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Murder in Vail excerpt



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Chapter 1

THE WOOD CABIN nestled itself into the mountainside, hidden by the hundreds of Colorado Blue Spruce trees towering amidst the twenty-three secluded acres in the awe-inspiring Rocky Mountains. At over nine thousand feet above sea level, the air was thin. In mid-winter, the ground was white. At the outset of a winter storm, the temperature hovered near zero.

Outside, over two feet of snow covered the world-class terrain situated between Vail and Frisco, on the outskirts of Copper Mountain, Colorado. As the sun set behind the majestic Rockies, visibility was limited. The gentle crunch of steps in the fresh snow was inaudible beyond thirty feet. Slow, equally timed strides resembled the makings of human steps. But with the abundance of wildlife searching for winter food, anything was possible.

The old man sat in the dark, save for the natural light glowing from the hearty wood-burning fireplace that warmed the spacious great room of the family-built cabin. It opened into a quaint but functional kitchen. A stainless-steel tea kettle heated

up, preparing to scream as the water approached its boiling point. Next to the propane-burning built-in stove that rested atop a massive island, a coffee mug containing a green tea bag waited to be filled. The mug was oversized, disproportionate to the point of being deformed, and multi-colored, evidencing signs it was a gift made from the hands of a child. It was old but well taken care of, just like its owner.

The old man's modest, rustic home was designed by his grandmother and built by his grandfather, long before Vail earned its reputation as a world-class ski resort destination. When they passed, they left their unassuming home and its valuable land to their three grandchildren, who included the old man.

The three siblings had decided that the old man would occupy the residence, as he was the only one who had remained in Colorado after his siblings had moved farther west. As each heir passed, the remaining equitable interest in the property passed to the surviving siblings.

Large cobblestones surrounded the burning logs and narrowed their way up to the tall ceiling, providing a classic log cabin ambiance in the cozy Colorado cabin. The width of the fireplace surround extended ten feet, centered perfectly along the thirty-foot wall perpendicular to the cabin's entryway. On each side of the fireplace, symmetrical built-in bookcases accented the cabin's foremost heat source.

A wide array of literature filled the handmade bookshelves, all well organized by categories. An encyclopedia set, a massive collection of law books, and an Ivy League-worthy collection of reference periodicals consumed every linear inch of the bookcase to the left of the screenless fireplace. To its right, mostly fiction novels adorned the handcrafted bookcase, with

titles ranging from *Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The DaVinci Code* and the *Longmire Mystery* series. Keeping them company, a copy of *The Almanac of Famous Quotes* gathered no dust.

Sitting at a forty-five-degree angle facing away from the burning logs that had been ruggedly cut in exchange for the old man's sweat, lay a brown recliner. Its leather was warmed by the fire on its right side, and by the old man's behind on its topside. Reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose hung for dear life as his tipped head faced downward to a torn and tattered notebook. He reviewed his notes for the ten-thousandth time, then jotted down some more.

The crackling fire logs resembled a firework show in the silence of the isolated woods. A mini Fourth of July celebration in mid-winter. Then, abruptly and unexpectedly, the silence ended. A rustling followed by a thump sounded outside, two seconds before the tea kettle sounded its high-pitched whistle.

The old man tossed his notebook and pen on the side table to his left, knocking over a recently received holiday card displayed upright. The envelope in which the card had arrived fell to the floor and under the bottom shelf of the wooden table, with only a corner peeking out underneath.

He hustled to the stove to silence the screaming kettle. For eighty-three, he moved quickly. But still, he was in his ninth decade, so not nearly as fast as he wished. By the time he turned off the stove and removed the kettle from the scorching cast iron top, he heard nothing other than the crackling silence.

Had he heard a noise outside? One could flip a coin. Sometimes, while deeply entrenched in his search for the undiscovered, his imagination got the best of him. Other times, his hearing aid played tricks on him. So, for the old man, if a tree

fell in the woods, did he actually hear it? He certainly wouldn't wager on it.

Could it have been an animal desperately searching for winter nourishment? Was it an extreme skier, separated from his buddies, looking for an epic vertical drop? Or was it an intruder looking to rob the old timer of his most valuable asset—the physical manifestation of the product formed between his ears?

Animals scrounging around on his property was common, but this sounded different. Just slightly, but different nonetheless. Extreme skiers passing through was not commonplace, but it wouldn't be the first time. An intruder, looking to snatch valuable physical property, would be gravely disappointed. An intruder, searching for valuable intellectual property, potentially could strike gold.

