**Three**

****

**Horror in North Litchfield**

**D**espite its close proximity to both the beach and Highway 17, a road which closely ran along its western edge, the neighborhood, on most occasions, was a quiet and peaceful place to live and visit. Like other nearby beachfront neighborhoods, it had its share of noise and traffic, but those were generally during the summer months when schools were closed and vacationers were in town visiting. The only other time of the year when the neighborhood got somewhat out-of-control crazy was when parents living in the area dropped their kids off so they could safely run from house to house in their Trick-or-Treat costumes without having to worry about speeding traffic. But for the rest of the year, this was the perfect neighborhood to live in if you liked a peaceful place to live.

But, on this Friday afternoon, the normally tranquil neighborhood was turned upside down by the sirens of responding police cruisers, fire trucks, and ambulances as they raced from several different directions to the emergency that now existed on Lakeshore Drive. Further away, the sirens of additional fire trucks could be heard as they responded to the mutual aid call that had been put out by the Midway Fire Department’s on-scene commander.

Within the first fifteen minutes of fighting the fire, three firefighters had partially made their way into the burning home as they dragged a one and three-quarter inch attack hose through one of two doors on the home’s south side. Supporting each other’s movements as they moved a few more steps into the fully engaged kitchen, they found the first victim. Quickly, the lieutenant in charge of the three-man team radioed for medical assistance as two other firefighters half-dragged and half-carried the badly burnt lifeless body of a young adult male out of the home to where they placed him down on the lawn of the side yard. Despite several moments of valiant CPR efforts by EMS and fire personnel, it was soon apparent that he was dead. As others had worked to save him, a GCSD deputy sheriff quickly saw that while the victim had been badly burned around his legs and lower torso, he had not died from the fire or from smoke inhalation. Looking closer at the injury he saw to the back of the victim’s head, he quickly realized what the cause of death had been. But, in the chaos of the moment, with his help needed elsewhere as the fire continued to eat away at the downstairs living area, the deputy’s observation went unreported for the time being.

As others placed the first victim on a wooden stretcher to carry him further away from the active fire, another team of firefighters were being supported by other deputies near the home’s front door. With the use of a halogen tool, and from several strong kicks, they forced open the locked door. Barely making their way inside, they found their second victim on the floor of the front foyer. Unlike their first victim, this male’s body had not sustained nearly as much damage from the fire. But like their other victim, it was easy to see this victim had also sustained a significant injury to the back of his head. As fire personnel kept the flames away from them, two deputies dragged the second victim out of the home and placed him down on the front lawn. Soon his body was carried to the side yard of the residence where it was placed down next to the first victim. Both bodies were soon covered by a single white sheet.

With the fire again under control, and with fire personnel working to make sure that all of the hot spots were sprayed with gallons and gallons of water so they did not flare up again, sheriff’s deputies began to take a closer look at the head injuries the two victims had sustained. It was quickly apparent these were not the type of injuries normally associated with a house fire.

Concerned by what he was seeing, and from what his nineteen years of experience was telling him, Sergeant Edward Kindle, the GCSD dayshift patrol supervisor, began barking orders to the six deputies who were present. In a matter of minutes, the immediate area around the scene was taped off with yellow plastic crime scene tape. The wording written on the yellow tape, one seen far too often on news reports and on cop shows, simply read CRIME SCENE – DO NOT ENTER. As this was being done, two of Kindle’s deputies began writing down the license plate numbers of all the vehicles parked in the immediate area. Another began using a cheap, but effective disposable camera to record what the exterior scene looked like. Soon finished with those tasks, the deputies then began writing down the names of everyone who lined the street watching the events of the afternoon unfold. Those were among several actions that Kindle did right this busy afternoon after learning and seeing the injuries sustained by the first two victims. Through no fault of his, they were actions that were initiated five minutes too late.

Raised barely four miles from the crime scene, Kindle, a big man in stature who looked and sounded as most Northerners expected a Southern law enforcement officer to look and sound, did one more thing correctly that afternoon. After formally notifying Georgetown County Sheriff Leroy William Renda of what had been found at the scene, he called Captain Bobby Ray Jenkins.

“Hello?”

“Bobby Ray, it’s Kindle. How ya feelin’, buddy? That back surgery go as well as ya hoped it would?”

