weeks, best I can tell from the snow."

He wheezes. "Getaway car from the bank heist" he says. He doesn't need my help to make the connection.

I nod. "Yeah. Found some burned baseball bats in the trunk and forensics managed to piece together charred fragments of the masks they used during the hold up along with some mail sacks." Problem is that's pretty much all they got. No clues as to who dumped it out there.

"You traced the car yet? Stolen most likely. Or rented in a false name."

I shake my head. "Not yet," I admit. "Plates were all burned up. But we lifted a partial VIN number. I got Tommy tracking that down today."

My old man coughs, a raking cough that shakes him to his bones. "I'll help you back inside," I say, but he waves me off with a flap of his bony arm. We sit in silence for a while, both of us just staring out at the snow.

"You think I can trust Tommy?" I ask him suddenly. This question still bothers me. "If Henry and Ely were the ones who pulled it off, like you think?"

"You can trust him," says my Dad simply, still looking off into the distance. Although my old man spent most of his life cussing out the Lundgren family, he was the only one in this town who stayed silent when I took a chance and offered Tommy a job. For all his gruffness, my old man was never one to judge a man too quickly. His hours sitting across the table of an interrogation room had taught him that. Sounds like you're not so sure, Bobo?"

I don't really know how to answer. So, I settle on the truth. "I don't know what to think," I tell him. "He says he could take his brothers down if that's where all this led. But you know....." My voice trails off.

"That boy's cut from different cloth than his brothers," he says. "Always has been." He is matter of fact.

"Nearly twenty years younger, avoided trouble growing up, knows right from wrong, seems like he's got a good heart, best as I can tell at least." These were the things that made me give Tommy a chance. "But, he's still a Lundgren."

"He's cut from a different cloth," my Dad repeats himself. A loop of saliva droops between his lips and the back of his hand as he coughs away.

I look at the line of telephone poles snaking away up the road. A group of birds are sitting on the wire. It feels like they are watching us. Further on up the street, Marty Nichols is slowly clearing a path from his front door to his mailbox. The sound his snow shovel makes on the pavement carries clearly on the crisp, morning air.

"You've heard the same talk I have, I suppose," I say. "About why Tommy might be different?" Tommy came along just a few months before throat cancer took that mean sonofabitch Ray Lundgren. Some think maybe Ray wasn't Tommy's father. Some think perhaps Connie Lundgren's tears at the graveside when Ray passed was guilt rather than grief. But, if Connie did cheat on her husband, she sure kept it quiet, because I've never heard shit about who it might have been, and she certainly never remarried. Instead, she's just been growing older and meaner, holed up in the family farm up on Muskrat Ridge with her brother.

"They say she controls Ely and Henry like they're dogs on a leash. If they held up the bank, you better believe Connie Lundgren knew about it."

"I've heard all the talk, Bobo," he tells me. "Been the same forever. But I don't listen. You know how this town is." Although my Dad always knew what was going on around here, he was always careful not to talk too much. He was an insider, but he also kept his distance. It was one of the reasons why he was so good at policing this place. People trusted him with their secrets.

"You think it's true though? That he wasn't Ray Lundgren's son?" I ask him. It would certainly explain a lot about Tommy.

"I just know he's cut from a different cloth, that's all," he says for the third time. "Anyone can see that." He is annoyed. It's his way of telling me we are done with the subject. If my old man knows anything about the Lundgren family tree, he plans to hold his tongue.

"I went and talked to Henry," I change the subject. "Just like you suggested, Sheriff."

He doesn't look at me. "Got shit, I bet."

"Not much," I admit, thinking back to the conversation I had with Henry at the lumber yard and wishing I'd handled it differently. "He says he doesn't know anything about the robbery or where Ely is."

My Dad nods and gives a little smile to himself. He knows Henry Lundgren well enough and he thinks I'm no match for him, although he doesn't say so. At least for that, I'm grateful.

"You think he killed Ely and kept all the money. Or do you think Ely double crossed him and skipped town with it?" One of these two theories seem the most likely explanation to me. But my old man is somewhere else, ahead of me, deep in thought. I wait on him; no rush. I get up and pull the blankets up around his chin because he must be cold.

