

TWO ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELLAS

WHITEOUT

LYNETTE EASON
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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Snowbound Secrets” © 2026 by Lynette Eason

“Buried in Shadows” © 2026 by Gracie & Johnny, Inc.

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Eason, Lynette author | Pettrey, Dani author | Pettrey, Dani Buried in shadows | Eason, Lynette Snowbound secrets

Title: Whiteout : two romantic suspense novellas / Lynette Eason and Dani Pettrey.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025038379 | ISBN 9780764245978 paperback | ISBN 9780764246081 casebound | ISBN 9781493452484 ebook

Subjects: LCGFT: Fiction | Christian fiction | Thrillers (Fiction) | Romance fiction | Novellas

Classification: LCC PS3605.A79 W48 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025038379>

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Cover design by Faceout Studio, Addie Lutzko

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, BooksAndSuch.com.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BURIED IN SHADOWS

DANI PETTREY

To Jess

Here's to our first project together!
I had the most fun working on the story with you.

Please Join Us for the Marriage of

*Izzy Brunswick
& Talbot Wentworth*

— WEDDING PARTY —

Bridesmaids

Cassandra Parker, *friend of the bride*

Mia Beckett, *friend of the bride*

Amy Bishop, *friend of the bride*

Nat Wentworth, *cousin of the groom*

Penelope Wentworth, *cousin of the groom*

Savannah Brunswick, *cousin of the bride*

Kendra Kade, *friend of the bride*

Groomsmen

Joel Brunswick, *brother of the bride*

Jayce Brunswick, *brother of the bride*

Scott Brunswick, *cousin of the bride*

Lyle Wentworth, *cousin of the groom*

Brady Chase, *friend of the groom*

Heath Dalton, *friend of the groom*

Devon Hamilton, *friend of the groom*

PROLOGUE

HER BREATH BURSTING in her lungs, Cassie Parker readied to take a step, her bare foot hovering over the wooden floorboard. *Please, don't creak.*

She placed her foot on the floor, praying for silence.

Creak.

She closed her eyes, cold wafting over her trembling limbs. She held still. So still. Her lungs burned. She released her held breath and took another shallow inhale.

Creak. The sound echoed from the front of the house.

No.

Creak.

Closer this time—heading toward her.

She'd done what he'd said. Broke it off with Joel. Left the love of her life standing at the altar, so why was he back after a year of silence, instead of keeping his end of the bargain to leave her be? What had she done? Not seen Joel. She loved him too much to risk his life at a psycho's hands.

Creak.

She stiffened. Soon she'd feel his breath on the back of her neck, smell his musky cologne.

The moon slipped from the cloud cover, shining down to the courtyard in the center of her home, illuminating him. Faceless, but very, very real—a knife in hand.

Run, you idiot. Run!

Breaking into a sprint, she dashed for the front door.

Creak. Creak. Creak. Footsteps clapped behind her.

Just keep going. Keep going.

Reaching the door, she fumbled with the chain, finally dropping it against the metal door with a clang.

Hands soaked with a cold sweat, she struggled to grasp the dead bolt.

Please. Please. Please.

He was nearly upon her.

She scrambled to get the dead bolt unlocked, then opened the door to find him standing there.

Cassie bolted upright in bed, sweat-drenched and lungs burning. Her gaze flashed to her bedroom door. Still locked with the bar across it.

Windows. She darted a glance at each. All down. The extra locks she'd installed holding.

Struggling for a solid breath, she got to her feet, the floor frigid beneath them.

Reaching in her nightstand, she retrieved her SIG, clasping the gun in her left hand.

You're overreacting. It's been a year. He's not here.

Make sure, a voice whispered on the howling wind.

She grasped the bar and, taking a deep breath, lifted it up and opened the door to darkness. Grabbing the flashlight she'd positioned on her dresser, she clicked it on and stepped into the hallway.

Sweeping the house in fear he'd be hiding around the next corner, she moved in a swift manner, following the pattern she used every night to clear her home before bed. Every night and every time she returned to her home.

It'd be a year without a note. Without any sign of him, but he terrorized her still.

When she reached the kitchen, her rigid muscles eased some, her breath less shallow.

