

## Blood Hoax Chapter One

The defroster argued with the freezing rain pinging the Subaru's windshield. Ike Cherny wondered when the road crew would start sanding. *After someone goes off the road*, he thought, as he patted the passenger seat looking for his Camels. He poked the tobacco in his mouth and punched the lighter.

Off to the left, about two hundred feet ahead, a single headlight bobbed wildly.

"So, Olga," he spoke to the GPS and eased off the accelerator, "what's your take on this?"

The light bounced and zagged on a course heading right at Ike. He flashed his high-beams, but the light did not falter. Sixty feet and coming on strong.

Snowmobile! Ike identified the speeding shape. Two bundled bodies huddled behind its windshield. Two ass-holes ignoring the Subaru. Ike hit the horn with a heavy hand and touched the brakes ever so lightly.

The result was like an elephant stomped on the brakes, locking the car into a skid. The snowmobile skittered by as the car surged off the road and down a short embankment. Ike popped his seatbelt and leapt out, spewing Polish curses.

Grabbing at bushes to pull himself up the slippery bank, he cursed the weather, snowmobilers and life in general. He wanted to punch the smiling faces he glimpsed as they skimmed by the out-of-control Subaru. He committed their features to memory. Because he would find them.

What did they look like? Man and woman? Maybe a man and a kid. Brightly colored scarf, or could be a stocking hat, flowing behind the passenger. What was different about the man's wild white beard? Perhaps it wasn't white at all but simply snow frosted. Dumbfounded, he stood on the road.

Silence. Darkness. A trace of exhaust lingered in the wet air.

"*Kurwa!*" he cursed in Polish. Didn't even stop to see if he was hurt. He slid back down to the Subaru, opened the hatch and pulled out a short-handled shovel from under a pile of horse blankets.

The things I get into because of Tuleigh. Driving in a sleet storm. Following the orders of a machine. All in hopes of finding Tuleigh. And I'm not even on her GPS destination list of forty-three men's names. He dug into the snow, tossing shovelful aside.

Ike knew Tuleigh, as the New England sales manager for Blutrena Feeds, used her GPS to travel to dozens of farms each week. You'd think her GPS destinations, or at least most of them, would have a farm name. He stopped and leaned on the shovel, puzzling over it. A man's name identified each destination. Not a single woman's name. He pulled his cap down over his forehead to deflect the biting sleet then went back to shoveling.

And how come no "Ike?" Or even "Dusky," the name of the horse she rode when she spent a few days with him at Beckmere Farm where he was the head horse trainer? When the tires were freed-up, he brushed snow from his jeans before settling back in the car. He brought the car to life and the GPS chirped:

"Go two-point nine miles. Turn right on Old Factory Road."

"Listen, my dear Olga," he spoke to Tuleigh's GPS, "can you wait till I get the car back on the road before telling me what to do?" He engaged the low 4-wheel drive option,

straightened the wheels, put the Subaru in reverse and touched the gas.

Ike had randomly chosen this destination Tuleigh named “Bruno” on her GPS and Olga had obliged by directing him north from Beckmere Farm in Hyderville, Connecticut into Massachusetts; then north of the Mass Pike.

There had to have been men in Tuleigh’s life before she came into his. God knows he counted an impressive number of notches on his belt.

They’d been together three years now. He wasn’t seeing anyone else. Thought it was mutual. Just how long does a woman keep directions to forty-three men from her past in her GPS database?

And where had she gone? Did one of the forty-three offer her something better? He hadn’t heard from her in going on three months. He’d begun calling her when she was a half-hour late for their date in Springfield. Then he called her boss at Blutrena who told Ike she quit.

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“I didn’t buy into that.” Ray, Tuleigh’s supervisor, had told Ike when he called. “She wouldn’t just up and leave.”

“She ever talk about taking another job?” Ike spoke into the phone. *Or another man?*

“Tuleigh talked about *you*.” Ray’s laugh came across the lines.