"Strikes me," he says finally, "that if you can find that money then that'll tell you which of those two scenarios is true." I nod my head. That much is obvious. But not so easy to pull off. Where do I even start to look for the money?

But he's not done quite yet. "And another thing, Bobo," he says. Maybe this is what he's been building up to all along, in his own patient way.

"Perhaps you should pay Lauren Lundgren a visit too. Put some pressure on her."

I know he doesn't like her a whole lot. He thinks she's a whore, like most folks around town do. They say she sleeps around. But I'm not so sure. There is something about Lauren that I like.

"You think she's involved in this whole mess?"

He makes a face, like I'm some kind of dumbass. "Sure, as shit. You can bet she's shedding no tears for Ely and a woman like Lauren Lundgren sure could use a million dollars."

He has a point I suppose. But I just don't see Lauren as a murderer. "OK," I say, without much enthusiasm. "I'll go see her."

"Worth a try, Bobo," he says. "After all, what else you got?" He enjoys making this point.

"Let's see whether Tommy makes progress on tracing the burned-out ride," I tell him, just to let him know that I've got at least some other leads open.

"Do it your way," he tells me as he tries to lift himself up out of his chair. He doesn't quite make it to standing and flops back down. "Even if you place 'em both in the bank that Monday night, that's still not getting you any closer to finding Ely or the cash." He tries to get up again and I offer him my arm. But, again, he waves me off, and this time he manages to stand. He steadies himself for a second, then moves back inside and drops into his favorite chair, exhausted. I ask him what he needs but I can tell he is done talking with me and, before too long, all I hear is the gentle rasp of his breathing, each inhale and exhale lengthening as he drifts off to sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### CHARLIE FORTUNE

"Well? What the fuck do you expect, Johnny." My mom's voice is even. She's shouting in whispers.

My Dad paces the floor. I can't see his face I can tell he's frustrated. "It's not over. It's never over." He paces some more.

I'm sitting on the stairs listening to them, peeking around the corner. I've been here for the last ten minutes or so.

It had started the same as most nights, the jabs, like the opening round of a title fight. I'd gone to my room to escape from it, jammed my headphones in to drown out the noise of them going back and forth. But it was the sound of the lamp crashing against the wall that brought me out of my bedroom.

My dad had thrown it clean across the living room, smashing the bulb and mangling the frame. My mother stays sitting on the couch, while he prowls around her. If she's worried that his anger will be turned on her, she doesn't show it.

"You know we're done Johnny. It's over. You just won't accept it. We were done long ago. But, now it's time. I won't do this any longer. I've talked to a lawyer."

I've heard them argue about this so many times before. She wants out. He thinks they can work it out. But with each argument, she makes it harder for him, loading another fifty-pound stone around his neck. Still, he seems determined not to collapse under the weight. "Why don't we try a counsellor?" he asks. "We gotta talk about stuff."

"Stuff?" says my Mom and this time she cannot avoid nastiness streaking her words. "You know the minute we start to talk about *stuff*, the lid's going to blow off this fucking marriage like Old Faithful."

"Old Faithful? That's fucking ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, it fucking is, Johnny. And you know that better than I do. You fucking started this, remember. We were both stuck in this shitty marriage, but I thought we had a deal?"

"Oh fuck, not that again" he says. It seems he's heard this line before, and he waves his hand at her like he's swatting away a fly.

"Well didn't we?" she pushes him.

"No. We had a marriage and a kid. We didn't have a deal; stop with this deal shit." He grunts in frustration.

"You fucking betrayed me, Johnny. You did what you did, and you knew things would never be the same again."

"Why won't you talk about it?" he asks her. "Why won't you see someone? What the fuck have we got to lose?" He's asked this question more times than there are stars in the sky.

"Because you're right: we've got nothing to lose because we've already.....fucking.....lost it. So, there's no....fucking....point." She punctuates each word. Why did you do what you did, huh?"

"Fuck you," he says quietly, exhausted. "You're choosing this. Admit that much You're choosing to walk out. Not me."

