



## Prelude

Clara Stewart hung up the telephone with an enormous smile. The same smile that adorned her picture encased in the gold oval on the real estate sign in the front window.

She paddled her office chair backwards with her feet, out into the hallway. "Someone wants to see the Briarwood Mansion," she yelled.

"Are you kidding?" Adam retorted.

"Nope, they'll be here in two weeks." She flipped through her appointment book notating the date, time and place.

"Are you going to take the bet?"

"Do I look crazy to you?"



## Friday Six Weeks Later

The fifty-three foot moving van was parked ramps down, dead centre of the circular drive at nine-hundred-ninety-nine Briarwood Gate.

The massive three-story manor complete with turret's loomed over the van dwarfing it, making it resemble a child's toy.

The mansion sat far back off the road like a daunting silent spectator privy to all and everything through its peepholes in the trees.

The new owners rushed the front door, unlocking it, their voices bubbling and pitching with excitement. The family of five, complete with dog and hamster, group hugged then disappeared through the opening to scout out the mansion's massive layout floor by floor, room by room.

The moving company owner had been analysing and scrutinizing their every movement until they vanished from sight.

He'd stood motionless, arm extended, hand up, fingers splayed as the soft yellow glow of lights rippled out from one window to the next to the next. When the illumination reached the second floor, he sneered. It was time.

He whipped his arm down like a flagman at the 'Indy 500.'

Time was of utter importance.

Harry, the company's supervisor was standing just a hair to the right of driver's door as if mothballed; the colour gone from his face, his hands were twitching involuntarily. His eyes were protruding from the sockets.



His head cocked far back on his neck at an odd angle, as if partially severed. His gaze clamped on the top left turret. Without warning his eyes ringed in white, he spasmed, wobbled, did a backward two-step smashing into the van driver's door and slamming it shut. His body pivoted, his feet scrambling for footing as his legs turned on the auto-pilot button to run.

"To hell with this shit!" He yelled. He tore off down the drive as if the devil himself was after him.

The remaining four did not give Harry a second thought, grouping together to unload the van, pushing, rolling, and thrusting the contents across the deck to the top of the ramp and booting it off into the snow.

The five thousand dollar bonus, which had been settled prior to taking the moving job to this particular location, was left by the wayside.

Unopened ... Uncollected.

The hair on the back of each of their necks had been standing at attention since entering the driveway. Half way up, cold shivers began coursing up and down their spines. Since stepping from the cab, they'd all looked over their shoulders time and time again, in-between staring up at the top row of windows. They'd collectively thought they had seen something, something dark, foreboding ... Looking back at them from those top windows.

They had heard the stories.

Everybody in these parts had.

As the last piece of furniture toppled off the side of the ramp, they held one another's eyes. The fear was front and center.

The company's owner winged the documentation of inspection and completion through the air in the general direction of the front porch. The driver started the



Ina Louise Jackson

truck as the other three crammed into the passenger seat on top of one another. The smell of burnt gears and gasoline filled the cab as the van hauled ass down the drive.

The unsecured loading ramps dropped down, swaying, mashing the snow into lumpy mush before ripping free, spinning, following the path of the van like huge grotesque tops. They veered off into the ditch, the one quickly disappearing into the snow; the other teetered, and then moved forward as if it had grown legs, ploughing directly into the massive boughs of a pine.

Marty and Norm Abbott stepped onto the front porch just in time to witness the last of the snow tornados created by the van. They stood side by side, portraying the identical 'Oh My God' body lingo. Their heads swivelled owl like in perfect unison, taking in the disarray of belongings.

"Think anything is broken?" Marty could not believe this. Their entire lives toppled and mangled together like someone's garbage. She zipped up her coat.

"You can count on it," Norm said quietly. He rubbed his hand back and forth across his chin.

"Think they'll be back?"

"Wouldn't count on it!" The words 'Jesus Fucking Christ' were sitting on the tip of his tongue. He sighed heavily instead of blurting them out.

"What are we going to do?"

"Stay up all night." He pulled his hood up and stepped off the porch into the snow.

"Well ... That's the last of it." Norm sat the two wet cardboard boxes that jingled like china bells down in the front hallway. He made his lips disappear into his mouth. He glanced at Marty and then back at the boxes.