

It wasn't the first snow of the season. Panama, Vermont, lay far enough north to have already seen several snowdusted dawns. But this wasn't dawn, and these flakes didn't dust. From early afternoon right on into evening, they fell heavy and fat and wet.

Truckers stopping at the diner complained of the roads growing slick, but the warning carried little weight with locals. They knew that the sun would be back, even an Indian summer before winter set in. Snowfall now was simply frosting on the cake of another wildfire fall, thick flakes silencing the riot of colorful leaves, draping a plump white shawl on the town green's oak benches, on marigolds that lingeringly lined front walks, on a bicycle propped against an open front gate.

The scene was so peaceful that no one imagined the accident to come, least of all Bree Miller. Winter was her favorite season. There was something about snow that softened the world, made it make-believe for the briefest time, and while she wasn't a woman prone to fancy — would have immediately denied it if accused — she had her private moments.

She didn't bother with a jacket. The memory of summer's heat was all too fresh. Besides, with locals wanting to eat before the weather worsened and with truckers bulking up, the diner had been hopping, so she was plenty warm without.

She slipped out the door, closing it tight on the hum of conversation, the hiss and sizzle of the grill, the sultry twang of Shania Twain. In the sudden hush, she ran lightly down the steps, across the parking lot, then the street. On the far side, she flattened her spine to the crusty trunk of a large maple whose amber leaves hung heavy with snow, and looked back.

The diner was a vision of stainless steel and neon, rich purples and greens bouncing off silver, new and more gallant through a steady fall of snow. Gone were little items on her fix-it list — the scrape Morgan Willis's truck had put on a corner panel, a dent in the front railing, bird droppings off the edge of the roof. What remained was sparkling clean, warm, and inviting, starting with the diner's roadside logo, concentric rings of neon forming a large frying pan with the elegant eruption of FLASH AN' THE PAN from its core. Behind that were golden lamps at each of ten broad windows running the diner's length and, in booths behind those lamps, looking snug and content, the customers.

The diner wasn't Bree's. She just worked there. But she liked looking at it.

Same with Panama. Up the hill, at the spot where East Main leveled into an oval around the town green, snow capped the steel roofs of the row of tall Federals and beyond, white on white, the church steeple. Down the hill, at the spot where the road dipped past the old train depot, snow hid the stains that years of diesel abuse had left and put a hearty head on the large wood beer stein that marked the Sleepy Creek Brewery.

Panama was ten minutes off the highway on the truck route running from Concord to Montreal. Being neither here nor there was one of its greatest strengths. There were no cookie-cutter subdivisions, no planned developments with architect-designed wraparound porches. Porches had been wrapping around houses in Panama since the days of the Revolution, not for the sake of

style but for community. Those porches were as genuine as the people who used them. Add the lack of crime and the low cost of land, and the town's survival was ensured. Bright minds sought haven here and found inspiration. The brewery was but one example. There was also a bread company, workshops producing hand-carved furniture and wooden toys, and a gourmet ice cream factory. Native Panamanians lent stability. Newcomers brought cash.

Bree drew in a snow-chilled breath, held it deep in her lungs, let it slowly out. The occasional snowflake breached the leaves overhead to land in an airy puff on her arm, looking soft, feeling rich, in those few seconds before melting away. On impulse, she slid around the tree trunk to face the woods. Here, the snow picked up the diner's lights in a mystical way. Drifting leaves whirled about, forest fairies at play, Bree fancied. From nowhere came childhood images of carousels, clowns, and Christmas, all more dream than memory. She listened hard, half expecting to hear elf sounds mixed in with those of nocturnal creatures. But, of course, there were none.

*Foolish Bree. High on snow. Time to go inside.*

Still she stood there, riveted by something that made her eyes mist and her throat ache. If it was wanting, she didn't know what for. She had a good life. She was content.

Still she stood there.

Behind her came a fragment of conversation when the diner door opened, and the subsequent growls, muted by billowing flakes, of one big rig, then a second. By the time the semis had rumbled out of the parking lot, cruised down the hill, and turned toward the highway, the only sound left was the cat's-paw whisper of snow upon snow.