I know my Dad. This is important to him. He may be many things, but he doesn't think of himself as a quitter.

"Sure," she replies. "If you want someone to blame, go ahead. Blame me. I don't give a shit anymore Johnny. I just want out"

"I don't want to quit," says my Dad. "I don't want to fucking quit." He bangs his fist down on the table with a dull thud.

"But we're done, Johnny" my Mom repeats. "We're done whether you want it or not. I'm leaving you. You can't stop me."

He acts like a man hanging trapped on to a cliff face, afraid to fall. He knows he can't climb up. He knows he can't climb back down. So, he just stays there, clinging on as best he can.

"It's coming up to Christmas," he says. "Stay through the Holidays at least."

"No, Johnny. You always come up with some reason. I stayed through Thanksgiving. For Charlie."

"Stay for Christmas. Then we can decide what to do." He tries again.

"There is no 'we' Johnny," says my Mom. "I've decided." She twists the knife. "I can't stay any longer. I gotta go. I'm headed to Florida for Christmas."

Suddenly my Dad stops pacing. "Why Florida? Why now? You met someone? Someone else?"

My mom hesitates. "Jesus Christ, Johnny. Can't you understand. Our marriage is finished. It's done."

My Dad doesn't answer.

"I'm leaving. You hear me? Tonight. My stuff's already packed. I'm taking the van" For the first time, she raises her voice. It's the same tone, the same words, she's used with me a thousand times.

"Fuck you" he says. It's all he can summon up. "Fuck you" he repeats. Then he grabs a vase from above the fire place and throws it across the room. I watch it, like a fastball racing towards the plate. It splinters into pieces when it hits the wall. I close my eyes. I want this all to stop; somehow.

"You throw stuff all you like, Johnny. Go ahead, break this whole fucking place apart." She pauses. "But we're still done."

I open my eyes and see that she's got up. She heads towards the door but my Dad steps across to block her way. I close my eyes again, afraid to look.

"Get out of my fucking way." She makes a noise like an angry trailer park dog.

"Don't go. Not tonight. Tomorrow." His finger nails are scrabbling at the rock face, scraping desperately for grip. I wonder for a moment what it must feel like. Like, when you're about to fall off a high tree branch and you get that rush as if you've been hosed with iced water. That must be how he feels right now.

I think about whether I should rush down there and try to stop her. I love her and I don't want her to go. I want to go and hug her, make her stay. I want her to give my Dad another chance, whatever the hell it is he's done. But I'm too scared, too embarrassed, too confused. I don't understand any of this. I just want her to stay.

My Dad stands there. He's so much bigger than her, she seems tiny standing in front of him.

"Move aside, please" she repeats, this time more softly, but no less firm.

I open my eyes to see what he'll do. He has his arm across the doorway, holding the door frame. If he lets her pass, I know things will never be the same again.

He hesitates, no doubt thinking the same thing. After a moment, he pulls back his arm and my Mom slides past him. The man clinging to the cliff face can hold on no longer and he tumbles backwards. When she is gone, he walks slowly over to a chair and sits down heavily. His back is to me, but I can tell he's exhausted. And then, I see him drop his forehead into his hands to cover his face and I watch his shoulders shaking as he starts to cry.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### LAUREN LUNDGREN

I see him unexpectedly, from across the lot, loading groceries into his truck. For some reason that I can't quite explain, I find I want to go talk with him again. The bags in my own cart have the look of someone who lives alone: too much microwave food and cheap booze. It doesn't take me long to empty them into my trunk, so I wait for him to finish unloading, watching him from a distance. I make sure I arrive at the empty cart collection point at the same time as him and we both hesitate, like cars at a four way, trying to figure out who should go first.

He seems a little awkward. "Hey Lauren," he says with a little head nod but not much of a smile. "Go ahead."

I push my cart forward, slamming it roughly into the back of the others that are there, and he then does the same.

"Thanks for stepping in the other night at Stig's. You know, with Henry and everything."

Tommy looks at me and shrugs, like it was nothing. "I know how he can be," he says.

