

THE TRUTH ABOUT SNOW ANGELS

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I found an old black and white picture of my daughter making a snow angel when she was about four years old. She wore her long fancy wool coat and looked so happy, lost for a moment in the snow. I looked closer at her arms and legs frozen in place for the pose. I couldn't help but wonder, what if she had disappeared into the snow and ended up in another realm?

Mrs. Crowley hunched over an antique stove, creaking and banging as she retrieved a batch of warm cookies. Officer Jane Morgan watched the plump woman struggle to maneuver in a tight calico dress, her bones and joints well past their prime. Her white hair assembled in a severe bun and age spots riddled her pink neck.

The room smelled of gingerbread, and hot tea steeping in the pot.

“Let me just set these onto a plate to cool, Sweetie, then we can have a chat.”

Jane sat at the table, mouthwatering, hoping the cookies would cool enough to eat before she was finished with her interrogation about the missing children.

“I love your cookies. They're legendary in this town.”

Mrs. Crowley grinned at her. “It's my Mama's recipe. Got a few secret ingredients to make them extra special. Except for the raisin eyes, and a little line I press into the dough for a smile, these little guys come out of the oven naked as paper dolls. I dress them up

when they're cooked; cover them in frosting clothes when they cool. Tray after tray of little paper dolls, and all of them my little darlings."

"No hurry. They smell delicious," Jane replied.

After a few minutes of transferring the cookies, Mrs. Crowley rested herself at the table. She adjusted a delicate teacup into its place in a mismatched saucer.

"Don't sit in that chair, Sweetie. It's got a bum leg. Sit in that one, there."

Jane moved her seat. "I appreciate you talking to me today. I'm sorry to drop by unannounced."

"No bother." The old woman's hand shook something terrible when she held the heavy teapot but she managed to pour the steaming liquid into both cups.

"Sugar?" she offered, holding a white cube between tongs.

"Thank you, yes," Jane said.

"So, to what do I owe this nice visit?" Mrs. Crowley sipped her tea.

"I don't know if you watch the news, but—"

"Don't much care for it. All that violence. Not the world it used to be."

"Yes, well, did you hear about the children?"

"Children?"

"Three of them in three months have disappeared in this town. A set of brothers and a little girl."

Mrs. Crowley set her cup down. "I heard. Everyone knows I suppose. Signs up all over, and of course Jake—he does my gardening—he told me. Tragic, but I suppose they're in a better place."

"I doubt that. Anyway, we're not assuming they're dead. We're holding out hope they're not, though statistically speaking after this long—"

"Did you know them? The children?" Mrs. Crowley asked.

"Not personally, no."

"I did. Wonderful kids, all of them. Little Dani, she was a treasure. She came by one day to play in the snow out yonder."

"Back there?" Jane pointed out a window.

"Yes. She made a snow angel in my meadow," the old woman boasted, chewing her chapped bottom lip with false teeth. Her eyes

alighted with the memory. "Sure as sugar she did. All bundled in her coat, that red wool one from down at Macy's. What a sight she was. Little arms and legs moving so fast I damn near thought she'd melt the snow."

"Dani wasn't your neighbor though; she lives clear across town. How is it she came to be in your yard? Are you a friend of the family?"

Mrs. Crowley frowned, pursed her lips. "Absolutely not. Do you *know* her family?"

"I interviewed her parents. They're devastated that she's gone."

"I'll bet. No one to beat up on."

"Excuse me?"

Mrs. Crowley rose to fetch the tray of cookies from the counter. "These ought to be cool enough." She piped some ruffled collars with a frosting tube.

Jane picked one up. Like most people in Bradfield, she had been eating Mrs. Crowley's cookies her whole life. She looked at it, ready to bite off an arm, but hesitated. Oddly enough, this little gingerbread boy looked sad somehow. Maybe the placement of the eyes? The baked-in slit of a downturned mouth? She set it down.

"Her Mama was a pincher," Mrs. Crowley continued. "She hurt that little girl. Didn't deserve her."

"We didn't find any evidence of abuse."

"Course not, you never met the child and now she's gone. You didn't see the bruises all over her body. Trust me, Dani's in a better place."

