



Loose Id

*Baby, It's
Cold Outside*

*Nicole
Kimberling*

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Chapter One

Dying in an avalanche was one fear that had never plagued Peter Fontaine. But glancing up at the walls of snow rising on either side of Nick's Audi, Peter thought that might have been an oversight. Nick's expression remained unconcerned as they wound their way through a narrow canyon of snow. Peter's chest tightened. The snowy walls seemed to be leaning toward him. A chunk of white fell to the wet black ribbon of road. His heart hammered as he envisioned himself being buried beneath the building-sized blocks of snow. Sweat beaded his brow. He glanced at himself in the mirror on the back of the passenger-side visor.

A gray-faced ghoul stared back at him.

From the driver's side, Nick asked, "Are you all right?"

Nick, of course, looked absolutely handsome. Through a vigorous regimen of snowshoeing, he'd retained his summer tan all the way till Christmas and beyond. His brown hair was streaked with straw-colored highlights. He wore a trim beard and mustache. It kept his face warm in the winter, he claimed. His pale blue eyes seemed like they could have been made from winter sky.

"I think I might be feeling a little confined," Peter admitted. "How stable do you think these walls are anyway? Have any DOT snowplows gone missing in the last few weeks?"

Nick gave him a level glance. "We're almost there."

"Seriously, this is like driving down a Manhattan alley," Peter heard himself say, heard the note of hysteria in his voice, and yet was unable to stop himself talking. "Have I mentioned how much I hate Manhattan alleys?"

"Maybe you should try to think of something else."

"Like what?"

"Tell me about the article you're going to write."

“What article?”

“You always write an article for the *Hamster* about every place we ever go.” Nick smiled easily, carelessly, as if he had no fear whatsoever that he would be imminently crushed under tons of snow, which was probably the case.

Peter took a deep breath.

“I think it will go something like, *Anyone who stays in Bellingham for very long will become familiar with the number 542. You see it on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and even occasionally on “scenic highway” road signs. Highway 542 goes fifty-five miles east and five thousand feet up from Bellingham Bay to the Mount Baker Ski Area. If you're lucky enough to not be suffocated in a freak highway avalanche, you will reach Artist Point—*”

“We're not going that far,” Nick said. “The sno-park is just past Glacier.”

“Hooray,” Peter weakly rejoined.

“Once we turn off the highway it will be more open. I promise,” Nick said. “I didn't realize you were so claustrophobic.”

“I don't think it's claustrophobia so much as fear of being buried alive.”

“If you want me to take you back to Bellingham, I can do that and still make it back up in time for the festival.”

Peter shook his head. “I really want to be there. I can tough it out. I promise.”

Nick nodded but seemed worried.

“It's just that I don't ever remember you saying you liked snow camping.”

“I like the *idea* of snow camping,” Peter offered. “And I want to be with you for New Year's Eve, and this is where you're going to be, so...”

Nick broke out in the sort of smile that had once made him the darling of the Manhattan gallery scene.

“I really think that after you get used to the cold you're going to like it. The Freezing Man festival is a lot like Burning Man, only colder and with fewer hippies on acid—and with more snow sculpting.”

“But there will be *some* hippies on acid, right?”

“Only if you invited your friends.”

When Nick had first proposed the idea of spending New Year's Eve huddled together in a recently erected igloo, Peter had been torn.

Because their families lived in different states, they had decided to spend Christmas apart. Nick had entertained his cousin Kjell's family at the Castle, the enormous, cliff-face domicile that Nick had inherited from his first partner. Meanwhile Peter flew to Austin to visit his folks, who had moved to Texas once Peter graduated from college.

One guest at the Fontaine Christmas barbecue, Larry Polk, happened to be a newspaperman. He happened to offer Peter an interview at the *Austin Chronicle*. Peter happened to accept.

He'd been drunk at the time, but he'd agreed to the interview again, sober, three days later.