The conversation stalls and he's about to turn away. But I want to talk. Ely never had any time for his younger brother. It was always Ely and Henry who were tight. Never Tommy. For a while, when Tommy was growing up and he was living with his Mom and his uncle up at the farm, I would see him at the god-awful family events that Ely used to make me go to, in the first few years after we got married. After Ely's dad died, Connie Lundgren used to try and pull off happy family dinners for the Holidays. They were always a disaster. Typically, the men were all sloppy drunk before noon and Ma Lundgren would sit at the head of the table, buzzed herself, lipstick smudged, hair falling out of its scrunchie, pointing at each of us in turn with a crooked finger, telling us why we'd never amount to anything. After dinner we'd all sit around on the couch with football on TV, smoking weed. One time there was a full-blown fist fight between Ely, Henry and both uncles. Henry knocked one of them out cold and Ma Lundgren had to break it up using a shotgun. I quit going after that; just made my excuses. I couldn't stand it. Ely didn't care if I went or not. He knew his mother hated me anyhow and so it gave him something to get in a fight with me about whenever he got home and wanted to pay someone back for the humiliation he'd suffered up at the farm. Best I can tell, the minute Tommy could drive he escaped too. He was living in friends' spare rooms and even sometimes in the back seat of his car, long before he graduated high school. I remember once, when they were drunk, I heard Ely and Henry talk about it. Ely called Tommy a fucking faggot. That he was a disgrace to the family. That Ma Lundgren's was too soft on him and how she would never have let either of them act that way.

"No news on tracking down Ely, I suppose," I say to him, just to keep things going.

"Not exactly," Tommy replies. "Although we did find a burned-out car up in the woods the other day. Looks like maybe it was the one used in the bank robbery."

I nod. "Henry came around to my place the other night. Wanted to know if I knew where the money was." I feel like I should give him something, so I throw him a bone.

"What you tell him?" asks Tommy. What he really means is: what do I know about the robbery and where the money might be?

"Told him the truth," I say. "Told him I didn't know where the money was."

"He's trying to scare you. Just like in the parking lot." Tommy knows his brother. He hesitates. "Did he try anything, you know, physical?"

I shake my head. "No," I tell him. "He seemed pretty pissed though, about the money going missing. Definitely sounded like he had no clue where Ely had stashed it."

Tommy doesn't say anything, just files the information away. He'll probably tell Dewey about it though; that Henry is doing the rounds, trying to track down the money.

"I always made a point not to know too much about what Ely and Henry got themselves into," I explain. While I'm happy to tell Tommy about Henry's search for the money, I don't want to land myself in court as a prosecution star witness. That's not the sort of thing I need. I can do without some smart-ass public defender raking back through all my shit, trying to prove why I wanted to stick it to the two of them by making stuff up. Jesus, you don't have to be much of a lawyer to figure out that I've got all the reasons in the world for wanting those two sons of bitches locked away for a good long while.

"I try and do the same," he tells me. "I know they are into some nasty shit, but I try to stay out of it. Best I can anyway." He taps his badge. "Sometimes it's hard being a Lundgren around here." He looks away for a moment and, when he turns back, his face has a sadness to it. And, suddenly, I realize just why it is that I needed to talk with him so bad. He's the only person in this town who knows what it's like. He knows Ely, he knows Henry, he knows his mother. He knows what it's like to be a Lundgren.

"I can't believe I married into it. What the hell was I thinking?" I say with a half-smile. "I just hope it'll be different for Rachel. That's all."

"Your situation was different to Rachel's" he says, and I wonder how much he knows about why I walked down the aisle. We stand in the parking lot, by the empty shopping carts, sky solid gray like gun metal. Another shopper shows up to ditch her cart and we move aside to let her past.

"I better get moving," Tommy tells me, signaling that we are done talking. "I'm meeting Rach later. We're headed to dinner and a movie." He smiles, a nice smile as he thinks about his night ahead. I'm pleased for them both. They deserve to be happy. Everyone deserves at least one shot, even if they then go ahead and screw it up.