Ninety seconds later, the front door's vintage wooden door-knob slowly turned, inching clockwise at the speed of a pocket watch's second hand. Each turn was made with precision and total silence, eliminating the odds it was an animal—at least of a four-legged variety. Inside, the fireplace sparkled, now struggling to warm the cozy cabin that cooled slowly as the frozen air seeped into the expanding door opening. After edging to a six-inch crack, the creeping door came to a stop. About shoulder height up the door jamb, a long satin stainless-steel barrel peeked inside the rural home, clearing the path for its holder.

The *Ruger Mark IV's* extended ten-inch barrel emerged like a telescope scanning the room. The long sleek barrel accomplished two things: increasing the bullet's stability and velocity with its prolonged barrel-time; and enhancing its accuracy due to the increased sight radius from the distance of the rear sight to the front sight. Featuring a Computer Numerical

Control-machined grip frame, a cold hammer-forged barrel, and a natural pointing checkered synthetic grip angle contoured comfortably to the hand; it was the intruder's weapon of choice.

Prepared to have a shotgun greeting him at the door, the unwelcomed visitor paused. Nothing. His butt cheeks clenched. With his right foot, he gently tapped the door, opening it another few inches. Still nothing. No spring-gun booby trap to blow his head off his shoulders. No "get off my lawn" old man blowing the door from its hinges with a *Remington 870* shotgun. Still proceeding with extreme caution, the trespasser tossed a pinecone into the cabin, expecting a gunshot to follow. He waited. He listened. Nothing.

Led by the long-barreled companion, two black down jacket sleeves crept through the doorway. A hooded head followed. The right shoulder of the insulated, quilted winter attire leaned into the door just enough to open it halfway. The *Ruger* cleared the room, the outdoor air chilled it. Other than the popping of the fire logs, the loudest things in the room were the hideous homemade mug and a brightly colored handcrafted blanket draped over the old man's chair.

Physically fit like a fifty-five-year-old lumberjack, the old man still chopped his wood and fished often, but he no longer drove a car. His diminished eyesight over the years, combined with the dangerous mountain roads—especially during winter—made such a luxury unwise. Rather, a versatile young millennial, who split time as a rideshare driver and other employment, graciously drove the old man to his limited outings.

The great room and kitchen were unoccupied. The cabin's owner appeared nowhere in sight. The dossier on the old man indicated a ninety-eight percent chance he would be home. Other than a twenty-five-minute drive to Frisco once a week for

groceries, and every day for a morning coffee rendezvous with his best friend, he was all but certain to be home.

The old man didn't own a vehicle, so the absence of one provided no clue to the intruder. And with the fireplace being the cabin's primary heat source, it would blaze all winter, even while unsupervised. So likewise, that didn't offer a hint as to the presence of anyone.

The hired gun had been tasked with two assignments: secure the old timer's notebook and any other related evidence; and if necessary, expedite the introduction of the Grim Reaper to the seemingly immortal old man.

The burglar cleared the main room and kitchen. No old man in sight. He tiptoed to the lone bedroom. No old man passed out on the bed or dead on the floor. He searched high and low. Still nothing. He simulated his routine in the bathroom. No old man hunched over sitting dead on his throne. He yanked back the shower curtain; no Janet Leigh scream followed. Wherever he was, the old man was not in his cabin.

With no old geezer in sight, the hitman's second assignment was put on hold, perhaps permanently, as it was only required if necessary to accomplish assignment one. Assignment one was the priority; get the notebook.

Returning to the main room, the intruder felt the top of the leather recliner nearest the fireplace. It felt warm. Perhaps recently sat on. Perhaps the effects of its proximity to a blazing fire. The side table next to the recliner was empty. Underneath, a bit of paper peeped out. The intruder squatted, picked it up, glanced at it, and shoved it in his pocket.

Obviously not a Rhodes Scholar, other than clearing the rooms, the hired gun didn't look for other clues to verify if the old man had recently been inside. He didn't see him, so his focus

instantly shifted to finding the notebook. If he combed every inch of the property where a notebook could fit, the old man was bound to turn up somewhere.

Primarily tasked with that mission, the search was exhaustive—and destructive.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, the old man's flesh had grown cold, and his body had stiffened like a board, lying still as a corpse. The cabin was cold, but its owner colder.

