

Chapter 1

Set deep in the woods of west-central Mississippi is a cabin. Once it housed a family with children and life. Now it sits empty and isolated. For fifty years, it stood through rain and wind, sleet and snow. From the moment he saw it, he knew it would be the perfect place for him. It would serve as his home away from home.

Stepping onto the old wooden porch, it gave a faint creak as it accepted his weight. Testing its strength, he jumped. It held. Nodding, he placed his hands on the rusted metal doorknob and turned. The door protested as it opened. The air inside the old house was stale and dusty. Nothing stood except the walls and the old wooden floor. Furnishings had long ago been taken away. It contained nothing but the kitchen sink, the bathroom sink, and the toilet. All had seen better days.

The place was perfect. It was far enough from town to be in the middle of nowhere and close enough he could return to his home so that no one would miss him. Walking back outside, he surveyed his surroundings. Not far from the back of the house was a murky swamp. He smiled. In case of emergency, it would serve as the perfect place to dispose of an unwanted body.

After returning to his car, he sat for a moment. Yes, this would work. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the deed to the property. He signed the necessary papers and tucked them safely back into his jacket. Turning the key, he started the car and drove back toward town.

Arriving back at his apartment, he checked the mileage from the old house to his apartment. Twenty- two miles. Perfect. The trip had taken about fifteen minutes. Closing the car door, he walked to his apartment. It was time to get ready for work.

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Weeks later, he stood in the old house once again. It had been cleaned and furnished. To appearances, it had the look of a hunting cabin. In a way, that is exactly what it was. He had put a large ceramic tub in the bathroom and a restaurant style icemaker in the kitchen. A small table stood in the center of the room. He had also added a refrigerator, chairs, a couch, and a TV. The place now appeared almost homey.

His cell phone rang. "Hello?" He listened to the voice on the other end. "Yes, things are almost set. I should begin production soon. I will call you when I have the first batch ready." The voice spoke louder. "Yes, I know you need it fast. Don't worry. Things are going according to plan. Go ahead and send Toby to me. Goodbye." He closed his phone and returned it to his pocket. When Toby arrived, everything would be set. Until then, he would make himself at home. Taking a seat in his recliner, he clicked the remote and watched a little TV.

Several hours later, a knock sounded at the door. Rising from his chair, he cautiously approached the door and opened it. Seeing his visitor, he turned and took his seat in the chair again, waiting for him to follow. "It's about time you showed up."

"Your directions were kinda hard to follow. This place is in the middle of nowhere, you know?" Toby took a seat in the vacant chair. He glanced at the TV. Finding nothing interesting, he turned his attention back to his employer. Grinning, he asked, "So, when do we get started?" He was ready for his fix. It had been five days since he had had a hit of meth. Toby was sure he would be able to find some here. If not, he would make his own.

"Why not today? I do not have to be at work until later tonight and I have nothing better to do." He grinned maliciously. "Do what you do best and go find me someone. You know what I am looking for." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a syringe containing a clear fluid and handed it to Toby.

Toby jumped from the chair. "Yes sir." Without another word, he exited out the door.

Leaning back in the recliner, he closed his eyes and waited with anticipation.

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A couple of hours later, Toby reentered the house carrying a man over his shoulder. He laid the limp, unconscious body on the bed as his boss wordlessly directed him by the point of his finger. Toby began to remove the man's clothes as the other readied his equipment. When he had the body stripped bare, Toby began the task of filling the bathtub with ice.

Toby busied himself with his appointed tasks; he silently assembled the needed instruments. A gallon jug sat on the counter. A central line kit sat on the bed next to the body. The necessary tubing was at the ready. Turning to the body, he noted the single injection site in the neck where Toby had administered the sedative. Surveying the body, he noted no bruising. Toby was getting better. Last time, he had left bruises on the victim. This man seemed to be in his early thirties with light brown hair that was cut short. He was clean-shaven with clean nails indicating he worked inside. Quickly, he scribbled some numbers on a piece of paper. He then arranged his supplies and began to clean an area on the man's right chest. Opening the kit, he inserted a catheter downward into the large vein leading to the heart, which carried blood toward the heart from the lower half of the body. Another catheter was inserted into the same vein but in the other direction. The first line allowed for maximum outflow while the other was to provide for a rapid infusion into the heart. Both catheters were stitched into the skin to hold them into place. After connecting tubing to the first catheter, he placed the other end into a gallon jug he had prepared containing a solution to keep blood from clotting. Releasing the clamp, he began to make his withdrawal. The jug began to fill quickly with blood. When it was almost full, he clamped the line. The man was still breathing, albeit shallow. Unclamping the other line, he began to quickly infuse the man with three liters of chilled saline. When he was finished, he cut the stitches and removed the lines from the man's body. Toby carried the man to the bathtub and immersed him in ice water until his temperature reached ninety degrees. With the optimum temperature met, he removed the body and redressed it.

