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 honestly 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 hey 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.

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***END OF 5,000 WORD EXCERPT***