

Sweet Creek Conclusion

Prologue

Wyoming restaurant owner, Gwen Lindstrom, and her companion, Jay Marker, take a late December vacation to Florence, Oregon, to visit his brother, Jeff. "Come visit and get away from the Wyoming winter," Jeff told them.

On a sight-seeing visit to scenic Sweet Creek Falls, Gwen and Jay find a man's body floating in the water. The man is Mark Purcell, a city commission member. The sheriff claims the death was an accident. Gwen is convinced Purcell was murdered.

When Jeff is hospitalized, Jay goes to Eugene to stay with him. That leaves Gwen with free time and a desire to find out what happened to Purcell. What she discovers is that the victim was suspicious about the financial dealings of the commission chair, Marty Hamilton, and accountant, Ginger Tiller.

Gwen befriends librarian, Mary Wayne, and Tony and Marcela Purcell, nephew and daughter of the victim. Before they can finish investigating what happened to Mark Purcell, Jay and Gwen have to return home to Wyoming. Then, COVID-19 begins its path across the country, and the investigation stalls. This short story concludes the investigation into Mark Purcell's murder.

"It doesn't look good," Jay told Gwen over dinner at her house a few weeks after they returned from Florence. "This Covid virus is transmitted easily and since it's new, we have no immunity. I've been talking with people I know both in the funeral business and medical examiners across the state. There's been a confirmed case in Wyoming, according to the Casper Health Department, and Colorado has had several." He turned worried eyes on Gwen. "Italy has quarantined and New York, too."

He took a gulp of wine and continued, "There's an exposure risk from tourists and others coming to Wyoming from those areas." He pointed his fork at Gwen, "including those travelers stopping for a bite to eat at the Rancher's Café."

Gwen had been about ready to fork up a piece of steak, but she set the utensil down and took a drink of wine. She was worried, too. They thoroughly cleaned the restaurant tables after each customer left, and tableware went through the dishwasher's hot water. Still...

She said, "Our business has nearly dried up. I'm torn. On one hand, we have regular customers who for various reasons depend on us for a hot meal. On the other, I don't want to expose our staff to this crap. They're telling us to wear masks, but have you tried to find any? It's impossible. Plus, it's getting dang hard to get disinfectant and we've been going through a lot of it."

"Think you should close down?" Jay asked her, the lines between his brows deepening with worry.

Gwen shrugged. "I just don't know. I have staff who depend on a paycheck."

The question about shutting down the Rancher's Cafe was answered the following week when the governor ordered the closure of schools and public places; Yellowstone followed suit. Restaurants could stay open if they sat customers outside, but March in Wyoming was too cold for Gwen to even consider that. She put a sign in the window announcing carry-out only and kept a few of the staff employed for food preparation. Then one of Gwen's waitresses came down sick. It wasn't Covid, but it was enough to scare Gwen. She took down the carry-out-only sign and replaced it with one announcing they were closed until further notice. At least that way, her staff could file for unemployment. She fought tears all the way home.

All the worry, and preparations for a shutdown, put concerns about the late Mark Purcell and the city of Florence out of her mind.

One mid-morning in early April, the phone rang. It was a long-distance number she didn't recognize.

"Gwen Lindstrom?" the male caller asked.

"This is Gwen," she said, ready to hang up on what she suspected was another sales call.

"It's Tony Purcell, Mark's nephew."

"Oh, hi, Tony."

"I'm calling with an update on the case."

Gwen held her breath.

"Of course, with COVID-19, everything has been put on hold, but between the medical examiner's report, the notes we found on Uncle Mark's computer, and a bulldog attorney Marcela hired, we caught the attention of the Oregon State Police."

"That's great news," Gwen said, feeling relief flood through her. "Did you tell them about Sheriff Coates threatening me, and the sheriff closing the case before Dr. Holden even completed the autopsy?"

"We sure did."

"Good. What's next?" she asked.

Over the phone, she heard Tony take a deep breath.

"With this freaking virus and the shutdown, everything is happening at a turtle's pace. The OSP is having one of its forensic accountants audit the commission's financial records and contracts. Marcela has authorized the exhumation of her dad's body so it can be examined more closely. Thankfully, he wasn't cremated."

Gwen's stomach roiled at the thought of digging up poor Mark's decaying body. "What are they looking for?"

"Evidence of a struggle. From what I understand, they might be able to spot bruising, cuts, and such."

"Poor Mark. Such a disruption from his final rest," Gwen said.

"Yeah, I try not to think about it too much. Anyway, I'll keep you posted. Mary Wayne will, too. If it wasn't for you two, we would have just accepted my uncle's death as a stupid accident."

Restaurants and other public places were still under a closed order. Gwen spent the time cleaning and organizing her offices, both at home and at the Rancher's Café.

There were senior and disabled people in the Dubois community who had depended on the restaurant for a hot meal: Vaughn Wilson, a widower; Angela Myers, a cancer survivor and her disabled daughter; and other frequent patrons. Gwen kept in contact with them. She and Max—the restaurant's co-owner and cook—prepared meals and picked up supplies for them.

Still, Gwen was bored and restless. Her sister-in-law, Sheriff April Erickson, called.

"I bet you're jumping out of your skin," said April.

"God, I am."

"I have a project if you want to help. It's a paying gig. Interested?"

"Hell, yes."

"Good, it's perfect for you," April lowered her voice. "I know how nosey you are."

"I prefer inquisitive, but go on," Gwen said smiling.