After placing the jug of blood in the refrigerator, he placed the call. "Your order is ready. You may pick it up here tonight.

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Toby will be here waiting. Goodbye.” Turning to Toby, he said, “You know where to dump the body. I will make the call when I get to town.” Toby nodded. He turned and left the house. Once reaching the city limits, he stopped at a payphone. Dialing 911, he waited for someone to answer.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“There is a body lying in back of the Shell station on Highway Sixty-One South.”

The operator paused for a second. “Sir, what do you mean by a body? Is the person alive?”

He hung up the phone saying to himself, “Not if you don’t hurry.” His cell phone rang. “Hello?” Toby was on the other end.

“It is done sir.”

“Thank you Toby. You may return to the cabin and wait for the pick- up.” He hung up and drove to his apartment. He always felt refreshed following his “procedures”. Humming a song, he showered and got ready for work.

The ambulance phone rang. Rising from her chair, Casey said. “Here they come, bringing another one in. What is it this time?” Pressing the button, she said, “Waters Edge Memorial, go ahead.” She waited for the oncoming report.

Over the radio, a voice replied, “Waters Edge, we are en route to your facility with a thirty-two year old male. He is unresponsive at this time. Heart rate is forty-six, respirations are twelve. We have yet to get a temp on him, but he is very cold to the touch. BP is 90/40. Any questions?”

“That’s all. See you when you get here.” She disconnected the call and wrote down what the paramedic had said. Once she finished, she went to inform the doctor and charge nurse. Hearing the back doors open, she looked up to see Doctor Ware enter the ER. “Hey doc, how are you doing?”

Smiling, he answered, “Fine, Casey. How is it going this evening?”

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She chuckled. "Fine until just now. An ambulance is bringing someone unresponsive in." Everyone readied themselves for whatever was being brought to them.

"Let me put my stuff down and I will be ready." He placed his briefcase under his desk.

Doctor Ware conversed with Doctor Tabor, the other doc in the ER while Casey and the other nurses readied the trauma room. Julie, the charge nurse told someone to bring the Bair Hugger in the room. She guessed the man coming in would need to be warmed quickly. The heated air through this blanket would help with that. She readied the oxygen and suction. It was safe to have everything they could possibly need ready. IV supplies were laid out and all was now ready while they waited for the ambulance.

There was nothing to do now but wait. Casey stood to the side as the other nurses talked about their lives. She listened as they made plans to meet for breakfast when their shift ended in the morning. Sometimes she wanted to join the others, but after finishing a long, busy night at work, all she wanted to do was to go home and fall into her bed. Nothing felt better than being bundled under the covers of her bed. It was the only place where she could go and feel perfectly content. Casey knew that was not much of a life, but she got enough reality at work every night.

The sounds of sirens jolted her back to the present. Putting on her gloves, she waited for the chaos to begin. The ambulance doors flew open and the room was suddenly alive with activity. Doctor Ware entered the room and the paramedic started giving his report.

"This is a thirty-two year old male found unresponsive behind a gas station. There are no visible signs of trauma. We could not get a temp on him. He is bradycardic at forty-six. The last blood pressure we got on him is ninety over forty." They lifted the man from the gurney to the stretcher. "These are the only marks we found on him." He pulled the man's shirt open and exposed a single small hole in his chest.

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Doctor Ware looked at the mark. "Interesting. What do you think that is?" He talked more to himself than to anyone in particular.

Casey began to cut the man's clothes off while Julie brought the Bair Hugger over and turned it on. After turning the man over and checking him for injury, they began the process of warming him. A rectal temperature revealed the man's body temp was ninety degrees. Casey informed the doctor.

Suddenly, the heart monitor began beeping. The patient was crashing. "Let's tube him." Doctor Ware placed a tube in the patient's throat to ensure breathing. The man's heart stopped. "Start CPR!" Casey began compressions on the man's chest. What was happening? This man seemed healthy. He was too young to die. Drugs were quickly infused into him, but nothing seemed to work. She pumped until she was almost out of strength. Travis, a fellow nurse, took her place and resumed compressions. For twenty frantic minutes, they worked on the man. Regardless of what they tried, they were unable to restart his heart. When everything had failed, Doctor Ware said, "Time of death is..." he glanced at the clock on the wall, "ten thirty. Thank you everyone for your work." He left the room to chart on the event.