"Good for you guys," I say. "She showed me the ring. Really pretty. You chose well."

"Thanks," he says then turns to go.

But I can't let him. "I miss Ely." It rushes out of me suddenly like I'm unable to help myself. "In a funny kind of way," I add, as if that makes it alright, which perhaps it does.

Tommy hesitates. He hears the confusion in my voice, senses that I want his help. He considers what I've said. "I think that's probably a normal way to feel," he says slowly. "They say even when people are in abusive situations, they keep going back there anyway. Just because it's what they're used to. It's somehow comforting, I suppose." After he's said it, he frowns, probably because he realizes how it paints me. Makes me look like I'm some helpless punching bag that doesn't have the guts to get out.

I feel uncomfortable, not sure what to say. "Ely and me. well, we were more complicated than that," I tell him.

He looks sorry. "I know that, Lauren," he says, and I wonder again how much he knows about my marriage.

"I'm glad he's gone" I say. "Really. My life sucked with Ely around. But I miss him too." I wish now I'd not said anything. There is no way I can expect him to untangle this for me.

He looks at me funny, like he feels bad that he can't provide me with much comfort, or any good advice for that matter. In fact, he looks like he'd rather be any place right now other than here, talking to me.

"Maybe I'll feel differently if we ever find out what really happened to him?" I've thought about this a lot recently. Part of why I feel the way I do, is because it seems like things aren't really done; not fully closed. I don't know for sure that Ely is even dead. I certainly don't know where his body is. Or if he'll just walk back through the door one day and the beatings will start again. "Right now, I just can't seem to find any peace."

Tommy looks away again, out across the parking lot. "You just gotta try and move on, Lauren," he says. "Best you can." He hesitates. "We all gotta do that." The sadness I'd seen earlier returns and I wonder if perhaps he misses his brother too, even if just a little bit. Or is there something else about all this that makes him look the way he does?

I nod. I don't know what I expected, but a part of me is disappointed with our talk.

"I gotta run," he says. "Rache'll be waiting on me otherwise."

"I know," I tell him. "Go," I say, and this time I mean it.

"One last thing though, Lauren," he says before he turns to head back to his truck. "It's likely we'll trace that car any day now and, when we do, we'll get from there to who did it pretty quick, and then to the money. So, if you do happen know anything about where it is, I wouldn't keep it to yourself. OK?"

He says it like he's trying to help. But it's not lost on me that this is the exact same parting shot Henry had used the other night when he paid me a visit. It's pretty clear they all think I know more about this than I'm saying.

He doesn't wait for an answer and I don't give him one. Instead I walk slowly back over to my car and head home. When I get there, I unpack my groceries and after I'm done, I pour myself a shot of Jack from the bottle that's still sitting open on the kitchen table from this morning. The whiskey warms me, and I immediately feel a little better. I sit there, slowly circling the glass in my hand, thinking back to what Tommy had said. It strikes me that, so far, I've only ever searched the house for anything that would tell me why Ely disappeared and where he might have gone. I've never looked at it through Ely's eyes; never asked myself, if I was trying to hide a million dollars, what would I do with it.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MARTIN DEWEY

I park at the end of her driveway but pause for a moment before I get out. In some ways, the house is like every other in this street: slightly run down, in need of paint. But, in the neighbor's yard, there is a battered old plastic playhouse, its red roof covered with snow. Christmas lights hang across the front porch and a lopsided Santa and his sleigh have been jammed into the frozen ground. Lauren and Ely's yard, on the other hand, is empty. I wonder why they never had kids. Was it that they couldn't, or perhaps that they didn't want to bring a kid into the middle of their messed-up lives? Or was refusing to get pregnant just another of the ways Lauren Lundgren tried to get even with Ely for the way he treated her. They say, every time Ely hands out another beating, Lauren finds some guy to flirt with. And so, the cycle of violence between them, continues. Each one doing their best to hurt the other. But, despite what everyone thinks, I sense there's a lot more to it than just getting even. For one, she stays with Ely despite all the shit. Second, she finds a way to appear strong. I've seen plenty of broken women in my line of work. Women who have disappeared so far back inside themselves that you can barely see who they really are any more. Lauren Lundgren isn't one of them.