"The Hamster is too small a venue for an award-winning journalist," Larry had told him in his flat, east Texas drawl. *"You need to come on down here. We'll treat you right."*

Peter loved the *Hamster*, loved the city of Bellingham, loved his friends here, but he also had a little something called ambition. And to satisfy that he would have to trade up. He needed a bigger city with a bigger paper and bigger circulation.

He hadn't told Nick about either the job or the fact that he'd agreed to an interview; he couldn't. He, constantly talking, constantly writing copy in his head, could not find the words to say that he was thinking of leaving Bellingham. Not even now.

Peter found himself staring out the window and made himself look at Nick instead. He filled up his eye with the image of his lover...felt himself relaxing enough to stare hard at that beard Nick been wearing since November.

Peter didn't know if he liked it, but thought maybe he might. He wondered if he should grow a beard himself, before remembering that he couldn't. Mustaches barely managed to take hold on the outcropping of his upper lip. An entire beard would never grow on the thin, barren planes of his face.

And he could probably count on never having too much hair on his chest, unlike Nick, whose hairy Viking ancestors probably had never needed to wear shirts at all.

Though not born a true Pacific Northwesterner, Nick had nonetheless adapted to local ways and therefore ran the air conditioner in his car anytime the thermometer went over sixty.

Peter preferred to engage the car's heated seats rather than the air conditioner, but then, that followed. An old boyfriend of his had once remarked that he was “as cold as a woman,” and that was just about right. He didn't have a lot to keep him warm. He had what some kindly referred to as a “runner's physique” and others, such as his grandmother, called “skinny little string bean.”

He had no idea how he was going to survive the weekend in the wilderness and even less idea how he would bring up the job in Austin.

Because he didn't want to leave, really. He didn't want to leave the Pacific Northwest, and he didn't want to leave Nick. But he wanted to level up—go out into the larger world and prove what he could do. Comfort, even affection, couldn't satisfy that desire to compete, to go further. It stayed in Peter's chest, a hard, gnawing anxiety.

The anxiety apparently showed on his face, because Nick said, “You know, there's a lodge on the property about half a mile from the campsite. If it's too miserable, we can always go there.”

“That wouldn't impress your outdoorsy friends much.”

Nick snorted. “Once they let me out of the army, I no longer had any desire to exercise my machismo.”

“That's because you have a natural rugged manliness that makes machismo completely unnecessary,” Peter said. In spite of his claim of imperviousness to the opinions of others, Nick beamed smugly at Peter's comment. “I, on the other hand, wouldn't call myself rugged.”

“No,” Nick agreed, “you're more like a greyhound. Sleek, skinny, and always on the scent of a good story.”

“And exactly like a greyhound, I think I'm going to be shivering in this snow.”

“You can always curl up on my lap for warmth.” Nick grinned.

Peter rolled his eyes. “There is no way I'm going to cuddle up to you in front of all those burly, sporty dudes.”

“You will, once you're cold enough. Or drunk enough.”

“There isn't enough vodka in the world. And you would die of embarrassment if I did.”

“So you think.”

“So I know, Mr. I-Don't-Even-Hold-Hands-During-the-Pride-Parade.” Peter laughed.
“You're shy. Just admit it.”

“I admit nothing.”

Nick turned right and started up a narrow, slippery side road that seemed more like twin ruts in the snow than a paved surface. Though it was more treacherous, Peter felt better about this road than he had about the snow canyon that was 542. Sliding into an icy ravine seemed preferable to being crushed beneath tons of snow, though he couldn't generate any logical reason why. After ten minutes of slow, careful driving, he saw a handwritten sign ahead:

FREEZING MAN PARKING.

AVALANCHE WARNING IN EFFECT.

HAPPY FUCKING NEW YEAR!

Chapter Two

Like many of the trails systems in Whatcom County, Salmon Ridge Sno-Park had been built by a team of dedicated snowshoeing enthusiasts, including Nick's second cousin, Kjell Van Beek.

Kjell had taken up plein air painting as a way to express his feelings during a personal crisis he'd experienced in his midthirties, and five years later he'd become not only quite good but a well-known fixture in Bellingham parks and on Whatcom County's many scenic byways. Like Nick, Kjell had a near-superhuman tolerance for cold. Peter had once seen him standing at his easel in the middle of Boulevard Park in a prosaically beautiful snowfall wearing a parka, snow boots, and cargo shorts.