The diner door opened again, this time to a louder 'Bree! I need you!'

Brushing tears from her eyes, she pushed off from the bark. Seconds later, she was running back across the road, turning her head against the densest of the flakes, suddenly so desperate to be back inside, where everything made sense, that she grew careless. She slipped, fought for balance with a flailing of arms, landed in the snow all the same. Scrambling up, she brushed at the seat of her black jeans and, with barely a pause to shake her hands free of snow, rushed inside, to be met by applause, several wolf whistles, and a 'Way to go, Bree!'

The last was from a trucker, one of the regulars. Another round of applause broke out when she wrapped her icy hands around his bull neck and gave an affectionate squeeze on her way to the kitchen.

Flash, the diner's owner and executive chef, met her at the swinging door. A near-full gallon of milk hung from his fingers. 'It's bad again,' he said, releasing the door once she was inside. 'What're we gonna do? Look of the roads, no delivery's coming anytime soon.'

'We have extra,' Bree assured him, opening the refrigerator to verify it.

Flash ducked his head and took a look. 'That'll be enough?'

'Plenty.'

'Seventeen's up, Bree,' the grillman called.

The diner sat fifty-two, in ten booths and twelve counter stools. At its busiest times, there were lines out the door, but bad weather slowed things down. Barely thirty-five remained now. LeeAnn Conti was serving half. The rest were Bree's.

Balancing four plates holding a total of twelve eggs, twelve rashers of bacon, six sausages, six slabs each of maple nut and raisin toast, and enough hash browns to crowd everything in, she delivered supper to the men in seventeen, the booth to the right of the door. She had known the four all her life. They, too, had gone to the local schools and stayed to work in the area, Sam and Dave at the lumber mill three towns over, Andy at his family's tackle store, Jack at the farm his father had left his brother and him. They were large men with insatiable appetites for early-evening breakfast.

The Littles, two booths down, were another story. Ben and Liz had fled a New York ad agency to run their own by way of computer, fax, and phone from Vermont. Along with seven-year-old Benji, five-year-old Samantha, and two-year-old Joey, they hit the diner several times a week to take advantage of Flash's huge portions, easily splitting three orders of turkey, mashed potatoes, and peas, or biscuit-topped shepherd's pie, or American chop suey. They were currently sharing a serving of warm apple crisp and a large chocolate chip cookie.

At Bree's appearance, the two-year-old put down his hunk of cookie, scrambled to his feet on the bench, and opened his arms. She scooped him up. 'Was everything good?'

He gave her a chocolaty grin that melted her heart.

'Anything else here?' she asked his parents.

'Just the check,' said Ben. 'That snow keeps coming. Driving won't be great.'

When Joey squirmed, Bree kissed the mop of his hair and returned him to the bench. At the side counter, she tallied the check, then put it on their table and set to cleaning the adjacent booth, where the drivers of the newly departed big rigs had been. She cleared the dirty dishes, pocketed her tip, wiped down the black Formica, straightened shakers, condiment bottles, and the small black vase that held a spray of goldenrod. She set out new place mats, oval replicas of the frying pan from the logo, with the regular menu printed in its center. Specials — 'The Daily Flash' — were hand written on each of two elliptical chalkboards high behind either end of the counter.

She moved several booths down to Panama's power elite — postmaster Earl Yarum, police chief Eliot Bonner, town meeting moderator Emma McGreevy. Before them were dishes that had earlier held a beef stew, a pork chop special, and a grilled chicken salad. All three plates, plus a basket of sourdough rolls, were empty, which was good news. When sated, Earl, Eliot, and Emma were innocuous.

Bree grinned. 'Ready for dessert?'

'Whaddya got?' Earl asked.

'Whaddya want?'

'Pie.'

'Okay. We have apple, peach, and blueberry. We have pumpkin. We have strawberry rhubarb, banana cream, maple cream, maple pecan, pumpkin pecan, lemon meringue —'

'Anything chocolate?' Earl asked.