Casey retrieved a sheet from the cabinet and carefully laid it over the body. The other nurses had walked out of the room, leaving her alone with the deceased patient. She did not mind. Before covering him, she looked closely at the man. He had smooth skin and his face and hands were clean. The puncture wound drew her attention to his chest. Leaning down, she took a closer look. It looked almost like needle mark that an IV would leave. Maybe he had recently been in the hospital. She gently covered his head with the sheet, brushing against his hair as she did so. Placing her hand into his hair, she noticed the ends were dry but toward the scalp was wet. She thought that weird. Maybe it was because he was being warmed for a while. Thinking nothing more, she left the room and waited for the coroner to arrive.

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Casey was finished charting on the deceased patient when the coroner arrived a short time later. “How are you doing tonight, Abe?”

Abraham Nader had been the county coroner for years. It seemed no one else wanted the job. He had two assistants, but he was the only one that responded to calls at night. He always joked that he was the night owl of the bunch. “Fine, what do we have tonight, Casey?”

She glanced up at Abe. Dressed in his usual flannel shirt and jeans, his hair looked like it hadn't been washed in a week. He was middle aged and lived alone. It was rumored that he would stand over dead bodies and eat sandwiches while he examined them. Casey knew in his state that no woman would want him, hence his being single all his life. “This guy was brought in hypothermic,” she began to relate what had happened. “We could not bring him back. There was no way to know how long he had been down before he was found.”

“Let's take a look.” Abe allowed Casey to lead him to the room that contained the body. She watched as he threw back the sheet and examined the corpse. Casey noted that he did not make a comment about the mark on his chest.

She pointed out, “That mark on his chest was present when he arrived here.”

“Mmm...” Abe finished his exam and covered the body back up. He jotted a few notes on a piece of paper. Glancing toward Casey, he said, “I will get the body loaded and take him to the examiners for the autopsy.”

Not knowing what to say, she nodded and left the room. Something seemed different. Abe seemed distracted, unconcerned with what was happening. Usually, Abe liked to talk for a while, but tonight he made the notes he needed to and wanted to leave. She knew he had been stressed lately about money. He had started gambling a few years ago and it had now developed into quite a habit. Everyone knew about it. Abe's money problems were no secret to the town. He was well liked by everyone and therefore, his faults were accepted as well.

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Casey returned to her desk. Noticing she had another patient, she rose and went to greet them. Through the night, she continued to work as usual. Nothing else out of the ordinary came in except the same runny noses, sore throats, lacerations and chest pains that came through every night. Her mind kept returning to the young man. What had he done to deserve his death? Had it been a bad drug deal? Had he simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Sometimes they learned details about deaths later on the news, but most of the time, they never knew the origins or outcomes of emergency patients.

As the sun rose and her shift ended, Casey gathered her belongings and declined, once again, the weekly breakfast invitation. "No, thank you. I'm going home and go straight to bed." With a slight grin, she said, "Maybe later."

While driving home, her cell phone rang. "Hello?" Her boyfriend, Scott, was calling. "Yes, I am on my way home. It was a rough night. I'm tired. Yes, I will call you when I get up this evening. Have a good day. Love you, too. Bye." She hung up the phone. Her relationship with Scott had seen its ups and downs. Right now, things were okay. They talked almost every day. Sometimes he would bring her something to eat on the nights she worked. On their days off together, they would go out to eat or to the movies. Casey wanted to take things slow. She felt that Scott would be more serious if she would let him. Casey loved her freedom. Most thirty year olds her age were on their second marriage by now. She had not had her first yet. Maybe one day, but not now. She had always hoped some guy would come along and sweep her off her feet like they do in the movies, but no one had ever caught her attention enough. Not even Scott. He was nice to have around and she cared for him, but not enough to marry him. If she spent the night with him, which wasn't often, it was always at his place. She did not want a man getting used to sleeping at her house. Maybe she was old fashioned or maybe she just didn't want her territory invaded.

After a hot shower, she climbed into her bed. Every morning, she watched the news to unwind. When she had had enough, she

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turned off the TV and settled deeper into the covers. Releasing a sigh, she closed her eyes.