

December 25th, 2015

The emergency lights from the Hickory Falls Sheriff's Department Ford Interceptor flashed across the snow when it pulled into the Graham Video store parking lot. The sheet of white should have been untouched by tires at 6:45 a.m., and the snow-covered green Jetta, sitting in the far left-hand corner of the parking lot should not have been there. Two different sets of tire tracks cut through the pristine snow. One set belonged to the Jetta. The other set made a large circle in the snow before making its way back toward Main Street.

The officer brought the SUV to a stop about five feet from the Jetta; its headlights bathed the car in the frigid darkness. Unable to see past the Jetta's frosted snow-covered windows, a building sense of unease began to crawl over him, tightening the flesh to his bones.

The officer's shift had been easy that night. He had not responded to any emergency calls, nor had he had to pull anyone over. A Christmas miracle itself. But all that had changed fifteen minutes ago while he was patrolling Broke Run Road, when Sheriff Will Daniel's voice came over the radio.

"Call just came in. We got a report of shots fired at the Graham Video store. Caller says they saw a man running across the parking lot, carrying what appeared to be a shotgun. The suspect reportedly got into the passenger side of a blue sedan before it took off with two others inside. Need you to check it out," Daniel had said.

Why the hell is the sheriff in at this hour? the officer had wondered. *Shouldn't Susan be on the call desk? And what's going on at the Graham Video store?*

Now on scene, with the first cracks of gray sky beginning to materialize through the night horizon, he radioed back into the station.

"I'm at the Graham Video store. I've located a V-dub Jetta. It's an early 2000s model. No sign of anyone else, including the reported blue sedan. Though there are two sets of tire tracks in the snow, indicating another vehicle was present." He glanced at the video store's entrance. There were no broken windows and no ajar door to indicate a robbery had occurred. The place appeared buttoned up tight. "No signs of a break-in, Sheriff. Getting out to inspect the vehicle."

"Ten-four," Sheriff Daniel's voice came back over the line. *"Proceed with caution."*

Again, the officer thought it was strange that the sheriff was in at that hour, and on Christmas morning. Where was Susan Green? She usually worked the overnight shift; she should still have been at the station, working the dispatch desk. Still, the officer knew, she could have gone home for any number of reasons—the holiday, the storm, or maybe a family member had fallen ill—and the sheriff had filled in for her. Pushing the thought from his mind, the officer returned to the pressing matter at hand.

Stay focused. Stay sharp.

Stepping from the SUV, the blowing snow and driving wind bit at the officer's exposed skin,

penetrated his clothes. Zipping his jacket up to his chin, he started toward the car, trudging through the shin-deep snow.

As he neared the Jetta, pelted with snow and ice so hard it stung, he noticed a set of footprints leading away from the passenger-side door toward the second set of tire tracks before vanishing. The tracks were nearly filled in with fresh powder, but it was unmistakable what they were. He assumed this was where the person had gotten into the second car—*an old blue sedan*. Looking back to the Jetta, he saw something smeared along the top of the passenger-side door. Whatever it was had frozen to a hard, ruby-colored substance.

He eased in for a closer look.

Blood!

Frozen blood.

A strange tightness gripped the base of the officer's neck as if Death had wrapped a cold, boney hand around him and begun to squeeze. His heart rate quickened. He placed his right hand on his sidearm and identified himself.

“This is the Hickory Falls Sheriff's Department. If there's anyone inside the vehicle, would you please step out?”

There was no reply. The car was dead still. The only sound across the parking lot was the howling wind and the ice pebbles hitting the closest metal lamp post.

Not wanting to disturb what he believed to be blood on the passenger-side door, the officer lumbered through the deepening snow, around the front of the Jetta, to the driver's side. Reaching down, he took hold of the handle and pulled.

The driver's side door was locked.

He took a deep breath of cold air, sending what felt like ice daggers into his lungs as he tried to steel himself for what he might find inside. His teeth began to chatter, and an internal shudder tremored in his core and quickly expanded to the rest of his body.

"I'm asking anyone inside to identify themselves and step out." He waited, but when no one replied, he said, "If you do not comply, I will be forced to inspect the vehicle. Last warning."

Silence.

No movement came from within. The car's stillness bothered him—like it was dead. But that was impossible. Cars could not be deceased like humans or animals. So why was he getting the dreaded feeling that death emanated from it?

Placing his gloved hand on the window, he brushed the light dusting of snow away and bent down to look inside.

The officer recoiled at what he saw or who he saw staring back at him. His feet slipped out from under him, and he went down onto his backside, hard. Snow kicked up when he hit the ground, and for a moment he was cocooned in falling white powder, protected from what he had seen.

But when the snow settled, the officer was again gazing at the driver's-side door of the Jetta. There, he saw a man's pale face pressed against the glass, the muscles twisted and tightened in agony. His eyes were open and locked directly on the officer with a vacant, lifeless stare, pleading with him, even in death, to save him.

Too late. I'm too late to save you.

The officer shot to his feet; snow fell off his uniform in large patchy clumps. And though the temperature was in the teens, he felt sweat break out across his back and forehead.

Moving gingerly toward the Jetta again, the officer realized he knew the dead man looking back at him.

Clay Graham—the owner of the Graham Video store.

He removed his Maglite from his belt and turned it on. Bending, he shone the beam through the ice-crusting driver's-side window and began to scan the car's interior.

That's when he saw them.

He pressed a gloved hand over his lips, suppressing the scream that wanted to leap from his throat at the horrific sight of carnage and death inside the Jetta.

It wasn't just Clay Graham dead inside the car but also his wife, Claire, and their teenage daughter, Sidney.