I get out the car and walk up to the house. I had taken my old man's advice and called her first thing, telling her that I wanted to talk. She'd been the one who had suggested I drop by. There's no doorbell, so I rap on the doorframe and immediately hear deep, gruff barking coming from inside. Lauren opens the door, bending down to hold the collar of a pit-bull that shows me its tonsils and a sharp set of teeth. She's barefooted, dressed in sweat pants and a baggy sweatshirt.

"Don't worry about Rocky," she says. "He's a big baby at heart." She cuffs him around the head playfully and the dog wags its tail. "Come inside," she says. "Shit, it's cold again today."

I step inside the house and she closes the door behind me. The dog checks me out, sniffing at my pant legs. I bend down and pet it, slapping its side. "He's a fine dog," I tell her.

"Ely named him after Rocky Balboa," she says. "It was his favorite movie." That's hardly a surprise, I think as I look at Lauren's face. I can still see the discolored mark on the point of her right cheek bone. It's faded a little, but it's the same one I'd noticed the night I talked to her at Stig's.

"But Rocky never liked Ely," she continues. "He was always my dog." No doubt another victory in her silent war against Ely. "You made the right choice," I tell Rocky.

"You want coffee?" she asks. "It's still warm." We go through to the kitchen. Her house is untidy but not dirty. A blanket lies discarded on the couch and there's an empty pizza box on the coffee table on top of which is the TV remote. There's as much sign of Christmas inside as there was outside, and it strikes me that this is how my own place must look to anyone who cared enough to visit. In the kitchen a few plates and glasses are stacked in the sink and a jar of peanut butter stands open on the counter top. Her cellphone lies next to it, playing country music through its tiny speaker. The song sounds metallic with all the bass stripped out. Lauren pours two cups and hands one to me. Then, she opens up one of the cabinets and pulls out a whiskey bottle. She unscrews the top and splashes a shot into her own coffee then offers me the bottle. "Want some?" she asks.

I smile. This is one of the things I like about Lauren Lundgren. I find her as she is, no frills, nothing to hide about how she lives her life.

"What?" she says noticing the look on my face.

"Nothing," I say quickly, anxious not to offend her. "I'd love to join you, but I'm not supposed to drink on duty." It sounds pathetic even as I say it. Shit, I'm supposed to be sheriff of this town.

"Suit yourself," she says, sitting down at the table. She motions for me to do the same and I draw up a seat. We sit facing each other and she waits for me to shoot first. I don't know quite how to start, because I don't want it to sound like an accusation. "We've still had no luck locating the money from that bank robbery that went down last Thanksgiving," I say. I take a sip of my drink and then look down into it to avoid making eye contact, watching the dark liquid circle in my cup.

"Yeah," she says. "Tommy told me as much. But he said you'd found a burned-out car which might lead you somewhere? I didn't know Lauren and Tommy were even friends. Certainly not close enough for him to be discussing the case with her. "We ran into each other at the grocery store yesterday," she says by way of explanation.

"Well, you heard right. Tommy's following a few leads on the car." I take another drink. I wish I'd taken her up on her offer to add a shot of whiskey because I feel strangely nervous around her. "Problem is, Lauren, there was no sign of the money in the car. Forensics went over the remains of what we found in the trunk. Best we can tell, the money was taken out before the car was set alight."

She gives me a look, like did I really need a forensic test to tell me that? I try to make things better. "Well, you wouldn't go to all the trouble of robbing a bank and then burn the money, would you?" Shit, I think to myself. Could I sound any more lame?

But she helps me out, either out of kindness or embarrassment. "So, you want to know if I've got any idea where the money is?" she says. "You think maybe I popped Ely and took the cash?" Lauren cuts to the chase. She smiles briefly, one of those ironic smiles. But it's not filled with bitterness. She understands well enough how things might look.

I shrug. "I suppose so." What else is there to say. That's exactly why my old man sent me here. "You know I gotta try and do my job," I tell her, almost by way of an apology. "Everyone around here thinks I'm a lousy cop compared to my Dad." I run my hands around my coffee cup, back and forth, back and forth.