Peter had met Kjell before, briefly, when Nick had had a show up at Mindport Gallery. He'd talked mostly about his recent conversion from painting with oils to painting with acrylics.

More than the sign, it was sighting Kjell standing alongside the road in that very same outfit which told Peter they had arrived at their destination. The fresh, powdery snow stirred up by Nick's car stuck to the dark, curly hair on Kjell's meaty thighs, but he didn't seem to notice, being deeply engaged in scumbling a thin layer of white paint over the painting on his canvas, giving the thing the same hazy, misty look as the surrounding scenery.

"Shouldn't we stop and say hi?"

Nick shook his head. "He wouldn't talk to us if we did. He's in the flow."

"Do you ever do that?"

"Get in the flow? All the time."

"No, I mean stand around painting exactly what happens to be in front of you at the moment."

"Not really. Sometimes I'll sketch something I've just seen, but I've never been much of a plein air guy. They really love to capture the light and energy and immediacy of their

environment. The gestalt of the moment. Including whatever random bugs and twigs fall into their paint. Kjell once painted over a whole cloud of gnats that slapped into his painting during a windstorm. That certainly lent the piece a unique texture as only encountered outdoors.”

“Bumpy?”

“But uniquely, organically bumpy.” Nick pulled the car alongside a string of around thirty similarly snow-worthy vehicles.

Peter hadn't expected the Hilton, but he had expected at least one building to be visible. The promised lodge, for example. Nothing, not even an outhouse, marred the expanse of snow and trees. He zipped up his coat, summoned his manly sense of adventure, and opened the car door. The air was chilly but not bitterly cold. Huge white snowflakes drifted down through the still air to alight on the cedars, the car, Nick's woolen toque.

A few yards down a gentle slope a few people in brightly colored winter gear tromped through the snow, erecting poles and packing snow into blocks. The puffiness of their parkas changed their proportions, giving the scene the impression of extremely industrious children busy making the world's greatest snow fort.

“I came up Wednesday and scoped out our site and started our structure.” Nick hauled rucksacks of equipment out of the back of the car. “It's right down there. See the red flag?”

The red flag was really more of a banner such as one might see a costumed knave carrying in a renaissance fair. Two golden letters adorned the red field: *N* and *P*. It hung alongside a little mound of snow that seemed to be getting gently covered with a blanket of cotton ball-sized snowflakes.

Was getting buried in the snow his theme for today?

Without really thinking, he started to internally write his own obituary: *Peter Fontaine, winner of the Investigative Reporter's and Editor's Award, died Saturday after being suffocated inside an artistic igloo. Fontaine's lover, prominent Bellingham painter Nick Olson, escaped the igloo with only a mild chill. Fontaine's blue, frozen body will be on display at the Freezing Man Snow Sculpture Festival until the North Cascades experience a significant summer snowmelt.*

Perhaps sensing Peter's uneasiness, Nick said, “You know, I didn't realize you had this claustrophobia problem when I built the shelter. It's pretty tight in there.” Nick paused, seeming about to reiterate his offer to take Peter back to Bellingham.

“I’ll be fine as long as there’s enough room for you to warm me with your body.” Peter forced a lewd smile.

Nick smiled back—a smile of relief and gratitude. “There’s sufficient space inside to generate heat-producing friction.”

“Then let’s go down so I can see the accommodations.”

Nick led the way, dragging their gear behind him on a pulka that he’d made from a plastic sled he’d bought at Canadian Tire and some half-inch PVC pipe. Peter watched Nick—bearded, dressed in well-worn GORE-TEX, polarized shades, and dragging a sledful of cargo—and he didn’t think that Nick could have appeared more rugged if he’d planned it. And he fit right in with the other men there, though it was sometimes hard to tell the men from the women beneath all the protective gear. The only sure indicators of gender were the colors pink and purple for women and beards for men. Otherwise everyone looked the same in snow pants.