'Chocolate pecan, chocolate mousse, chocolate rum cream --'

'How about a brownie?'

She might have guessed they were headed there. Earl was predictable.

'One brownie,' she said, and raised questioning brows at Emma. 'Tea?'

'Please.' Emma never had anything but tea.

Eliot played his usual game, letting Bree list as many ice cream flavors as she could — Flash owned part of Panama Rich and stocked every one of its twenty-three flavors — before ordering a dish of plain old strawberry.

Working around LeeAnn, the grillman, the cook, the dishwasher, and Flash, Bree warmed the brownie and added whipped cream, hot fudge, and nuts, the way Earl liked it, and scooped up Eliot's ice cream. She served a chicken stir-fry to Panama's only lawyer, Martin Sprague, in the six spot at the counter, and pork chops and chili to Ned and Frank Wright, local plumbers, two stools over. With carafes in either hand, she topped off coffees down the row of booths, then worked her way along the counter.

At the far end sat Dotty Hale and her daughter, Jane. Both were tall and lean, but while Dotty's face was tight, Jane's was softer in ways that had little to do with age. Not that Bree was impartial. Jane was one of her closest friends.

LeeAnn had her elbows on the counter before them. In contrast to the Hales, she was small and spirited, with short, spiked blond hair and eyes that filled her face. Those eyes were wider than ever. 'Abby Nolan spent the night *where*? But she just *divorced* John.'

'Final last week,' Dotty confirmed, with the nod of a bony chin. 'Court papers came in the mail. Earl saw them.'

'So why's she sleeping with him?'

'She isn't,' Jane said.

Dotty turned on her. 'This isn't coming from *me*. Eliot was the one who saw her car in John's drive.' She returned to LeeAnn. 'Why? Because she's pregnant.'

LeeAnn looked beside herself with curiosity. 'With *John's* child? *How?*'

Bree smiled dryly as she joined them. 'The normal way, I'd think. Only the baby isn't John's. It's Davey Hillard's.'

Dotty looked wounded. 'Who told you that?'

'Abby,' Bree said. She, Abby, and Jane had been friends since grade school.

'Then why'd she spend the night with John?' LeeAnn asked.

'She didn't,' Jane said.

'Were you there?' Dotty asked archly.

'Abby just went to talk,' Bree said to divert Dotty's attention from Jane. 'She and John are still friends. She wanted to break the news to him herself.'

'That's not what Emma says,' Dotty argued. Emma was her sister and her major source of gossip. 'Know what else she says? Julia Dean got a postcard.'

'Mother,' Jane pleaded.

'Well, it's *fact*,' Dotty argued. 'Earl saw the postcard and told Eliot, since he's the one who has to keep peace here and family being upset can cause trouble. Julia's family is *not* thrilled that she's here. The postcard was from her daughter in Des Moines, who said that it was a *shame* that Julia was isolating herself, and that she understood how upset she had been by *Daddy's* death, that they *all* were, but three years of mourning should be enough, so when was she coming home?'

'All that on a postcard?' Bree asked. She didn't know much more about Julia than that she had opened a small flower store three years before and twice weekly arranged sprigs in the diner's vases. She came by for an occasional meal but kept to herself. She struck Bree as shy but sweet, certainly not the type to deserve being the butt of gossip.

'Julia's family doesn't know about Earl,' Jane muttered.

'Really.' Bree glanced toward the window when a bright light swelled there, another eighteen-wheeler pulling into the parking lot.

'And then,' Dotty said, with a glance of her own at that light, 'there's Verity. She claims she saw another UFO. Eliot says the lights were from a truck, but she insists there's a mark on the back of her car where that mother ship tailed her.'

LeeAnn leaned closer. 'Did she see the baby ships again, the squiggly little pods?'

'I didn't ask.' Dotty shuddered. 'That woman's odd.'

Bree had always found Verity more amusing than odd and would have said as much now if Flash hadn't called. 'Twenty-two's up, LeeAnn.'

Bree stayed LeeAnn with a touch. 'I'll get it.'