"I wouldn't worry much about that," she says. "You know exactly what people in this town think of me, but I still keep showing up for work every day." She's trying to make me feel better. "Even if I do need a little help sometimes." She throws a glance at the bottle of Jack and I give her a smile.

"I'm gonna keep looking for Ely and I'm gonna keep looking for that money," I tell her. "One of the things I learned from my Dad was that, in this job, the one thing you need is a lot of is patience."

"You got a tough act to follow," she says. I've heard that line more times than I care to remember. But she's not quite finished. "Expectations sure can drag a person down."

I look across at her, but she doesn't offer up anything else. Whether she's talking about me, herself, or maybe even Ely, isn't clear. But whatever she's thinking she keeps it to herself and I don't feel like I can ask her to explain. Instead, I lean back in the kitchen chair and she waits on me to speak.

"Did you notice anything suspicious about Ely, the night of the robbery? I know it's a while ago now, but best as you can remember?"

"You mean did he show up carrying a big bag over his shoulder marked loot?" She gives me another of her looks, enjoying messing with me. "I remember I was working that night. It was a Monday, right? I didn't get home until late."

"Was Ely here before you?"

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "He was still out. "But that doesn't mean much. Our marriage was hardly one where we waited up for each other. It wasn't unusual. Often, he came home drunk and I just pretended to be asleep to avoid trouble. You know?"

I give her a look that's meant to be sympathetic. Because, the fact is, I don't know. I can't imagine what it must have been like, married to Ely Lundgren all these years. "I'm sorry," I say, then immediately look away, embarrassed that it just slipped out of me. This is no business of mine.

But she doesn't seem to mind. She gave up looking for sympathy long ago.

Lauren looks at me closely and it feels like she's weighing up whether she can trust me or not.

"I got something to show you," she says suddenly, getting up. The dog also scrambles to its feet, startled by her movement. Its feet scratch on the linoleum floor. "Follow me," she says, heading out of the door that leads off the kitchen down into the basement. I do as she says, intrigued, and she flips on a light switch and begins to go down the wooden stairs. "I found this yesterday evening," she calls over her shoulder. "After I got home from the store. After I'd talked with Tommy."

It's a cold, windowless space and all the light comes from a bare bulb screwed into the low ceiling which barely clears the top of my head. The place is piled up with boxes, stacked on top of each other, filled with the usual crap. I can see that Ely uses it as a place to store his guns, stacked on a rack against one wall. I look around to see if I can spot why Lauren brought me down here, but I see nothing unusual.

"Over there," she says, pointing towards the furnace which is set back in the furthest corner. I still see nothing, so I wander over to take a closer look.

"Behind it," she says. "You'll have to kneel down."

I squat and look past the metal duct work that runs along the ceiling and down the back of the furnace. And I see what she means. There is what looks like a square hatch shape, etched into the wall.

"I needed to use a box cutter to open it." She is behind me now holding a flashlight. "And you'll need this."

I slide my fingernails into the line around the edge of the hatch and it drops forward immediately into my hands to reveal an opening. Lauren hands me a flashlight which I shine inside. There's a narrow crawl space that heads off to the left, hugging the concrete foundation, running behind the dry wall. I crawl inside and follow it. Around the corner, the passageway opens up into a larger space, big enough to stand up in. I shine my flashlight around. The place smells stale. There are a few old beer cans crumpled in one corner and tacked into the joists that form the frame of the dry wall are some centerfold spreads from porn magazines. Their faces stare back at me weirdly in the flashlight beam, wide eyed, getting fucked from every angle. Also, discarded in one corner is a pile of empty mail sacks, the same ones used during the robbery. But, if this is the place Ely used to store the money, it's also clear that he's been able to stay a step ahead of us. Because, sprayed in red paint onto the wall is a message. It is from Ely. It says simply: "FUCK YOU HENRY, FUCK YOU LAUREN. FUCK YOU TOMMY. FUCK YOU ALL."