“We were getting pretty tight,” Ike admitted. “I’m worried. I tried to file a missing person’s report but they told me only immediate family could.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, Ike. I reported it, too, even though my superior thought I was making too much of it. Said she probably ran off with a farmer’s son.”

He said goodbye to Ray and continued to worry about Tuleigh.

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“In point-two miles, turn left to destination.”

Okay. Let’s see what this “Bruno” is all about. He guided the car gently to a stop in the slippery parking lot edged with two-foot gray snow banks. A spastic neon sign identified Romano’s. Hard to think Tuleigh was pushing Blutrena Feeds at a *bar—unless some of the patrons are bulls*. He smiled at the thought.

Three dark compacts and a blue pickup huddled by the entrance. And a snowmobile snuggled up to the dumpster.

Icicles ringed the hooded light bulb over the door. He depressed the thumb latch and pushed. Didn’t budge. He put his shoulder to the heavy door and it scraped open. The smells of cigarette smoke and musty old wood whooshed out. Cigarette smoke in a public bar? How could it be?

Ike felt all eyes trained on his neck as he shoved the door shut against the storm. Prepared to stare them down, he turned around, but the dozen or so drinkers cuddled their drinks with great contemplation.

Only the bartender glanced at him. Her arms jiggled as she sloshed water in the under-counter sink.

A sharp crack brought Ike’s attention to the pool table set in the far corner. “Yes!” a man raised the cue stick over his head in victory.

“Lucky shot,” said the other man. He rubbed chalk on his stick.

A visual survey indicated a total of nine men, three with beards. All dark haired. Where did white beard go? Or white beard’s partner in the gaudy-colored scarf?

Ike walked forward, headed for the empty stool between a woman with long stringy hair and a man hunched protectively over his drink. Could the “Bruno” that Tuleigh had earmarked this GPS destination for be here today?

“Yeah?” The barkeep moved over to Ike, placed a paper napkin in front of him. Her features were pinched in a fat round face. Tiny line of a mouth, dark spots for eyes under pencil thin brows. But her hair was nice. If you like curls. Big head of shiny brown ringlets that gleamed with a life of their own even in the dim light.

“Jack Daniels, rocks.” He took off his knit cap and stuffed it in his jacket pocket.

A couple, with their heads almost touching, sat across on the other side of the bar. The man had a full back beard and a knit cap pulled down to his eyebrows. The woman’s puffy light blue jacket was open and a turtle neck cradled her small face. She swiped blond bangs off her face. The man reach for her hand.

“It’s okay,” Ike heard him say. “Your worrying takes all the fun out of life.” The man tapped cigarette ash in a grimy tin dish.

“How are the roads?” The barkeep set Ike’s drink on the napkin.

“Bad. What does it take to get the sanders out around here?”

“This crowd’s pretty used to icy winter roads. We aren’t complainers, so the road crews save us for last. That way they can stop in for a beer on the house when they’re done. So, what brings you out?”

“I’m looking for Bruno.” Being careful not to move his head, Ike scanned the drinkers and realized he had caught everyone’s attention. He sensed the man at his right elbow straighten up a bit and sucked smoke from his cigarette.”

“Bruno?” She gave a hearty chuckle. “You got to give me a little more. What does this Bruno look like? What does he do?”

“I don’t know.” Ike took a drink, letting the whiskey move around his mouth. Why did everyone turn their attention to him at the mention of “Bruno” yet the bartender blew him off?

“Maybe this will help.” Ike zipped open his jacket and pulled an envelop from the inside pocket. “Bruno may have been with this woman.” He sorted through his pictures of Tueigh and chose one snapped in the midst of an open mouth laugh showing even white teeth. Her eyebrows swept upward like angels’ wings. Recalling how silky her hair felt, Ike ran a thumb across the likeness of her wavy cap of black hair. In the picture, a pair of the huge hoop earrings she loved to wear winked at the camera. Ike turned it toward the bartender and placed it on the bar.