She topped off Dotty's coffee and returned the carafes to their heaters. Scooping up the chicken piccata with angel hair that was ready and waiting, she headed down the counter toward the booths. Twenty-two was the last in the row, tucked in the corner by the jukebox. A lone man sat there, just as he had from time to time in the last seven months. He never said much, never invited much to be said. Most often, like now, he was reading a book.

His name was Tom Gates. He had bought the Hubbard place, a shingle-sided bungalow on West Elm that hadn't seen a stitch of improvement in all the years that the Hubbards' health had been in decline. Since Tom Gates had taken possession, missing shingles had been replaced, shutters had been straightened, the porch had been painted, the lawn cut. What had happened inside was more murky. Skipper Boone had rewired the place, and the Wrights had installed a new furnace, but beyond that, no one knew. And Bree had asked. She had always loved the Hubbard place. Though smaller than her Victorian, it had ten times the charm. She might have bought it herself if she'd had the nerve, but she had inherited her own house from her father, who had inherited it from his. Millers had lived on South Forest for too many years to count and too many to move. So she contented herself with catching what bits of gossip she could about restoration of the bungalow on West Elm.

None of those bits came from Tom Gates. He wasn't sociable. Good-looking. Very good-looking. Too good-looking to be alone. But not sociable.

'Here you go,' Bree said. When he moved his book aside, she slid the plate in. She wiped her palms on the back of her jeans and pushed her hands in the pockets there. 'Reading anything good?'

His eyes shifted from his dinner back to the book. 'It's okay.'

She tipped her head to see the title, but the whole front looked to be typed. 'Weird cover.'

'It hasn't been published yet.'

'Really? How'd you get it?'

'I know someone.'

'The author?' When he shook his head, the diner's light shimmered in hair that was shiny, light brown, and a mite too long. 'Are you a reviewer?' she asked.

He shifted. 'Not quite.'

'Just an avid reader, then,' she decided. Not that he looked scholarly. He was too tanned, too tall, too broad in the shoulders. Coming and going, he strode. Flash bet that he was a politician who had lost a dirty election and fled. Dotty bet he was a burned-out businessman, because Earl told of mail from New York. LeeAnn bet he was an adventurer recouping after a tiring trek.

Bree could see him as an adventurer. He had that rugged look. His buying a house in town didn't mean much. Even adventurers needed to rest sometimes, but they didn't stay put for long. Panama bored men who loved risk. This one would be gone before long.

It was a shame, because Tom Gates had great hands. He had long, lean, blunt-tipped fingers and moved them in a way that suggested they could do most anything they tried. Bree had never once seen dirt under his nails, which set him apart from most of the men who ate here, and while he didn't have the calluses those men did, his hands looked well used. He had cut himself several months back and had needed stitches. The scar was nearly two inches long and starting to fade.

'I just finished the new Dean Koontz,' she said. 'Have you read it yet?'

He was studying his fork. 'No.'

'It's pretty good. Worth a shot. Can I get you anything else? Another beer?' She hitched her chin toward the longneck on the far side of his plate. 'You know that's local, don't you? Sleepy Creek Pale. It's brewed down the street.'

His eyes met hers. They were wonderfully gray. 'Yes,' he said. 'I do know.'

She might have been lured by those eyes to say something else, had not the front door opened just then to a flurry of flakes and the stamping boots of four truckers. Shaking snow from heads and jackets, they called out greetings, slapped the palms of the men in seventeen, and slid into sixteen, which meant they were Bree's.

'Nothing else?' she asked Tom Gates again. When he shook his head, she smiled. 'Enjoy your meal.' Still smiling, she walked on down the line. 'Hey, guys, how're you doin?'

'Cold.'

'Tired.'

'Hungry.'

'A regular round for starters?' she asked. When the nods came fast, she went to the icebox on the wall behind the counter, pulled open the shiny steel door, and extracted two Sleepy Creek Pales, one Sleepy Creek Amber, and a Heineken. Back at the booth, she fished a bottle opener from the short black apron skimming her hips and did the honors.

'Ahhhhh,' said John Hagan after a healthy swallow. 'Good stuff on a night like this.'