Thank you, Lord.

She leaned back against the kitchen counter, her gaze falling to her open cookbook in its wooden stand on the granite countertop.

She lifted her flashlight, centering on the book.

Horror coursed through her at the sight of the linen envelope.

He was back.

ONE

■ JANUARY 30

CASSIE APPROACHED the stunning Silver Pines ski village the following day, her insides still tingling from the letter's reminder to stay away from Joel. After a year, she'd hoped she was finally free, though his last letter before disappearing warned of what would happen if she reunited with Sheriff Joel Brunswick, and she'd refused to risk Joel's life—no matter how much it destroyed hers.

Now he was back. Because she was seeing Joel this weekend? They were hours away from her home at the Cedar Loft ski lodge in Silver Pines, Colorado, so how did he know where she was?

Her skin crawled. Had he gone through her things? Seen the invitation to the four-day wedding party weekend for her bestie in the trash? She'd learned not to keep personal information lying around. Her planner stayed on her phone, and her phone stayed on her. But somehow, he knew. But how?

Taking a stiff inhale, the winter chill burning her lungs, she pushed those thoughts away as she passed by the Silver Pines Resort, continued through the quaint ski village all the way to the opposite end, and pulled into Cedar Loft Resort's parking lot. She prayed the four-hour drive to the Colorado destination was enough to leave him behind, but fear whispered otherwise.

She grabbed her gear, checked in at the lodge, then walked

through the upper part of the idyllic ski village to find her cabin. Cedar Loft consisted of the beautiful lodge—only a few years old—and outer cabins only reachable on foot—snow shoes optional.

She rested her mittened hand on the outer doorknob of her cabin. He couldn't be here. She exhaled. Yes. He could, but . . .

Please don't let him be here. No more letters. Let me be free.

At least for the long weekend, culminating in Iz wedding Talbot. She didn't want her horror ruining another Brunswick wedding, and more importantly, ruining the wedding of someone she loved so dearly—*again*.

She opened the door and pulled her gun from her waist holster. Entering, she held her breath. She hated herself for letting him bring her to this level—scared, trepidatious . . . borderline paranoid. But he had. She couldn't shake the sensation of always being watched, of the prickly fear creeping up her neck that he'd been in her place, touched her things . . .

"Stop it! He's not here. You are fine!" Maybe if she repeated it enough, she'd believe it. Doubtful, but worth a shot.

Clearing the main room, she smiled at finding a note from her bestie—thankfully, no envelope with her name scrawled in black across it or she'd have freaked. *His* always came in expensive linen envelopes. How something so beautiful could bring such pain she didn't know.

She cleared the rest of the cabin and came back to read Izzy's note.

Welcome to the Silver Pines ski village! Our first excursion begins at one p.m.

Meet on Cedar Loft's main lodge's porch at ten till.

Dress in snowboarding gear.

We're going to have a blast!

Izzy & Talbot

A deep swell of dread swirled through her. Not for seeing her stalker but for seeing Joel. It'd been a year, almost to the day—the perfect day they'd spent before their wedding.

Tears burned her eyes, dropping on the note and smearing the ink.

He'd ruined her life. Taken away the man she had loved—loved still.

Even after her move from Jeopardy Falls to Taos, all the precautions and sacrifices, he'd still returned.

Please, Lord, I beg you, let me be free. I don't know what else to do.

Sheriff Gonzales, of the Taos sheriff department, didn't know what else to do. Given it'd been a year without contact from her stalker, he'd set the case on the back burner.

Joel worked the case to the bones in Jeopardy Falls, then he joined forces with Sheriff Gonzales after she moved, but the case still refused to be solved despite their best efforts.

Her fists tightened, the note crumpling inside her left hand, and she forced herself to take a deep breath.

He's not here. He's back there. She exhaled and sank down in the oversized leather chair, resting her head in her hands.

Please help me not ruin Izzy's wedding like I ruined her brother's. And guide me to the right path when I return home.

She'd alerted the sheriff before she left and prayed he was already making progress. Glancing at her watch, she had a half hour until the meet-up.