"I have a stack of cold case files. I need someone to read through them and write up a summary. And," she paused. "If you find a lead we didn't pursue or something that needs a second look, note it."

"Sounds interesting."

April continued. "Some cases date from before I became sheriff. Sheriff Myrick, as you know, wasn't as thorough as he should have been."

Just a few days later, Gwen was in the middle of one such case notebook when Mary Wayne called.

"I'm glad to hear from you," said Gwen.

They made small talk about Covid, the weather, and when both the restaurant and her library might reopen. Then Mary said. "I wanted to update you on the progress of Mark's case. Tony said he called you earlier. Thought I'd call with an update."

"I'm happy it's still ongoing," Gwen said.

"It's been slow but sure. The OSP is focusing on four people: Marty Hamilton and Ginger Tiller, of course. Sheriff Coates and Mayor Harry Dieter are the other two."

"Interesting. Not about Marty, Ginger, and the sheriff. But I am surprised about the mayor."

"They're all pals. You remember Jake Thielman telling us about seeing them out on a boat."

"I do. He said they were fishing."

"Can you hold on for a minute? Someone's at the door," said Mary.

While she waited, Gwen flipped a page in the case summary she was examining and made a note.

"I'm back. Sorry. My daughter's here but there's one last thing. They exhumed Mark's body and found bruising on the back of his upper arms as if someone grabbed him. They determined it happened near the time of death."

"That's interesting. It confirms my suspicions that it wasn't an accident."

"You have good instincts," Mary said. "I gotta run, but we'll keep you posted."

On May 15, the governor declared restaurants and bars could reopen with one caveat—employees had to wear masks. Gwen stayed busy doing what needed to be done to reopen the Rancher's Café. There were food and supplies to order, the staff had to be notified, and schedules made. It was enough to push questions about the progress of Purcell's murder investigation to the far reaches of her mind.

On Tuesday morning, May 19, and with a big grin on her face, Gwen turned on the lights and flipped the sign on the restaurant door to show they were open.

"Oh, geez," Lacey, the morning waitress, said as she tied her apron. "We already have people in the parking lot waiting to get in."

Gwen chuckled. "Max is in the kitchen cooking bacon. I'll get the coffee started if you'll grab the condiments."

And they were off and running.

Monday was Gwen's usual day off. She was at home fixing a sandwich for lunch when Tony called.

"We got 'em, Gwen," he said, and Gwen could hear the glee in his voice.

"That's great news," she said. "Tell me."

"Mary said she told you about the marks they found on Uncle Mark, like he was grabbed."

Gwen sat her sandwich on the counter and hopped onto a bar stool but didn't pick it up to eat. "She did."

"There were four people the investigators believed were involved. Marty and Ginger, of course. The other two were the sheriff and the mayor. Mayor Dieter, Harry is his first name, folded first. He claims he suspected something fishy was going on with the finances, but swore he was not involved with what happened to Mark."

"He just chose to look the other way?" Gwen snarked.

"That's my guess. From what I understood, he was having financial problems and Marty was slipping him a few bucks."

"They're not looking at the mayor for the murder?" Gwen asked.

"No. Fraud possibly, but not the murder. The other three are a different matter. Marty Hamilton and Ginger Tiller have been charged with murder, or as an alternative, conspiracy to commit murder. Coates resigned. They have an arrest warrant out for him as soon as they're able to locate him. Like I said, this pandemic stuff is slowing everything down."

"So, what happened?" Gwen asked, eager for the story.

"About what we thought." He snorted. "Ginger is playing the victim, not that it's going to help her. She couldn't talk fast enough once the state police brought her in. She told them Uncle Mark was sniffing around—they had been skimming money from the city projects, God only knows for how long. Marty saw the shit coming down, made a plan for Ginger to lure Dad out for a drink, and perhaps something more."

Gwen remembered that the toxicology report showed Viagra in Purcell's blood. He was planning for the more part. She asked, "If Ginger lured him out there, how is she claiming she's a victim?"

"She says she and Mark went for a moonlight drive out to Sweet Creek. It was her opinion the sheriff and Marty just wanted to threaten Mark."

Gwen snorted.

"I know and I agree, she absolutely knew what was going to happen. Ginger claims they were both drinking; I know Mark was. Marty and the sheriff followed them out to Sweet Creek. My uncle got slipped some downers at some point. Enough to make him compliant enough for them to shuffle him out to the falls. Ginger is claiming she stayed in the car waiting. One of them beamed him with something—the medical examiner thought a tire iron or similar weapon—and then they pushed him over the edge and into the water."

Gwen heard an audible gulp over the line.

"Excuse me for a sec."

There were sounds of a blowing nose.

"Sorry about that," he said in a hoarse voice when he returned.

"Tony, no need to apologize. Now we know and that's a good thing."

"Anyway, between the cold water, the drugs, and the concussion, Uncle Mark didn't have a chance."

"I'm glad they finally got them," Gwen said softly after he stopped talking.

"Me, too," he added. "And I want to thank you. If you hadn't pushed it, we would have never figured it out."

After a little more conversation, they ended the call. The courts were backlogged, Tony had told her, so it would be a while before a trial could be held but Hamilton and West had been arraigned via videoconference and Coates would be soon.

Later that day, over the last of the grilled trout Gwen had caught the summer before, Jay and Gwen toasted the news.

"To my favorite lady sleuth who, like a teething puppy, just keeps chewing at a knot until it unravels."

Gwen laughed and clinked her glass against Jay's. "And to her sidekick who keeps bravely soldiering on."