Laid out in bed from his recent surgery, Bobby Ray Jenkins, the commander of the Georgetown County Sheriff’s Departments Major Case Squad, smiled at the sound of his friend’s voice. Quickly he muted the sound of his television so he could hear what Kindle had to say. Unaware of what was going on that afternoon; Bobby Ray had been watching a documentary about Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg on the History Channel.

“I’m alive, Big Ed, but I’m afraid I’m not going to be mowing the lawn or swinging the golf sticks any time soon. I’m still hurting a bit, but I’m getting there slowly. Going back to see the doctor on Monday for my first follow-up. Not sure why that’s happening though. Guess he must have a house payment coming up on one of his villas or something like that.”

Bobby Ray’s joke made Kindle laugh for a brief moment. Like most people, Kindle included, Bobby Ray believed that a large number of follow-up visits to doctors’ offices after surgical procedures were a giant waste of time and money.

After a few more moments of small talk, Kindle soon got to the reason why he had called his friend. “Bobby Ray, I thought you might want to know what’s going on here this afternoon seeing that it’s going to keep your folks busy for some time. You got the local news on by chance?”

Intrigued by what Kindle had just asked him, Bobby Ray’s eyebrows raised as he used his remote to bring up one of the Myrtle Beach television stations. As he did, he listened carefully for several minutes to what Kindle was telling him about the investigation that had just gotten underway. Listening to the facts and details being presented to him, as well as watching what now filled the screen of his television, Bobby Ray only interrupted on two occasions to briefly ask for clarifications about the conditions of the two bodies that had been found. Later, when Kindle finished, he peppered the sergeant with several other questions.

“Ed, you sure there’s only two victims?” Bobby Ray asked as he began formulating his next question in his head.

“Nope, not sure about anything right now. That’s why I’m calling you. My gut is telling me this is gonna get worse before it gets better. Once we start searching what’s left of the first floor we may find another body or two in there. The FD is still working inside; too early for us to get in there yet.” Kindle said as he stood sweating profusely in the late afternoon sun.

“Audrey there yet?” Bobby Ray asked.

Kindle took a moment to look around as he stood outside of his cruiser to see if Lt. Audrey Small, the deputy commander of the Major Case Squad, had arrived. “Not that I can see, Bobby Ray. I heard her answer Dispatch when they called her about this, and I heard her tell them she was en route, but I haven’t seen her arrive as yet. Want me to have her call you when she does?”

“Yeah, do that, Ed. Tell her that I want to talk with her before she gets started doing anything. You call in for any more help on this yet?”

“If she doesn’t get here soon that’s just what I’m planning on doing, but I thought I’d wait a few more minutes to see if she shows up. With you laid up, it’s her responsibility to call out the truck and the rest of your folks. Figured I wouldn’t step on her toes too early, if you know what I mean. I’ve got enough other bullshit to do with keeping traffic and the media far enough away from here so we can work without being under a damn microscope.” Kindle paused for a moment to watch two late arriving EMTs rush by. “Bobby Ray, no disrespect intended because I like that girl, but with you laid up like you are, and with this giant mess we’ve got on our hands and her being fairly new to the murder game, is she gonna be able to handle all of this on her own? Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I know a lot of us would feel a whole lot better if your sorry-ass was down here running the show.”

Bobby Ray understood Kindle’s concern, but he quickly dismissed it in a joking manner. “Ed, relax. Audrey is good at what she does. She’s just not as good at it as you and I are. We’re in good hands for now, don’t worry.”

His joke was meant to give Kindle some confidence in Small’s ability to manage a scene of this magnitude, but the veteran cop could not help playing two of Bobby Ray’s words over in his head.

“For now? What’s that mean?” Kindle asked curiously.

“She’s out of here in ten or eleven days. She’s getting married and then she’s headed to Hawaii on her honeymoon for two weeks. She and her husband are going to visit several of the islands there. I should be able to get back to work by the time she leaves. In the meantime, just give her whatever help you can and everything will be fine.”

Bobby Ray’s explanation brought another wave of concern to Kindle. “Yeah, but what if you aren’t back to work by then. Who’s gonna run the show then?”