Bree glanced out the window. 'How many inches would you say?'

'Four,' John answered.

'Nah, there's at least eight,' argued Kip Tucker.

'Headed to twenty,' warned Gene Mackey for the benefit of a passing, predictably gullible LeeAnn.

'Twenty?'

Bree nudged Gene's shoulder. 'He's putting you on, Lee. Come on, guys. Behave.'

'What fun is that?' Gene asked, hooking her waist and pulling her close.

She unhooked his arm. 'All the fun you're getting,' she said, with a haughty look. 'I'll be back to take your order once I'm done scraping down plates.'

'I'll have my usual,' T. J. Kearns said fast, before she could leave.

'Me, too,' said Gene.

John pointed at himself and nodded, indicating beef pot pie topped with mashed potatoes and gravy, served with hunks of bread for dunking and whatever vegetables Flash had that day, buttered.

Kip was eyeing the specials board. 'What's he got up there that I want?'

Bree knew Kip. 'Brook trout,' she said in a cultured way, 'sauted in butter and served on a bed of basmati rice, with sun-dried tomatoes, Portobello mushrooms, and broccoli.'

Kip sighed his pleasure. 'One up, right here. Thanks, doll.'

Panama lay in hill country. Come the first of November, sand barrels sat on most every corner, trucks carried chains, and folks without four-wheel drive put on snow tires. But this wasn't the first of November. It was the ninth of October, and the snow was coming heavy and fast. By eight, only a handful of stragglers remained.



Armed with a laptop computer and her own serving of trout, Bree slid in across from Flash. He was reading the newspaper, alternately sipping coffee and pulling at one of two sticky buns on his plate, no doubt his dinner. She never failed to be amazed that a man who was endlessly artful when it came to creating meals for others had such abominable eating habits himself.

'You're missing good trout,' she said.

'I hate bones.'

'There aren't any bones. Not in your trout.'

'That's what we tell the customers,' he said, without looking up, 'but I never know for sure if I get them all out, and the fear of it would ruin my meal. Besides' — he looked up then — 'there aren't usually any sticky buns left after five. Why are there today?'

Bree opened the laptop. 'Because Angus, Oliver, and Jack didn't make it in' -- and wisely so, since the three were in their eighties and better at home in a storm.

'Flash?' asked LeeAnn. She shot a look at the last man at the counter. 'Gav says he'll drive me home, since I don't have boots or anything, but he can't hang around till we close.' Her brows rose.

Flash shot a look at Bree. 'Ask her. She's the one who'll have to cover for you.'

Bree shooed her off. 'No one else is coming in. Not tonight. Go.'

LeeAnn went.

'She skips out early too often,' Flash said. 'You have a soft heart.'

'Yours is softer than mine, which is why you didn't say no first. Besides, she has kids at home. I don't.'

'Why not?' he asked.

Bree pulled up the supply list. 'I think we've been through this before.'

'Tell me again. I especially like the part about needing a man to have kids, like you couldn't have any guy who walked in here. Know what turns them on? Your disinterest.'

'It isn't disinterest. It's caution.'

Caution sounded kinder. Disinterest was probably more to the point. The men who passed through the diner were just fine for conversation and laughs. They gave appreciative looks to her hair, which was thick, dark, and forever escaping whatever she tied it with, and her body, which was of average height and better toned than most. What they liked most, though, was the fact that

she served them without argument and, more, that she knew what they wanted before they said it. Her father had liked that, too. She had been his cook, his maid, his tailor, his barber, his social secretary...the list went on and on. In the days following his death, she'd had her very first taste of me time. Now, three years later, it was still both novelty and prized possession.

'Caution. Ahh. Well, that is you, Bree. Cautious to a fault. Have you hired someone to get you a decent heating system, or are you still getting estimates?'

'I'm still getting estimates.'

He glanced at the snow. 'Time just ran out.'

'Give it a day. Sun'll be back.'

'You're only postponing the inevitable. Last winter you were racing over here half frozen. Why wait? You have money.'