They all seemed to be engaged in various stages of building snow shelters. Nick greeted them, introducing Peter as he went.

The igloo closest to the road was inhabited by a chef named Henry Swank and his wife, Janelle. Both seemed to be in their late thirties, and they had obviously been interrupted in the middle of an argument. They owned a catering business in Bellingham. Peter knew them from their *Hamster* ad, which highlighted their organic produce and membership in Sustainable Connections, one of Bellingham’s many left-leaning business associations.

Janelle smiled warmly and shook Peter’s hand, while Henry only gave them a cursory wave. Peter couldn’t decide who had been winning that argument. Henry probably, since Janelle had been happy to be interrupted.

Next came a Martin Wells, who seemed to be in his midtwenties. He and two friends, Rick and Shane, seemed to be bent on creating an entire mansion. Three domed humps stood clustered together. Peter wondered if they somehow had to make three different rooms to avoid sleeping close to each other. They seemed to be the type of guys who would be worried about being perceived to be fags.

“Martin’s got an engineering degree but no job offer. He and two buddies apparently spend all their time on the mountain perfecting their snow- and ice-building techniques. I cannot compete with them.” Nick indicated his own snow mound. “It’s only one room.”

"Igloo sweet igloo," Peter remarked.

"Technically this is a quinzhee." Nick crouched down and opened the tiny, cupboard-sized door. "You make it by mounding up the snow, letting it set, and then digging out the middle. We'll be cozy in here, that's for sure. Just about the only thing that can bring it down is rain."

"What if it rains?" Peter thought it was a fair question, rain being quite common, even in January.

"Then we run back to the car and drive back to Glacier and get a hotel."

"Can the hotel room have a hot tub?"

"Absolutely." Nick opened the little door. "After you."

Peter crawled through the entry and found himself in a surprisingly bright domed room. Though there was not quite enough height to stand up straight, the top of the ceiling was about five feet high. A raised platform took up half the floor space. A red votive candle stood in a nook carved into the wall. There was a small hole in the top of the dome that Peter imagined must be for ventilation.

Nick sat down on the platform, beaming.

"How do you like it?"

"It's pretty cool," Peter said. "No pun intended."

"Funny."

"This is our bed." Nick indicated the raised platform. "The rest of it is our living room. Except the foyer, of course." Nick pointed at the little tunnel leading to the cupboard door.

"Where is our bathroom?"

"You always think of the most romantic things," Nick said. "We set up a couple of tents of portable toilets, and I've got WAG BAGs on the sled. We have to pack everything out, per Washington State regulations, and that includes toilet paper."

"That puts an amazing image in my mind."

"You can always go without. Kjell never uses it. He claims that a snowball does the trick, and you can just bury it afterward. The snowball, I mean. Everything else goes in the bag."

"You know, Kjell is exactly the kind of person I would expect to wipe his ass with a snowball," Peter remarked. "I think I'll go with the standard-issue TP."

“I tried the snowball method once.”

“I bet you did. How was it?”

“Chilly. Very, very chilly.” Nick gave an involuntary shudder as he brushed the snow off his mittens. “Let’s get our stuff inside so we can join the fun.”

After they moved their gear and set up their sleeping pads, Peter reluctantly acquainted himself with the toilet tent, which turned out to be not that bad.

It was two in the afternoon, two hours and twenty-nine minutes until sunset. Nick suggested they spend the time snowshoeing around the campsite so Peter could get the lay of the area.

In spite of only having worn snowshoes on one previous occasion, Peter got along fairly easily on his rentals. He followed Nick down a trail leading between snow-draped stands of western hemlock and fir. Overhead, the sky was deep blue. Weak winter sun shone from the south. Nick took him down to the trail’s terminus at the edge of the North Fork of the Nooksack River. Even in deep winter, water still flowed quickly and freely at the center. He pointed out the line of the riverbank and the treacherous ice that grew in a thin, deceptive sheet across the surface.

“And if you look up there”—Nick pointed up at a field of snow—“you can see how there are fissures in the surface of the snowfield?”