“A looker. How come you’d let the likes of Bruno come in here with her?”

“So you do know Bruno?”

“Naw...just jerking your chain.”

Ike felt the man next to him twitch like he was stifling a laugh.

“What about the woman,” Ike pressed the barkeep, “have you seen her before?”

“What made you decide to come to Romano’s looking for this woman?” She wiped her hands on a rag and picked up the picture. First she held it up to her nose, then at arm’s length. Ike read a glimmer of recognition that she quickly pulled the shade on.

“Her GPS has a destination named ‘Bruno.’ It brought me here. Would you mind showing the photo around?”

“Let me have a look.” The man at Ike’s elbow reached out a nicotine-stained fingers and turned the picture so he could see. “I’d surely like to know her,” he laughed.

Ike spun in his chair thinking all sorts of dark things because of the man’s innuendo, but kept silent knowing if he acted upon his anger he’d ruin any chance of learning something.

He couldn't go picking fights because some dirty drunk wants to get his hands on Tuleigh. He kept his hand busy and his mouth quiet by filling it with JD. This GPS plan wasn't working. Sleet storm, snowmobile, slime-ball bar patrons. How could this be one of Tuleigh's saved destinations?

"Let me see." The woman on Ike's left wiggled red painted fingernails in front of him and took the picture. "Real pretty," she said. "Wish I could get my hair to look like that."

With her back to Ike, the bartender handed Tuleigh's picture to the couple across the bar. Even though they were barely six feet away, her bulk formed an effective sound barrier. He couldn't decipher her mumblings, but he did pick up on the mirth in her voice.

What's so amusing? What do they know? The hair on the back of his hands tingled. He wrapped them around the icy whiskey and squeezed.

He watched the pool players set their cues down and move to where Tuleigh's picture passed around. Obviously the group knew one another. Not strange in a neighborhood bar, but something about their stance made Ike feel he was watching a football huddle determining the next play.

Why?

Their spokeswoman turned back to Ike.

"No go." She shook her head causing the curls to dance.

"Thanks for asking." Ike pulled out a pack of Camels and placed it on the bar. "Okay to light up?"

"Go for it. One of the advantages of Romano's."

"You've got some special dispensation?" Ike tapped a cigarette from the pack and rolled it in his fingers. He promised Tuleigh he would quit and he had till she disappeared, but the smoke swirling in this bar got to him. Just one.

"Naw. Just a health department made up of smokers. They enjoy have a place to hang out with a smoke and a beer." She pushed a Bic across the bar toward Ike.

Ike lost no time lighting up, savoring the first lung-full of smoke from a fresh cigarette.

Bar stools scraped against the floor. He could just see past the barkeep's bulk that the couple across the way prepared to leave. The woman zipped up her jacket.

"Later, Lilly," the man said throwing some bills on the counter.

"See you in church, Chief."

"Chief?" Ike questioned the man on his right.

"Yeah, Chief Kevin. Our Gilbertville Chief of Police."

"Wait a minute." Ike jumped off the stool and hurried to where the Chief held the door for the woman in blue.

"If you ever see the woman in the picture, would you give me a call?" He pulled a business card out of his jacket. "And," Ike said, pointing to the snowmobile that ran him off the road, "Would you know who owns that?"

The Chief took Ike's card. Over the man's shoulder, Ike saw the woman pull a three foot blaze orange stocking hat on her head as she walked toward the snowmobile. He looked back the bearded chief of police. It hit him that the sleet had frosted his black beard. Even without that, the stocking cap was a dead giveaway.

"The machine is mine."

"It was *you*? You didn't even stop to see if I was dead."

"Well, now, would you like to come down to the jail and file a complaint?"

Ike shook his head and looked away, sensing this was not the time or place to fight

injustice. He watched the two mount the snowmobile.

“Have a good day now. Drive careful.” The Chief adjusted goggles over his eyes. “Don’t forget to settle up with Lilly, now. Hear?”