'I have money for a new car. That's first on my list. Heating is second.'

'That's crazy.'

'Why? I have a woodstove in the kitchen and quilts in every room. I can stay warm whether the furnace works or not. But I can't go anywhere without a car.' She tapped the laptop's screen. 'We have to talk about getting a new milk supplier.'

'No.'

She softened her tone. 'Stafford's local. We both want to support him, but his deliveries are late more often than not, and lately a full quarter of what he brings is bad. Think back two hours. You were in a panic.'

'I was tired, is all. Stafford's working the kinks out.'

'He's been working the kinks out for two years, but they aren't going away --'

'Give him a little longer,' Flash said. He flipped up his paper and resumed reading.

Bree didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Oh, yes, Flash was softhearted, a sucker if the truth were told, though that was a good half of the diner's charm. He was an artist. Try as he might to look like a trucker in the black jeans, purple T-shirt, and bill cap that were the diner's uniform, he couldn't pull it off. Even without the long mane spilling from the hole in the back of his cap, he had too gentle a look, and that was even before he waved off the difference when one of the town's poorest came up short on cash at the end of a meal.

Not that Bree was complaining. Had her boss been anyone else, she would still be waitressing, period. But Flash wasn't hung up on formalities. She was good with numbers, so he had her

balance the books. She was good with deadlines, so he had her pay the bills. She worked with the people who printed their place mats, the people who serviced the drink machines, the people who trucked in fresh eggs, vegetables, and fish.

Hungry, she dug into her trout and broccoli. Focusing on the computer screen, she plugged in the week's expected deliveries, noted shortages that had arisen, set up orders to be placed as soon as she hooked the computer to the modem in the back office. Flash was a softie there, too. That modem had been installed within twenty-four hours of her saying it might be nice.

The sound of spinning wheels drew her eye to the window, where a truck was heading out of the lot. After a minute, the tires gained traction, the sound evened out, and taillights disappeared in the thickening snow.

By eight-fifty, the last of the diners had left, fifty-two places had been wiped down and set for breakfast, dishes had been washed, food put away, the grill scraped. Minutes after Flash officially called it a night, the staff was gone.

Bree was pulling on her jacket when he said, 'I'll drive you home.'

She shook her head. 'Driving is slow. It'll be faster if I walk.' Tugging up the leg of her jeans, she showed him her boots. 'Besides, you live downhill, I live uphill. No need backtracking in weather like this.'

But Flash was insistent. Taking her arm, he guided her out the door.

The world had changed dramatically since Bree's earlier foray into the storm. With the exception of bare pavement where others of the staff had parked and just left, everything was pure white, and colder, far colder than before.

'It's too early for this,' Flash grumbled as they approached his Explorer. While he dug behind his seat for a scraper, Bree started on the windows with the sleeve of her jacket. When he took over with the brush, she climbed inside. Leaning over the gearshift, she started the engine and, once the windshield was clear, turned on the wipers.

Since the parking lot had last been plowed, another several inches of snow had fallen. Between those inches and what had been left around cars that were parked, the lot was ragged. Flash gunned his engine to back the Explorer over the pile of snow at its own rear, then shifted into drive. The Explorer jolted its way to the street.

Bree stared hard out the windshield. As far as she could tell, the only thing marking the road was the slightly lower level of snow there. The headlights of the Explorer swung a bright arc onto East Main. Flash accelerated. His tires spun, found purchase, started slowly up the hill. They hadn't gone far when the spinning resumed. The Explorer slid sideways. He braked, downshifted, and tried again.

'Bad tires?' she asked.

'Bad roads,' he muttered.

'Not if you're going downhill. Let me walk. Please?'

He resisted through several more tries, shifting from drive to reverse and back in an attempt to gain traction, and he always did, but never for long. The Explorer had barely reached the first of five houses that climbed the hill to the town green when, sliding sideways and back this time, he gave in.

Bree pulled up her hood and slid out. 'Thanks for trying. See you tomorrow.' Shutting the door, she burrowed into her jacket and started up the hill.