Changing into her snowboarding gear, she stepped out into the crisp air. Not knowing which cabin Iz was in and not wanting to go knocking on all of them, she set out for the lodge and the coffee shop she'd spotted at the base of the trails. There was always time for coffee.

Snow crunched beneath her boots as she huffed her way to the edge of the small forest separating the cabins from the main lodge.

The snow gave way under the cover of evergreens. Only brown needles and pinecones littered the ground.

Coming out on the other side of the woods, she spotted the exterior ordering window of the Brew Through.

Five minutes in line and another few placing her order later, she studied the gorgeous Cedar Loft lodge, the Silver Pines lodge far in the distance, and the quaint, tranquil ski village surrounding her. A beautiful place to be wed, especially since Iz and her brothers had grown up on this mountain. Their dad's best friend owned the Cedar Loft, and Cassie had heard all kinds of stories about their childhood antics at the original lodge, which apparently remained standing, but she had never been to the ski village herself.

"Your order, love," the lady at the Brew Through shop said, leaning out the sliding window to hand her the hot cup of steaming cocoa with two shots of espresso. The scent of sweet marshmallows, dark chocolate, and rich espresso carried on the blustering wind.

"Sorry. Daydreaming," Cassie said, taking the cup.

"We all do it, darling. Enjoy your drink." She slid the window closed.

Cassie stepped out of the way for the growing line of customers, most with skis on their feet or snowboards tucked under their arms. Fresh snow filled the air, twisting in mini cyclones. She made it around to the front porch, where she found Iz and Talbot waiting—alone.

"There you are," Iz said. "I was about to track you down."

"Am I late?" Cassie glanced at her watch, then gave a sheepish smile. "Sorry. The coffee line must have taken longer than I anticipated."

"It's okay. You made it." She wrapped her arm around Cassie's shoulders, leading her around the corner and down the small slope to two helicopters waiting for the wedding party. A regular day of snowboarding would've been too dull for one of Izzy's adventures.

She looked questioningly at her bestie.

“Heli-skiing.” Talbot smiled. “You’re in our copter.” He pointed to the nearest one as the other lifted off.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Helicopter blades sliced through the air.

Trepidation shot through her. While she enjoyed heli-skiing, and carving fresh powder was addictive, the ride there skyrocketed her anxiety.

Iz reached over and squeezed her hand. “It’ll be okay, I promise. We’re just taking it to the west side of the mountain.”

“The untouched side.” Talbot stepped back and gestured for them to go with a sweep of his hand. “After you, ladies.”

Iz climbed in first, and Cassie followed.

Talbot, Izzy, and Brady sat rear facing. Heath, who worked with Cassie and Devon at the ME office, sat near the open bay door, forward facing. Her two coworkers had grown tight with Talbot over the past couple of years at all the group barbeques and outings, and now they were a close part of the gang. She scanned the seats again. Jayce and Mia had their seats, leaving the only empty one next to . . .

Joel.

Had it really been a year since she’d seen him? It seemed like yesterday, or at least her feelings were the same as back then. Despite what Izzy claimed, he couldn’t possibly still hold feelings for her.

His gaze met hers, and he nodded. “Cassandra.” His gaze pierced to her marrow.

Cassandra? He hadn’t called her that in years. Not since they’d first met when Iz brought her home to hang out in junior high. Cassie. For one wonderful and frightening year, she’d been *his* Cassie. But not anymore.

She settled in her seat, and before she had her headset in place, the copter lifted off, rising in the air. She longed to reach for Joel’s hand as she had so many times before. Instead, she balled her hands in her lap.

Joel’s gaze bounced over them, then he directed his attention

forward. She could practically feel the warmth of his body, his thigh inadvertently brushing hers as they hit turbulence, but he kept his focus on the windshield.

She, on the other hand, couldn't keep herself from staring. It'd been a year since she'd seen his strong shoulders, his chiseled arms visible under his pushed-up sleeves, the hunter green Henley shirt bringing out the green undertones in his blue eyes. His jacket lay across his lap.

His gaze flashed to her. She glanced down but not fast enough. He'd caught her staring. Heat rushed to her cheeks. She braved a glance back up, meeting his gaze head on.

