

CHAPTER 1

The body lay face up, halfway in the town's corporate limits, halfway in the state park. Dead eyes stared heavenward at a wintry sky. Deputy Sheriff Whaite Billingsly studied it for a moment and called in.

"Ike, I can shove him six feet west and let the state boys have him, or we can keep him. What do you think?"

Thursday afternoon and a snowy weekend approaching, Ike Schwartz, Picketsville's chief law enforcement officer, sighed. "Lord knows, it's tempting. But no, I reckon it'd better be us. Where are you exactly?"

"Out on the Covington Road—west at the town line. Funny thing about this guy—"

"What's that?"

"He looks familiar."

* * *

Ike peered through the park's barren trees and caught sight of Whaite twenty or thirty yards in. He shivered and looked skyward. Dull late November clouds piled up in the southwest and sent ragged streamers across the valley. The temperature had dropped five degrees since noon. His nose began to run but he could still smell snow on the way. He shivered again as a gust of cold air blustered down through tree limbs and made billows of brightly colored leaves swirl this way and that.

The shiver had less to do with the cold than with thoughts of automobiles skidding on roads and extra duty for his deputies. Picketsville did not handle snow well.

Usually an inch or two fell, melted, and then the temperature would drop back below freezing, turning the roads into skating rinks. County trucks spreading a combination of salt and cinders provided the only relief. Picketsville didn't rank high enough on the County's priority list to get any attention until a half dozen cars, trucks, and sometimes farm tractors ended up in ditches, upside down or worse. A real snow—six inches or more—would create a major traffic disaster and shut down the town for days. And the Sheriff's Department, his department, would be the one to sort it all out.

He retrieved a roll of yellow crime scene tape from the trunk of his cruiser, wrapped one end around a sign post, and walked it toward the area he assumed held the body. His breath left a steamy trail as he struggled up the embankment.

“How do, Ike, bit frosty today. The body's over there.” Whaite tilted his head toward a shallow swale at the foot of a tree stump. “I came up here on the rise so you'd be sure to see me.”

“Appreciate that.”

“Town line runs down to the sign there and over there's a survey marker,” Whaite pointed toward a concrete marker, “so if I run a line between the two, I make it he's laying about half in Craddock's Woods and half in the park.

“Somebody cut it kind of fine if the idea was to give him to us and not the state.”

“Or the other way around.”

“Or the other way round.”

A congregation of black birds, grackles and starlings, flocked up for winter, rose like a plume of smoke from black, skeletal tree limbs, circled, and following some inherent aerial choreography, swooped, climbed, and drifted south in a cacophony of

avian complaints.

“You’re driving your Circus Wagon today? Where’s the truck?” Whaite, when off-duty, usually drove a beat-up Ford 150 pickup. Ike had pulled up behind Whaite’s bright red, souped-up, 1997 Chevrolet Chevelle.

“Truck blew a head gasket. I got her in the garage. Be awhile ‘fore she’ll be back on the road, I’m afraid. This one’s a show car, Ike, not a circus wagon, won a prize or two.”

“Sorry, just kidding, it’s a fine looking piece of machinery. So, what have we got so far?”

Ike rocked back on his heels and waited. Whaite, he knew, could pick through a crime scene and pull out the important bits. He rarely missed anything and Ike needed to hear him tell it as he saw it. They sidestepped down into the gully and stood shoulder to shoulder staring at the body. Its arms were folded as if in prayer. Autumn leaves nearly covered the legs but some drag marks from the road were still discernable.

“Well, if you ask me, it looks like a robbery gone bad. His wallet is empty. Driver’s license says he’s Randall Harris.”

“A license? I thought you said the wallet was empty.”

“Was. The license was in a side jacket pocket. I reckon whoever did him didn’t think to look for it or maybe didn’t care. Probably in a hurry. Anyway, it appears whoever pulled this off drug him here after they shot him somewhere else. You can see the leaves are all pushed aside and the back of his shoe is scuffed up.”

“Shoe?”

“Yep, just the one. Must have lost the other when they hauled him up here.”

“If it’s not between here and the road then it’s probably where he was killed. Find the shoe, find the killer. By the way, how’d you find him?”

“I didn’t. I was down to the junkyard looking for some parts for the truck. On my way home, I saw this kid coming out of the woods and acting funny, so I stopped to check him out. He parked his pickup in the middle of the road. Told me he stopped to relieve himself and found the body. He said he was about to call it in.”

“You believe him?”

“I expect so. No way to know for sure. I had no probable cause to search him or his vehicle. He took off before I got the info from his driver’s license but I did get a tag number so we can run him if we need to, wrote it on a piece of paper here.” Whaite tapped his shirt pocket

“He’s not a suspect?”