Jane flinched. "Did you take her, Mrs. Crowley? Did you kidnap that little girl?"

"No ma'am I did not. But I will say I never saw that child happier than when she was back there."

"When was the last time you saw Dani Miller?"

"I suppose it was the last time anyone saw her. Back there, like I said, making an angel in my meadow."

Jane dropped her cup. Shattered it into sharp shards on the pitted hardwood. Mrs. Crowley had not been a suspect. Stopping by to question her was an afterthought. Mrs. Crowley lived on the outskirts and Jane hoped the woman might have spied an unfamiliar vehicle, anything that could be tied to a stranger. But now—

“Did you see anyone out there with Dani? Someone who could have snatched her?”

“No, she was all alone.”

“What about you? Did you bring her out there?”

“No, not me. I gave her some cocoa and cookies, told her she was a good girl, and then she went out to play. I let her be.”

“And she just disappeared?”

“Do you have children, Officer Morgan?”

“Well, no. I—”

“Of course not. You got your career,” she accused. “Ain’t that right?”

“Mrs. Crowley, my life isn’t the issue at hand here. What I’m here about is why so many children have disappeared in this town. And since you seem to have been the last one to see Dani alive—”

“Yes.”

“So you don’t deny it?”

“Why would I?”

“Because commonly the last person to see someone alive is a suspect.”

“That’s just poppycock.” She folded her gnarled arthritic hands on the table. Bit the head off of a sad cookie.

“What other explanation do you have?” Jane asked.

“Why don’t you have children?” Mrs. Crowley asked again.

Jane stiffened, rubbed her hands on her lap. “I, I can’t have them. I had some problems awhile back, in college and, well, I’ll never have them.”

“And you couldn’t adopt?”

Tears sprung to Jane’s eyes but she managed to rein them in. How dare this woman turn everything around? And yet, Jane felt compelled to answer. Childlessness was something that pained her every day and this woman’s grandmotherly love seeped through Jane’s resolve. “I’m a small-town cop and my salary is, well, not near enough for adoption fees.”

“And no husband?”

“No. So even if I could afford it, I probably wouldn’t get approved.”

Mrs. Crowley looked at her intently, with pity. Sadness stabbed

Jane until she looked down at the missing children's clothes. This wasn't the time for Jane to examine her own regrets. "My life has nothing to do with this investigation."

"Maybe, maybe not." Her rheumy eyes judged her. "The boys who disappeared, did you know them?"

Jane shook her head. "I interviewed the family and their friends, saw pictures."

"Darling boys. Used to see them at church."

"So you knew them then?" Jane asked.

"One time, I saw their Daddy trip the little one just for spite then laugh about it. Of course he wasn't the real Daddy."

"He was, I talked to—"

"No, not really. He married their Mama, adopted the boys from her but they weren't his kin and he never let them forget it. He did some awful things to those boys. Terrible things a child shouldn't ought to know about."

"I didn't know that."

"Don't imagine the parents would volunteer up *that* kind of information."

"Mrs. Crowley, did you take the children? To protect them?"

When the old woman didn't answer, Jane shifted in her seat, discreetly tugged at a pair of handcuffs clipped to her belt, poised and ready.

"Lots of children are abused and if no one offers refuge, what becomes of them do you think?" Mrs. Crowley asked.

"Maybe you should come down to the station with me, talk to my captain."

"They needed saving," the old woman defended.

Jane unhooked the cuffs from her belt. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to put these around your wrists and bring you to the station. You are under arrest for the kidnapping of three children—"

Mrs. Crowley stood, eased backward a few steps. "More than three I dare say. They weren't the only ones. Sure as sugar know that."

"Others?" Jane asked, frozen in place with the realization that this woman was not the kind old baker the town believed, but some kind of psycho—

Mrs. Crowley nodded. "Dani wasn't the first but wasn't she the last neither. Every so often I hear laughter. A lot of laughter carrying over the snow drifts, through the holly bushes, clear through the shutters and into this here kitchen. It ain't just from Dani and the boys. No, it's about, I'd say, a whole classroom of little ones laughing forever from the dark patch, where the snow angels take them." She leaned against the table, steadied her aged body and regarded Jane. "It's a joy being surrounded by all these beautiful angels. "

"C-can you take me to them? To the children? To the angels?" The latest three might still be alive but no way the rest would be, assuming Mrs. Crowley was telling the truth. Jane wondered what she'd find out there. A mass grave in the field? Tiny carved crosses with pink and blue ribbons blowing in the breeze, peeking above the snow line?