Deep emotion filled his eyes.

But which emotion?

TWO

"ALL RIGHT, FOLKS. Here you go," the pilot said, hovering just over the snow.

Joel leaned forward, taking in the pristine powder beyond Heath's shoulders. "Where's the other copter?" he asked.

"We do two separate areas," the pilot said, "but don't worry, they're just on a parallel run on the other side of that thin tree line. You'll all end up at the same place, or they can cross over."

The excitement of untouched slopes raced adrenaline through Joel's limbs—new slopes he'd never been on. He bounced his knee, raring to go, but everyone had climbed up to the door before him, save Cassie.

His chest squeezed. *Cassie*. He swallowed, aching for a distraction.

Any distraction, Lord.

"Have a blast," the pilot hollered over the thwacking blades. "Be at our pickup point by four, or you'll be tempting the blizzard blowing in tonight."

"Roger that," Heath, the first jumper, said, followed by Iz, Talbot, and Talbot's extreme sports buddy, Brady, then Jayce and Mia, leaving Cassie and Joel alone.

"After you," he gestured for her to go. He'd bring up the rear.

“Thanks.” A soft smile graced her lips. One that sliced right through him. How could he still love her after she’d left him with zero compassion?

She jumped, and shoving the consternation from his thoughts, he followed, hitting the powder, then rocking his snowboard and digging in sideways to a stop beside Cassie, who’d done the same based on her position.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. No. I just wanted to say how sorry I am.”

He arched a brow. “For?” He knew darn well what for, but he wanted to hear it. Wanted to know why. The question had plagued him for three hundred sixty-seven days.

She dropped her gaze, then met his. “For leaving you at the altar with no word.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“I can’t explain.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

She bit her lip—pink lips he used to kiss. Lips he’d thought he’d kiss forever.

“Won’t, but there’s a reason why.”

“And that is?”

She shook her head.

“Gotcha. I’m not worth an explanation.” He pushed off without looking back, praying the brisk wind would slap his steadfast feelings for Cassie out of his mind as he gained ground on the first group, now less than a hundred yards ahead.

Heat seared my limbs, and I fought the urge to move. They’d talked. The two of them *alone*. What had she said to Joel? Told him why she’d left him? Told him she still loved him?

Biting my lip—clearly too hard as blood slipped across my tongue. I spit it out. Just as I’d spit them out.

Them. There was no *them*. Didn't they understand that by now?

Gripping the binoculars, I tracked them down the slopes.

They needed to understand they'd *never* be together.

Messages hadn't worked.

It was time for decisive action.

THREE

SNOW FLEW in Cassie's wake as she blazed a fresh trail, joy alight in her. This was freedom. If only she could find it in her own life. But she pushed that aside and soaked up the peace being in nature always brought. Spending it with the man she still loved brimmed her happiness over. But she was simply fooling herself. Iz claimed he still loved her, too, but how could he after what she'd done? Even if she'd done it for the right reasons. Regardless, after a year of not seeing him, just having him near warmed her immeasurably more than the physical exertion heating her limbs.

Until the realization smacked her hard that even if he somehow managed to forgive her and, against all odds, still loved her, she couldn't be with him. *He* would see to that. And she loved Joel too much to endanger his life.

Anger pulsed heat through her limbs. A stark contrast to the frigid air engulfing her. She had to find a way to end this. End *his* control over her.

A deep and guttural roar rent the air, shaking the ground with violent energy.

Turning, she froze in fear. A volcano of white exploded, and a giant wall of white rushed at her.

"Cassie," Joel said, his mouth wide in a holler, but the sound dropped to a whisper before it reached her under the mountain's furious snarl. "Avalanche. Brace for impact."

His words hit a flash of a second before a wave of white and debris lashed over her, tumbling her in its ferocity.

Breathe. Take a deep breath and hold it.

She tried, but snow surrounded her, pummeling her along its jagged path.

Managing to get her arm crossed over her mouth, she fought everything trying to rip it away. “*Like you’re going to sneeze. Keep it there.*” Joel’s words during their avalanche training before they started heli-skiing a few years ago raced through her dizzied mind.