“No. This body’s been here a while. Probably dumped last night.”

“Did he touch anything?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. He must have come this way a bit, though—to make sure the guy was dead. You can see the leaves, where they’re deep, how he came in and where he did his business. Now down in this swale, the wind whips around and moves the leaves all around so that would erase any footsteps. Like I said, I don’t know for sure.”

The wind, on cue, gusted through the trees and whirled leaves in noisy eddies around their ankles. The temperature seemed to drop another ten degrees. Ike stepped closer to the body. “You said the victim looked familiar. What did you mean?”

“He looks like a Harris.”

“Well, he is, isn’t he? I mean that’s what his driver’s—?”

“No, I mean like someone I know. There’s lots of Harrises in the world, as you for sure know, but . . . well, I wasn’t raised up in Picketsville. I come from down past Floyd, up on Buffalo Mountain. You know the mountain?”

“I heard some stories about it from my father. Used to be a rough place, they say.”

“Before the war, World War II, that is, especially during the Depression, it was a hard place. Shootings and stabbings were as common as colds and one of the meanest families in the area back then was the Harrises—old Claude especially. They said he looked like President Wilson. Can’t say as how I’d know about that, but that’s what they said. Anyway, some of the later Harrises have that same chiseled look you see on this fella. That’s what I mean about he looks familiar. He looks like a Buffalo Mountain Harris. Like I said, driver’s license says he’s Randall Harris. Looks like maybe a Sutphin decided to even the score.”

“You’re losing me here, Whaite. You can fill me in on the folklore later.”

“Yes sir, but I reckon all we need to do is slip on down to Floyd County and find us a descendent of a Sutphin and we’ll have our killer.”

Ike studied the face frozen in death and shuddered. “I don’t think so, Whaite.”

“No?” Whaite looked disappointed. “Why is that, boss?”

“In the first place, why would a . . . whoever . . . or anyone else for that matter, come all the way to Picketsville to dump the body? If it was a traditional Buffalo Mountain killing, wouldn’t they want everyone down there to know about it?”

“Well, I guess they would but—”

“In the second place, whatever his ID says, this man is definitely not a Harris or anyone else from Buffalo Mountain. His name is Alexei Kamarov. He’s supposed to be

dead.”

“Well, I reckon that part is for sure done. But who is Alexei . . . whoever?”

Ike studied the all too familiar face of an old enemy/colleague from another life and sighed. This was not good. The congregation of blackbirds evidently finished with its sortie south, returned, and settled back into the trees with a discordant chorus of squawks and chattering. Ike had to raise his voice to be overheard.

“I need to make a phone call. Wait here.”

“Well sure, Ike, but—?”

“Be right back. This is not good.”

Ike walked back toward the splash of red Whaite’s Chevy made against the gray concrete and tree trunks by the road. He paused, his back to the woods, and punched in a number he had committed to memory. He waited while the number connected.

“Garland.”

“Charlie, it’s Ike. We have a problem.”

“We have a problem? You mean you have a problem? What kind of problem are you talking about? Another big crime and you need me to give you advice or—”

“Listen to me, Charlie, Alexei Kamarov is dead.”

“Well golly, we knew that. At least we supposed that when he disappeared after Eloise . . . after the shooting . . . after Zurich. He tried to find you, right? He couldn’t and then he disappeared. Figured Moscow Central had him put away. That was a while back, though.”

“Maybe they did and maybe they didn’t. But right now his body is lying not twenty yards from me, in the town limits. My town limits.”

“No.”

“Yes. Why is he here, Charlie? You want to take a stab at that? Is somebody trying to send me a message?”

“Maybe to you or maybe to the Agency. It could be they wanted us to know, figured you’d be sure send it. I’ll get back to you. Rats . . . bad news. Why is it always you that brings me bad news, Ike?”

“Not my game anymore. You call me ASAP, Charlie. I’m getting really nervous down here.” Ike zipped up his coat and slapped his sleeves against the cold which now seemed much more intense. He walked back up the rise to Whaite.

“You know I used to work for the CIA?”

“I reckon everybody does by now, Ike.”

“This man used to be on the other side. We had dealings. He was supposed to have been eliminated.”

“You’re sure it’s what’s-his-name?”

“No doubt about it. I just called an old friend in the Agency. They’re on it and will make an absolute ID soon, but it’s him. We need to secure this area as tight as a drum and Whaite . . . not a word of this to anyone, you hear? If anybody asks, we have a John Doe. No Harris, no Kamarov. For now, no one knows who he really is but you and me. You got it?”

“You’re the boss.”