Mrs. Crowley cocked her head to the sound of whistling wind through rattling trees. "Can you hear their laughter?" The windows were old and brittle like Mrs. Crowley, and Jane could hear the sounds of winter, but nothing else.

"No, I can't. I'm sorry. Are they still alive?"

"I expect so. They make a lot of noise for the dead, don't you think?"

Jane shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

Mrs. Crowley held up her wrists. "If you're going to take me in, let's get it out of the way."

"I was hoping you could bring me to the children first. I'll rest better if I know you're taking good care of them. You should get a coat. It's chilly outside."

Mrs. Crowley took a struggled breath through creaky lungs. "Lost my brother to the snow, did you know that?"

"Your brother?"

"We were little," Mrs. Crowley said as she left the kitchen and walked down the hallway. Jane followed her, wondering if she should call for back up. "Mama never let us make snow angels. No good ever came of it, she said. It's no better than using one of those Ohweeggee boards, the kind with the heart-shaped pointer."

"Ouija," Kathy offered.

"That's what I said. Ohweeggee. Everyone knows those boards open a doorway best left closed. Well, snow angels ain't no different, Mama told us."

Kathy shook her head. "Snow doesn't murder children, doesn't make them disappear—"

"Snow is just snow till a child enchants it. For a few minutes, the child becomes the angel and that angel don't want to go back to being just snow again."

"That's nonsense."

"Well Mama had us believin' it. One day though, my Daddy came home all liquored up and mad as a nest of bees because he lost his job. My brother Willy got in his way and Daddy beat him something good. After that, Willy told me he was going to the snow angels. Didn't care what Mama said, he was going out there, gonna become one of those angels, gonna leave here and never come back."

"And?"

"And he did. Moved his arms and legs so fast. I watched over him to make sure Mama or Daddy didn't come out and catch him. That's when I heard the laughter. From down under."

"I don't—"

"Mama was wrong! Snow angels don't take your soul; they lead you to a whole new and better world where all the sad children go. Those kids have so much love to give and it's all wasted. Wasted! When they go with the snow angels, their love is appreciated. My brother crossed over and down there—"

"That's not true."

"Sure it is. I saw it myself. He waved his bruised hands and feet so wide, made the biggest angel his little body could, until the dark patch below showed through under the snow. And then he just disappeared. Right before my eyes he did."

"Didn't your parents go look for him? Try to find his body?"

"Daddy figured he just ran away. Good riddance he said. Anyway, a couple of weeks later I heard laughter from the dark patch and one of those laughs belonged to my brother Willy. So I was happy he got away."

"If that's true, why didn't you go too? Try to escape to Snow Angel Land?" It was a ridiculous story, but one formed by a child to explain her brother's disappearance.

"Daddy never hit me again after Willy went away."

Without another word, Mrs. Crowley opened the door to a large hallway closet. She pulled out a stepladder and climbed it.

Jane shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to do. Part of her wanted to run out to her car and call for backup. The other part refused to leave Mrs. Crowley's side, less she divulge the truth about the missing children.

A heavy box teetered on the shelf and fell toward Mrs. Crowley, but she ducked out of the way and it crashed to the ground. The top split open and a red wool jacket sprawled on the floor like a bloodstain. She knelt, fingered the fabric, the black velvet collar. "I left Dani alone for the time, knew what she was doing. Told her about it. Told her there was a better place she could go if she desired. And she did desire, I dare say. When I went out later, her clothes and this coat were all that was left. That and her laughter under that snow angel out yonder."

Mrs. Crowley fiddled in the box and retrieved a handful of other garments. "Those little boys who disappeared, this is what's left of them. And here's my brother's hat. Kept it all these—"

"Put those down," Jane ordered. "Mrs. Crowley, don't touch anything else. Those clothes are evidence. Why didn't you give those to the police? Why did you hide them if you claim you don't know what happened to the children?"