Peter squinted up. “Yes, I think so.”

“That slope is highly unstable and likely to come down. I’d stay away from it.”

Peter couldn’t help but smile at the seriousness of Nick’s tone. He sounded like a troop leader addressing an errant and death-prone Boy Scout. Or maybe this was just his army survival training kicking in. It was insufferable in any case.

Peter said, “I don’t know why you think I’m going to be traipsing around out here by myself. I don’t even have a map.”

“You never know,” Nick said. “People get separated for a lot of reasons. And then they end up dying. And you should keep an eye out for tree wells too. If you fall in one of those, you could break both your legs.”

"I really don't think I'm going to be straying farther than the toilet tent." Peter stopped, planted his ski poles firmly in the snow.

Nick stopped and turned to face him fully. "I'm only telling you this because you're naturally curious and inquisitive and also secretive. You're the kind of person who'll sneak off to check something out without telling anyone. I just want you to know that there are a lot of ways to get hurt out here, so you shouldn't go out alone."

"I promise that if I decide to go poking around, I will take an equally nosy buddy. But seriously, I plan on spending most of my time here either looking at snow sculptures, snoozing in the igloo, or drinking vodka in full view of everyone, including you. Now please stop treating me like a girl."

"Quinzhee."

"What?"

"It's a quinzhee, not an igloo."

"I'll make a note of it for my story."

Nick nodded, apparently satisfied. He stared up at the trees for a few moments, then said, "I'm trying to make sure you're safe."

Peter thought: Nick Olson, king of communication, stated the obvious today on a snowy trail in the Mount Baker National Forest. Bystanders described his remark as "sincere but also easily observable by anybody."

Then he stopped his internal rant. Nick should be given credit for saying anything at all. Plus he was right. Peter was nosy and secretive. He was withholding quite a whopper right that very second. He was just mad at Nick for knowing him well. He felt his ire leaving him.

Peter said, "But you know, drinking vodka is not the only activity I had planned for tonight."

"Oh yes?"

"Well, night's going to last for a long time. My only concern is that if I expose any flesh, I might catch a chill."

Nick gave him a long, silent look and then smirked. "I think I can find a way to protect any flesh you may choose to expose."

“We should probably get back and make some dinner and get right to bed, then.”

* * * * *

Getting right to bed, when the bedroom was basically a hollowed-out snowball, required a little more planning than Peter had initially expected, but anticipation made them both giddy. By the light of a single flickering candle, they arranged what Nick referred to as their nest.

Nick could not stop smirking as he inflated their Therm-a-Rests and arranged them on additional pads. Peter tried to take mental notes on this process, feeling an informative article coming on, as he always did when Nick dispensed wisdom, but he absolutely could not focus on the benefits of closed-cell camping technology. The cold, the sounds of people walking, laughing, talking just outside the snow walls, propelled Peter into a heady, giggly, almost-childlike state of excitement.

And more than that, he had no idea how they were going to have sex. The air was cold. Cold! He didn't think he'd be able to take off his clothes and get sweaty without freezing. Nick seemed to have a plan about how they would proceed, but was keeping it to himself. Every few seconds, though, he shot Peter a look, as if he'd just had some new, lascivious idea that he couldn't wait to try out.

When he had the sleeping bags rolled out, Nick said, “Time to get your boots off, camper.”

Camper?

“So you're the hot camp counselor and I'm the homesick kid who wants to sleep in your tent with you?” Peter drawled.

Nick looked genuinely surprised for a moment; then his expression changed back to the strangely wicked smirk he'd been wearing for the last forty-five minutes.

“If that's the way you want to play it, sure.” He leaned close and whispered, “Do you miss your mom and dad?”

“I just don't want the rest of the guys to see me crying.” Peter swooned melodramatically against Nick's chest. “I just miss home so much.”

Nick laughed out loud. “I cannot imagine you ever crying about missing home.”

“I thought we were fantasy role-playing,” Peter said.