Beacon. She prayed her beacon was on because she was under the fury—an inconceivable force rolling over her, ripping at her limbs, and tossing her like a rag doll.

White enveloped her. Flashes of light followed by deep, entrenched darkness.

Please, Lord. Let me survive. Please don’t leave me.

Not in the vacuum of white.

Roaring beat against her eardrums.

Thud.

Pain ricocheted through her body as she collided into something hard and unrelenting. A tremendous weight rushed over her, consuming her. She fought to suck in a gulp of air, but it was too late. She was encased in its icy grip.

Pressure squeezed all the air from her lungs, suffocating her in darkness as the avalanche roared overhead—the sound almost deafening.

I’m going to die.

Hot tears mixed with the cold surrounding her.

I never got to tell him. I don’t want to die without telling him.

Please.

Trust me, Cassie, the Lord’s voice whispered over the turmoil.

Snow pressed at her lips, trying to force its way in. She clamped her jaw, hoping the pressure would stop.

Be still.

That was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to fight,

but as she embraced it, her flustered mind began to clear from the encroaching panic.

Backpack.

She pulled the string to inflate it, praying it would pop her to the surface, or at the very least, create a bigger air pocket around her. But nada. No balloon. No popping pocket of air. *Nothing.*

She tugged harder.

Nothing again.

Panic swelled, her body shaking from the deepest fear she'd ever experienced as cold seeped through her, the pressure unrelenting to the point of snapping her like a twig.

I'm going to die.

Buried in white.

Never found.

FOUR

JOEL CLUTCHED the thick tree trunk for sweet mercy, his head pressed against the rough, scaling bark. A cascade of white roared down the mountain—its force lifting his legs up behind him like they didn't weight a thing. Locking his arms tighter around the tree, he held on hard—fearing they'd break under the amassing pressure.

Please help me to hang on.

His life literally depended on his slipping grasp. His legs flung like a rag doll behind him.

Give me the strength I don't possess. I need Your strength.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

The words from Psalms broke through his panicked brain but didn't douse his frenzied concern for Cassie. She'd been right in the avalanche's path—nowhere near the tree line. While he hadn't physically seen her go under, he dreaded the worst. Being trapped in the undertow, pushed and dragged in its furious path, scraping the bottom of the earth. So much like a fierce ocean wave stealing your breath. *Breath*. He hoped if Cassie was dragged under that she'd gotten one strong breath before the snow closed in around her.

Please, Lord, let her be alive. Please don't tear her away from me again.

The roaring freight train of snow whooshed over him at lightning speed—the noise and pressure deafening.

Would it ever end?

What seemed an eternity later, it finally settled. The thick wave of rushing snow stilled, the mountain eerily silent. No sound of birds or voices or wind. Just desperate silence.

Cassie.

He moved, or attempted to move, but the packed snow—so high it nearly covered his head—held him fast to the tree. He wriggled, trying to yank his arms free, but no movement. He needed to be shoveled out.

Unable to shift his head more than an inch, he glanced out of his peripheral vision, taking in the devastation—rocks, debris, and mountains of snow.

The wind smacked his cheeks. Cyclones of snow swirled along the surface—the sky a furious charcoal.

Don't let the blizzard loose. That's all they'd need.

Please. Not until everyone is safe.

His prayer wasn't answered as fresh piles of snow broke from the clouds, mixed with pelting ice.

"Joel! Joel!" Izzy's called, her voice high-pitched, frantic.

Thank you, Lord. His sister was alive. There was one relief. He ached for more.

"Here!" he called, blinking his snow-caked lashes. His sunglasses must have torn off in the avalanche's wake.

He spotted Iz and Talbot in his peripheral vision.

They climbed up through the thigh-high snow, plowing for him.

"Oh, thank goodness," Iz said, reaching him and resting a hand on the tip-top of his shoulder—barely an inch above the packed snow line. Talbot approached seconds later.

"You okay, man?" he asked.

"I could use a shovel out." And fast.

"Of course, dude." Talbot pulled his avalanche shovel from his pack, unfolded the handle, and locked it in place. Iz did the same.