Jane helped the woman to her shaky feet. "Put your coat on." Mrs. Crowley did and then Jane slapped on the handcuffs.

"But I do know. I told you, they went with the snow angels."

"Where are their bodies?" Jane urged.

"Out yonder, I told you. Don't be cross. It's a place they deserve to be. They're much happier now."

"Can you take me out there?" Jane asked, trying and failing to keep the quiver out of her voice.

Mrs. Crowley smiled in a way that sent ice through Jane. "I was hoping you'd ask."

As Jane and Mrs. Crowley walked through the knee-deep snow, the car and house grew farther away, and she wondered again if she should call for back up. Mrs. Crowley was a frail old woman after all, and—

"Here it is. This is the spot," A proud Mrs. Crowley announced.

Jane looked across the meadow and saw nothing but a flat expanse of snow. "Is this where you buried the children?"

"This is where they are but I keep telling you, I didn't touch them. They wanted to become angels and live in the other world and so they did. Can't you see the angels? Look hard. Look really hard."

Jane squinted but still saw nothing but white upon white.

"All those poor children, they're down there without a Mama, you know. They could use someone like you to love them proper." Jane's heart went out to the lost children and their families. If what Mrs. Crowley said was true, these babes had been abused and unloved; all they had wanted was love. If they had been *her* children...

"Just please tell me where they are, Mrs. Crowley. Maybe it's not too late to save them, even just one."

"Oh they're saved all right. It's you who needs saving. You want a child more than anything and here are all these babies just dying for a good mama. Even in a wonderful place like down there, if they don't have a mother to love them, they feel lost. And sad. It's your calling to join them don't you see?" Her rheumy eyes burnt into Jane.

"Mrs. Crowley that's sick. You don't just kill children and bury them in your backyard. That does not help them!"

"Maybe I was wrong about you." Mrs. Crowley showed no remorse, only deflection. The weather was cold, and the snow began to fall upon the coating already there. The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees.

"What did you say? Do you understand what you did to these children?"

"I did nothing but provide them a world without harm. But they need you. A lot of lonely children down there are in need of a mother."

Jane wanted to turn and run but once again was struck by the other woman's words. What was *down there*? What did that even mean?

She called her bluff. "If you're so concerned about their welfare, why don't you go down there with them?"

"I need to tend them from here, insure no one desecrates their home. There have been souls living down there long before my time." Snow fell onto Mrs. Crowley's ice white hair, but she seemed unaffected. The cold did not bother her.

Jane's knees went weak. She reached for her radio and pressed the button but it didn't work. "Hello? Testing. Hello? I need help."

"No signal in the angel field. Nothing is alive out here, Jane."

Wind whipped around the frail Mrs. Crowley, surrounding her in a cocoon then receding.

"They need you, Jane. It's your calling."

"My calling is to save and protect people, not assist you with mass murder."

In the distance, Jane heard a hum. She hoped it was the sound of sirens, her partner somehow knowing she was in trouble, somehow hearing her plea. But then the hum separated, became voices. Children's voices. "Help us! Please help us!"

I'm trying! "Let's go to the station, Mrs. Crowley. We'll come back here with a team. I've heard enough." She walked toward her, reached for her arm.

"So you heard them? They are calling for you, Jane."

Their desperate voices grew louder. "Please help us, please stay with us. We need you, Jane. Please stay with us!" Echoes of all the lost children descended upon her. *A trick, this is some kind of trick. Hypnotism.*

Just then though, shapes formed in the snow. Shadows in the blazing white landscape. Tiny snow angels trapped in rows like gingerbread boys and girls all awaiting escape from the baking sheet.

"You see them now, don't you? I knew it! They are showing themselves to you because *you* should be the one to love them. Children, this woman has come for you! Show yourselves so she won't be afraid. Show yourselves so she'll come take care of you!"

The shadowy silhouettes of the snow angels grew bodies and desperate faces. Their arms and legs waved furiously. The children could not leave their molds but beckoned to Jane.

"Come stay with us. Be our mother. Please."

"What have you done to them?" Jane asked Mrs. Crowley.