“We're already in the snow; how much more fantasy do you need?” He knelt down in front of Peter and pulled off one boot and the other, and then Peter's snow pants, and pulled back the flap of Peter's mummy bag. Then, seeming to remember something, he blew out the candle. “No use giving everybody else a show.”

The light extinguished, he pulled Peter's long johns down and off, leaving only his socks in place.

“You don't want to get these damp,” he whispered. “They'll freeze.”

The cold assaulted Peter's skin, and he felt his scrotum sucking up into his body. Not exactly sexy, and yet the scrape of Nick's GORE-TEX and leather gloves against his thighs left his skin tingling, tightening. And they hadn't even kissed yet. Usually Nick kissed. He kissed a lot. But today locking lips didn't seem to figure in with his approach.

If Peter were perfectly honest with himself, he had to admit that he hardly ever gave Nick the opportunity to take the lead in sex. Though he often found a way to get Nick's cock inside his body, Peter's own aggressive sexual hunger meant that he called the shots.

Maybe it was the unfamiliar environment making him unsure of what to do, but he felt strangely passive. Or maybe it was that he was naked from the waist down, being very gently felt up by a fully dressed man. The gloves reached his genitals, and the shock of the cold battled against the delight of being held at all.

Delight won.

He arched against Nick's palm.

Nick gave him a little squeeze and said, “You should get covered up.”

Peter wriggled his naked lower half quickly into the sleeping bag.

Nick moved in, situating a towel underneath him. “Wouldn't want to get your sleeping bag damp either.”

“What about my jacket?”

“Maybe leave that on for right now.”

“Even my mittens?”

Nick gave out a low chuckle. “Especially your mittens.”

“So it's a mitten job you want, then? I should have known you had some weird perversion like that. You just like shopping for snow gear too much.” Why did the words *mitten job* suddenly sound sexy?

“You have no idea.”

Just that sound sent a twitch through Peter's groin. What, really, was Nick going to do? Have him on his hands and knees in the snow? He didn't think he could relax enough for that.

Then again, in a few minutes he might not be as chilly as he was now. Peter let Nick push him back into a semirecumbent pose, propped up on his elbows with the lower half of his body in the sleeping bag. Nick pulled off his own gloves and slid his fingers under Peter's jacket. His chilly fingers traveled up to tease Peter's nipple. A moan slipped from Peter's lips, and finally Nick kissed him, muffling the sound beneath his own warm and giving mouth. Nick's whiskers, like every other part of him, were cold, and they tickled Peter's jaw, then his throat, when Nick's mouth moved there.

Nick's hands had apparently decided to visit the world inside the mummy bag, now visibly tented, despite the dimness and the loft of the down.

Peter bit back his moans as Nick worked him. Which he liked, but he wanted more. As always.

“If you're planning on fucking me, you'd better get going with that.”

“Not part of my game plan, actually,” Nick said. “No lube.”

“There's sunscreen.”

Nick's laughter rumbled through his chest, shaking both of them. “You've got it all worked out, don't you?” He moved his fingers down, maddeningly circling Peter's opening.

“I just like to come when you're fucking me,” Peter said. “And you haven't used a condom for months.”

“What about what I want?” Nick nipped the side of Peter's neck. Not hard, but with a hint of rebuke.

“What do you want?” Peter got the sudden weird impression that they weren't talking about sex anymore.

"I want you to shut up and let me finish what I started," Nick said. Though his words were hard, his tone stayed playful, his fingers light on Peter's delicate skin. "Or don't you trust me?"

"I trust you."

"That's good, because wilderness survival is all about trust." Nick pressed the tip of his finger, and Peter wriggled to get it farther. Nick withdrew, guided Peter onto his stomach. Peter heard zippers unzipping, Velcro ripping open, then the snap of a cap popping open. Looking over his shoulder, he could see the shadow of Nick, hulking in winter gear, coat hanging open, working his own stiff cock. Peter pushed himself up on his hands and knees, excitement zinging through him, hardly feeling the cold anymore.

Nick pushed a slick thumb into Peter's hole and, after only working him for a moment, pushed his cock inside.

