

Ice Flow

By William P. Lazarus

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Chapter One

The sound of heavy boots on the porch followed by the harsh crack of wood against ice made Ambrose Curtain almost jump from his easy chair by the hearth as if the devil himself had encamped before his front door. The small, black cat curled by the fire was less animated. It simply yawned, stretched and rolled into a small ball. Aunt Rose, knitting furiously, looked up with her narrow smile and then quickly returned to her yarn.

Curtain shivered. He could not be so blasé, not with all that was happening. Who was visiting him? Why? He had a sickening feeling in his ample stomach. Was his business ending so quickly? He knew it would eventually unless he could come up with some financial solution or received divine intervention. Neither option had happened yet. Still, he was not ready for the inevitable disaster. He felt dizzy as his head reeled with questions. Why now? Why at night? Why at home? Maybe he was mistaken. Maybe if he remained very quiet, whatever or whoever had disturbed the early evening silence would go away. Barely able to breathe, he forced himself to sit and to pretend that nothing was amiss or afoot in the Massachusetts darkness.

His mind, however, continued to barrage him with the truth. This had to be it. No one in Revere River had ever visited him at night before. Few, if any, residents ventured into the cold nights here ever. An early evening July avalanche the previous year had further guaranteed evening solitude as it swept down from the nearby peaks of the Berkshire Mountains and flattened two homes, three carriages and several people. No one knew for sure how many

people died in the resulting snowball, since no one talked to neighbors unless required by law or business.

Mayor Dickson Hurlbutt has suggested some kind of search party, but no one volunteered, not even when he threatened to run for office again. After all, as was noted by several people, no one else indicated any interest in the position except him. An ad for volunteers published in the *Revere River Daily*, the town's weekly newspaper, failed to draw any interest, although that was no surprise either. Editor Wally DeHugh publicly insisted that ads in his paper never sold anything. People just read it for the gossip anyway. Since no one wanted to say anything bad about the dead, DeHugh had no tattletales to publish about those entombed in large snowball. So, they remained unidentified and unsullied.

In the end, whatever bodies had vanished under the rolling snowball remained part of the large mound blocking the only road to Boston. It had never melted, even when Revere River's temperature rose in August to an oppressively balmy 36 degrees F. Its continued presence served as a constant reminder of the dangers of nocturnal visits and deterred all such efforts. Yet, as Curtain was acutely aware, someone was outside his front door, ominously waiting amid the cold and snow and darkness.

The silence was deadly. Curtain heard only the sound of Aunt Rose's clicking needles and limited movement upstairs as Molly, his daughter, performed some chore. Yet, even relying simply on quiet as a calling card, the individual on the porch made the loudest racket. Curtain finally stood, unable to delay any longer. Faith, he told himself, would help him endure.

His legs were shaking. He managed a weak smile at Aunt Rose. "The good Lord provides," he quoted. "Mathew 5:15."

"Matthew never went shopping in Revere River," Aunt Rose retorted without pausing amid her furious purls.

Curtain did not reply. He had learned patience, especially with Aunt Rose, who had brought lots of strange ideas with her from Providence, Rhode Island more than two years earlier. His father's wife's sister, she was forever criticizing life in this small community. He would have encouraged her to return to her home, but was well aware the single road now open from Revere River led only to neighboring Caucus, and no one wanted to go there unless absolutely necessary.

As Curtain stepped into the shadows behind the couch, he trembled. The minimal heat from the fireplace and the little oil lamp was effectively blocked by the ever-present chill that seeped through the cracks of this old, historic home. It had been built by Wingate Martin, a would-be 49er from Harrisburg, Penn., who had deserted his family in hopes of finding gold in California. He had taken plenty of clothing, the family's only musket, his aging dog and some dried meat, but had forgotten a compass.

With the sun in his eyes every morning and pushing him on at dusk, Martin had managed to stumble through New York and eventually staked a claim near the peak of the vacant Berkshire Mountains. Soon after, he realized why no one else was competing for whatever treasures lay hidden high above the tree line. For starters, the permafrost destroyed his pickaxe; for another, no game endured amid the cracks and crannies of this foreboding landscape.

Eventually, Martin chose to seek gold through other means. He created a small placard with a shaky hand and began to market Revere River, the new community with its lofty vistas, plentiful water (in frozen form), open acres and a sense of communal living. He happened to arrive in Boston during the burst of late 1840s transcendentalism, when such attributes seemed almost heavenly. Martin also had the foresight to focus his sales pitch on religious-minded individuals, ones who would feel guided by God's hand. As a result, an intrepid band of settlers bought the rights to the land from him and set off to their new abodes by a nonexistent river and named for an American patriot who never completed his poet-honored ride.

Martin had reduced costs by limiting his paperwork, having filed no forms with the state surveyor or land office. He also chose not to attend the first gathering in Revere River, but reportedly journeyed east on toward some new adventure toward the fabled California. Actually, he went to nearby Caucus. His crude map, however, served to guide his customers to this spot.

Industrious and convinced that the Lord had led them to this isolated environment to do His work, the new residents of Revere River arduously hauled wood up the slope and slowly built a community amid the endless snow, wind and ice. The city was shaped like a cross. The four spokes extended from the mandatory central green with focused intent: the top (or north) one led into a religious zone with two churches; to the left (west) was a residential neighborhood; to the right (east), a commercial area with a grocery store, two general stores and a diner; to the bottom (south), a public sector with City Hall, the courthouse, sheriff's office, stable, telegraph and the like.