"Did this to themselves. Chose the other world, just like I told you. And they need a mother."

Jane bent over Dani, who she recognized from the Missing photos splattered on every telephone pole in town. She was naked except

for ruffles around her neck and cuffs, and three black buttons down the front of her stomach, just like Crowley's renowned gingerbread cookies. "Come out of there, Honey, it's all right. You're safe now." She reached in to take the child's hand but it was only vapor.

"Please come down here with us. Please. We need a mommy."

Jane ran from one snow angel to another, all decorated like cookies. "Please come with us. Please be our mother," they pleaded. Tears formed in their ghost eyes, their smiles turned to frowns. "Don't make us go back alone!"

"You can't bring them back, Jane. They're down there for good and they need a mother. You say it's your calling to save and protect, well go to them. They need you," Mrs. Crowley said. "This is the only chance you'll ever get to be a parent, and we both know it." Snow encased her hair now, and eyelashes. Flakes dotted her cheeks.

"Don't lose your chance, Jane."

The children faded and soon they were only shadows again. And soon after, the meadow was unmarked snow, fresh and smooth and childless. Just like her.

"Where are they? Where did they go?"

"Went back to their home underground, in their idyllic place. Come on now, lie down in the snow. Wave your hands and feet. Make yourself a snow angel and love those children the way they deserve."

Jane paused. "It's not possible."

"They need you, Jane and you need them. There's nothing here for you. Your place is down there. With them. Taking care of them. Go on, give it a try. Make a snow angel and fulfill your calling."

An overwhelming feeling of obligation filled Jane. And soon it gave way to a guilty feeling of joy. *I'm going to be a mother. Finally.* She looked beyond the frozen Mrs. Crowley. No one would see. No one would know. And would anyone really miss her here? No. No they wouldn't.

Jane removed the handcuffs from the old woman. She set her gun down in the snow, along with her club, wallet, badge. She lay down in the snow, took a deep breath and moved her arms up and down. Faster and faster, with each movement, the children's voices grew louder, happier. She felt herself falling as the boys and girls called to her from below.

“Almost here! She’s almost here! We finally got a Mama!”

As she neared the bottom though, when she went from falling to hovering to stopping, just then when Jane’s heart swelled with ultimate joy and fulfillment, it all went horribly wrong.

Cold. She was so c-cold. C-couldn’t move. Her naked body was s-stuck. Trapped in the snow. She looked above her to see a thick clear layer of ice. To her left and right, the children too were trapped in the ice. Like naked gingerbread boys and girls awaiting life on a baking sheet, waiting for Mrs. Crowley to frost clothes onto them.

Tray after tray of little paper dolls, and all of them my little darlings.

Up above, Mrs. Crowley gathered up Jane’s clothes, badge, club, and gun. Jane could make out her shape through the ice. “Let me out!” she screamed. The children screamed as well, but Mrs. Crowley just cocked her head and smiled.

Was this the laughter the old woman said she had heard? Screams of terror?

Jane tried to pound on the sheet of ice but her hands only went up and down, trapped in her form of a cookie cutter snow angel.

“We’re glad you came, Mama,” Dani called from the next row of trapped children.

“Where’s the rest of your world? When do we drop down to the rest of it,” Jane asked.

“Mrs. Crowley said when you came, we’d go there but I think she lied,” another voice said. “She lied to all of us.” Other voices shouted agreement in her deceit.

“What about in the spring? When the ice melts?” Jane asked, shivering with fear and cold.

“Doesn’t ever melt,” Dani said. “We’re snow angels now and we’re just stuck.”

A boy’s voice from farther away piped in. “Did she lie about you being our mother though? Mrs. Crowley said you’d love us, take care of us. Will you?”

“Tell us a story, Mama. Please tell us a story,” Dani said. The others chimed in, begging for a story as well.

What have I done? Can’t ever leave. Ever.

“Please Mama. It won’t be so bad now that you’re here,” a faraway

voice said. Could be a boy or girl, a newcomer to the angel field or a victim from generations ago. “We’ve waited so long for you.”

Jane swallowed tears, accepted the fate she’d brought upon herself, the fate that in a different way she’d wanted her whole life.

“Once upon a time—”