At first, with the Explorer coasting backward, its headlights lit her way. When Flash turned at the diner's driveway and came out headfirst, the lights disappeared. Moments later, even the sound of his engine was gone.

In the silence, Bree trekked upward. The snow on the road wasn't deep, rising only to the top of her boots, but she had the same problem the Explorer had. With the drop in temperature, the thin layer of packed snow left by the plow had frozen under the new-fallen stuff. She kept slipping on the steepening incline.

Tightening her hood, she tucked her hands in her pockets and plodded on. When she slipped again, her arms flew out for balance, hands bare and cold. She wished she had gloves, wished it even more in the next instant, when she lost her footing and landed wrist deep in the snow. Straightening, she shook herself off and went on. One more slip, though, and she trudged to the side of the road. The snow was deeper there, well past her calves, which made the walking harder but safer.

Head bowed against the steady fall of snow, she leaned into the climb. She had walked the same route for years, barely had to lift her eyes to know where she was. One foot rose high after the other to clear the drifts. By the time she passed the last of the houses, her thighs were feeling the strain. She felt instant relief when the road leveled off at the top.

Turning left, she started around the town green under the gaslights' amber glow. There were no cars about, just snow-shrouded shapes in driveways. Wood smoke rose from high chimneys to scent the air. Snow slid, with a rush and a thud, down tall steel panels from roof to ground.

The curve of the road took her past the Federal that housed the bank, with smaller offices above for the town's lawyer, realtor, and chiropractor. The one beside it housed the Chalifoux family, the one beside that the Nolans, the one beside that the library. Farther on, in a more modest house, lived the minister and his family. At the end of the oval, spire high, large green shutters and doors finely edged in snow, was the church.

The wood fence circling the churchyard had disappeared under the snow, as had the split-rail one around the town green. But the green wasn't to be missed. A true common area, it had recently

been host to sunbathers, picnickers, and stargazers. Now the limbs of maples, birches, and firs hung low to the ground under the weight of the snow, transforming stately trees into weepers.

The sound of an engine broke the silence. At the opposite end of the green, a pickup coasted down from Pine Street and cruised slowly around the oval. When it reached Bree, it stopped.

Curtis Lamb rolled down his window. 'Just comin' from work?'

Bree raised an arm to shield her eyes from the snow. 'Yeah.'

'Want a lift?'

But Curtis lived downhill, not far from Flash. She smiled, shook her head, gestured toward Birch Hill, just beyond the church. 'I'm almost there. You go on.'

Curtis rolled up his window. The pickup went slowly forward, turned right at the bank, and started down East Main.

Bree resumed the hike. She was making good time now, was actually enjoying the snow. It was cleansing, coming so soon after summer's sweat.

Another engine broke the stillness, with a growing sputter. Bree guessed the vehicle was climbing Birch Hill. Its headlights had just appeared when a second pickup swooped down Pine, far off to her right. It was going fast, too fast. She watched it skid onto the oval, regain traction, and barrel toward her end.

Eager to be out of its way, she quickened her step. At the corner, she turned onto Birch Hill. The car climbing it — a bare-bones Jeep — was twenty feet off but approaching steadily, so she hopped from the street into the deeper snow at the side.

The pickup kept coming. Alarmed by its speed, fascinated in a horrified way, Bree stopped walking. The pickup looked to be dull blue and old. She figured that whoever was driving was either drunk, inexperienced, or just plain dumb.

'Slow down,' she warned. At the rate it was going, it would surely skid when it turned. And it was going to have to turn, either right onto Birch Hill or left around the oval. If it went straight, it would hit her head-on.

Suddenly frightened, she moved. Running as quickly as she could through the deep snow, she started down Birch Hill, but it was an ill-timed move. Seconds after she passed the Jeep, she heard the crunch of metal on metal. Then the Jeep was skidding back, sliding faster than she could run and in the god-awful same direction.

Its impact with her was quieter. She felt a searing pain and a moment's weightlessness, then nothing at all.

*THREE WISHES*. Copyright © 1997 by Barbara Delinsky. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be used without written permission from the author.