Before Bobby Ray could answer, Kindle’s portable radio brought him the news that another male victim had been found inside the house. This victim, nearly burnt beyond recognition, had been found lying on the living room floor under a badly burnt couch.

“Bobby Ray, did you hear what I was just told on the radio?” Kindle sadly asked.

“Got part of it. Sounds like you now have three victims, is that correct? Did they say if there was any kind of head wound found on the third victim?”

Bobby Ray could not see Kindle shaking his head at the news his radio had just brought him. “They didn’t say, Bobby Ray. What they did tell me was that they found the third victim with some kind of rope tied around his ankles and wrists. It sounds like he was intentionally tied up for some reason just before the fire started.”

“Damn!”

It was the only word Bobby Ray uttered in response to the latest news he had been given. After quickly processing his thoughts, the veteran investigator finally spoke again. “Make sure Audrey calls me as soon as she gets there. Be there with her when she does. In the meantime, I’ll give the sheriff a call.”

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Over the next fifteen minutes, Bobby Ray made, and took, several phone calls. Two of those he took were amongst the most important ones he fielded that day as they began to give direction to the labor intensive investigation that was just getting underway. The first of those two calls was one he took from Small. It updated him on a few more details regarding the fire and on the three bodies that had been found.

“Audrey, is the scene ours yet, or is the FD still in control of it?” Bobby Ray asked the person he had personally selected to be second-in-command of the Major Case Squad.

“It’s ours now. I just spoke with Chief Sullivan. I’ve got it noted that he turned it over to us at 1914 hours. He’s going to have his fire marshal work closely with us on the cause and origin of the fire, but the scene is ours to start processing. Chief Sullivan has reached out to SLED for some additional help on determining the cause of the fire as well. The FD hasn’t detected any signs of an accelerant being used, but we’ll know more about that tomorrow. SLED’s also on stand-by for any additional help we may need, but for now until I get up to speed with everything that’s happened here I’m not asking them for help. If we need it, I’ll speak to you first before making that call. That sound OK with you?”

“That’s fine. Listen, you know what needs to be done. Start handing out the assignments to our folks as you see fit. Just make sure they get the scene videotaped and thoroughly photographed from every possible angle before you start ripping it apart. Have a copy of the tape and a set of photos run over to me at the house sometime this evening so I can take a look at the mess that’s confronting you.”

Small listened attentively as her boss gave her the marching orders on the obvious tasks he wanted done. Loyal to Bobby Ray for the support he had shown her in selecting her as his deputy commander, Small knew it was killing her boss not to be at the scene. This was just the kind of scene Bobby Ray excelled at, the very same kind which had caused him to be held in such high regard in the South Carolina law enforcement community. But while she heard every word he said to her, what she heard next was why she had so much personal respect for him.

“Audrey, I’m not going to be much help to y’all over the next few days, so this is your scene to work. You know what to do, so go do it. You call me if you need me, and while I may be calling you with some suggestions, this is your investigation. Go solve it for us. If anyone, including the sheriff, gives you any trouble, you call me and I’ll make that trouble go away. Hear me?”

“Yes, sir. Thanks!” Small said with a touch of appreciation in her voice.

Despite being pleased by what Bobby Ray had told her, Small was already doubting her ability to supervise a case of this magnitude. While she had always performed well since joining the Major Case Squad, and had learned a great deal about how to handle such complex investigations, she knew her boss had always been there to have the final say in how they would be worked. As she tried to thank Bobby Ray for the support he was showing her, she fumbled trying to find the right words to express.

As Bobby Ray listened to what Small was trying to tell him, he also heard the words she did not say. Those unspoken words quickly told him the one thing he had hoped not to hear. They were ones which told him his deputy commander needed help. In the back of his mind, he distinctly heard her voice telling him one simple message.

*“Please send me help. I cannot do this alone.”*

Bobby Ray’s next call was to Sheriff Renda. It was one he was forced to make so the integrity of the investigation was there from the beginning. While the recommendation he was about to make was done so the investigation would get started off on the right foot, it was one he also made out of concern for at least three other people. He knew that each of the victims deserved their murders to be thoroughly and competently investigated. They also deserved to have someone running the investigation who knew what they were doing. With regrets of having to do so, his fingers placed the call to Renda’s cell phone.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

The question was, would that person be willing to get back into the game one more time?