

Flashes from the patrol cars' light bars lit up the death scene in a visual staccato of pulsating light – blue/red/white – blue/red/white. They cut across the sleep-deprived faces of Undersheriff Caleb Tallchief and his boss, Pottawatomie County Sheriff Joe Holcomb as the two leaned against the Sheriff's SUV. Occasionally one or the other would stamp his feet or flap his arms in a futile attempt to ward off the bone-chilling cold. Crime scene tape defined the perimeter and the small tent erected over the body protected their victim from the elements and the prying eyes. Neither man spoke – there was really nothing to say.

The young undersheriff wadded up his empty Styrofoam coffee cup, stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He'd had enough caffeine – more than enough. He was wired and his bladder was starting to complain. He glanced around searching for an impromptu bathroom.

His troubled blue eyes involuntarily slid back to the child's body in the ditch in front of him. It had been purposely thrown aside like yesterday's garbage. The horrendous damage inflicted on the small body was something neither Tallchief nor Holcomb had ever seen before. The child had been brutally stabbed – how many times Caleb couldn't even begin to guess. No telling what else had been done to her. She looked so small – so vulnerable lying there in the glare of the vehicle headlights – she couldn't have been older than ten or eleven, if that. Caleb's heart stuck in his throat as he fought back anger and tears. With a conscious effort, he looked away.

The same lights caught the stoic – almost expressionless – faces of the uniformed men scattered around. They stood in groups of two or three, some quietly talking – most just standing – the usual crime scene sarcasm and sick cop humor conspicuously absent.