Soon he was free, but his arms and hands were numb. He shook them out, and they flopped about, unfeeling.

“How is everybody? How is Cassie?” *Please say she made it out of the furious path of destruction.*

Iz bit her bottom lip.

He narrowed his eyes. “What?” he asked, but he already knew the answer.

She sniffed. “Everyone is fine, thankfully, except—”

“Cassie,” he breathed.

Iz nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

“We’ll find her,” Talbot said, his voice calm and firm with conviction.

Would he be so level if it were Iz in Cassie’s place? But calm was good in at least one of them. Talbot would think clearly, and that’s what they needed. But Joel was far from that level. Panic rushed hot adrenaline through his frozen hands, bringing them back to life with excruciating pain as blood once again began to flow.

Not wasting a second, he broke into a run for the weathered-looking group gathered in a circle. “Did any of you see Cassie go under the avalanche?” Negative answers sounded. He turned back toward the slope, scanning the snow and debris-strewn earth, anxiety pricking at his soul as he shouted her name again, waiting, pleading with God for her to answer.

“But she was about a hundred yards from me when it hit,” Devon said.

“Me too,” Mia said. “Maybe less.”

It was something. “And where were you two in relation to her? It might help pin her location.”

“Almost a hundred yards downhill,” Devon said.

“I was a bit lower,” Mia said. “I turned and saw Cassie flying off the outcropping, and then it started.”

“Okay,” Joel said, moving before he finished his question. “So about seventy yards up the slope from here?” He’d only been fifty

yards away from her, but the tree he'd clung to blocked his view of everything but brown bark and a wall of snow.

"Yep," Devon said, and Mia confirmed the distance.

Joel broke into a flat-out run uphill, tumbling forward with his flailing momentum. He landed on his knees, cold creeping into his bones. Righting himself, he continued the climb—his legs still struggling to wake up—to work right. Could anything be more infuriating? Time was of the essence and his body was taking its sweet time coming back to life.

"Cassie," he bellowed, progressing through high snow drifts—his steps deliberate, his legs shaking.

Other voices chimed in, calling Cassie's name—the crew spreading out and upward.

"We have a starting point," Izzy hollered.

He halted and turned to face her. "We do?" Hope lanced his soul.

"Yes, but we have to keep in mind how far the avalanche may have carried her," Iz said.

"I know." The thudding of his racing heart whooshed through his ears, making everyone's voices sound distant and echoed.

Please let me find her alive.

He couldn't imagine a world without Cassie, even if she was never to be his.

The thought of losing Cassie to the avalanche reverberated through his distressed mind.

"Joel." Iz tugged his elbow.

"What?" he snapped. "Sorry."

She shook it off. "Jayce made up a search grid by sections."

He swept his gaze over the crew systematically forming into a grid formation, all beginning to search their sector for Cassie with their lancing probes.

"What about her beacon?" What was wrong with him? He should have thought of that first. "Her balloon?" Why hadn't she pulled it? Was she unconscious?

Please, Lord, let her be awake.

He hated the thought of her awake and terrified under the snow, but she'd have an air hole if she was conscious.

"I'm getting no signal from her," Talbot said.

Had the weight of the avalanche crushed it? Was her balloon malfunctioning? It didn't matter why both weren't working. Just that they weren't.

He grabbed his lancing probe from his pack. "Where's my grid?"

Talbot walked it out for him.

He swallowed, his throat raw. Snow drove sideways lashing Joel in the face, the encroaching blizzard picking up speed. Only a short window existed to locate Cassie before she'd suffocated under the snow. An air pocket only lasted so long, and with fresh snow piling on . . .

He tightened his jaw, unwilling to go there. They'd find her. He wouldn't stop until they did.

Twenty minutes later, he moved to the next unsearched grid, his arms heated and trembling, his steps staggering, his legs listless.

Please, Father, let this grid be the one. "Please," he breathed. The ferocious blizzard growled in the oncoming night, swallowing the light.

A thousand different scenarios raced through his mind. He worked from the bottom left edge of the grid. Across the delineated space, his heart sinking with each empty quadrant. Their chance of finding Cassie—of her surviving until they found her . . . Time was swallowed in an endless void.