Peter yelped with pain, and Nick held still, letting the heat of his thighs warm and relax him, stroking Peter's exposed lower back while he adjusted.

"You didn't really think I'd hold out on you, did you?" He pushed slowly, incrementally, in.

"No, you wouldn't." Peter's voice was a ragged whisper. And suddenly he felt vulnerable saying it, so he looked back over his shoulder and added, "Not if you know what's good for you."

"That's my newshound. I was worried that you'd gone all soft for a second."

"Soft doesn't describe any part of me right now." Peter humped back against Nick, urging him to motion. Nick finally complied, pumping him hard and fast like he liked it. Peter met him every stroke, chasing that blinding sensation of orgasm, feeling no cold, no pain, just the hot, white moment of pleasure, that burst of physical joy, shooting out in jumpy strings. Nick's fingers clenched around his hips, and Peter felt the slippery warmth as Nick emptied himself inside him, and like a chain reaction, Peter tensed in a shaking paroxysm of ecstasy.

Nick kissed him one last time, breath shaky and heavy, then handed him his long johns.

"You don't want to catch a chill."

Chapter Three

The Freezing Man Snow Sculpture Festival is essentially a snowman-building jamboree. Since there is no judging, winner, or prize, it can't strictly be called a competition. But human beings are by nature competitive, and the Freezing Man celebration is no exception. The only rule is that you start building your snowman at daybreak on New Year's Eve and finish by midnight, so the snowpeople will be able to ring in the New Year. Dozens of intrepid visitors come to see the sculptures on New Year's Day, mostly after going on the Polar Bear Swim in Birch Bay.

Peter put his stubby pencil and Moleskine notebook back into his pocket. Outside, he could hear Nick cooking and talking to Kjell. The smell of frying sausages lured him out into the cold, bright morning.

Nick poured and handed him a cup of coffee in a thermal aluminum mug. It was true. Coffee did taste amazing after spending the night in a hollowed-out snowball.

This forest, this country, truly was full of natural wonders.

Guilt moved within him again, and he realized he had to tell Nick about the interview. They'd been living together for a year and seeing each other for two. Because if he got the job, then what?

What was he so afraid of? That Nick would be angry that he was contemplating a decision like moving to Austin, surely. But honestly, Peter knew what really frightened him—that Nick would refuse to move away from his beloved Castle on Wildcat Cove and that Peter would be, himself, unable to leave.

Seeming to notice Peter's deep distraction, Nick said, "Formulating an article about camp-stove cooking? My secret is Jimmy Dean."

“Yes. I'm going to start it off with the statement: *My boyfriend is the best camp-stove cook in the Pacific Northwest, but the rest of you losers can still try to acquire a little of his prowess by following these simple instructions.*”

Kjell chomped a sausage, chewed it thoughtfully, then said to Nick, “Good night last night?”

Peter reddened as Nick said, “Yeah, it was snug in there.”

Kjell nodded. “I always want some company about four o'clock in the morning, but it's nice to get away from the kids every now and then.”

“How many kids do you have?” Peter couldn't recall ever having seen Kjell with any, but he mostly saw the man at non-child-friendly events like art openings.

“Three. They're nine, seven, and three. Having them up here would just be a nightmare. One of them would be down a tree well in thirty seconds. Probably the oldest one. She'd climb down there on purpose, and then the youngest would try to follow her, get caught up in the branches, fall, and break himself somehow. Then I'd have to go get him.”

The specificity of Kjell's theoretical example indicated a wealth of experience to Peter. And the high, drifting snow in the area did mean that a variety of tree wells existed. Kjell's daughter could have her pick of conifers. Peter thought he might climb down one himself later. But that was only two children dispatched by the environment.

Peter said, “What about the middle one?”

“He wouldn't be any trouble. He'd just hang around with the women, drawing. The only danger would be him getting into the flow and freezing to death accidentally.” Kjell grinned. “He's a lot like Nick was when he was a kid.”

“I was plenty adventurous,” Nick said, affronted. “I just liked to draw. So did you.”

“Not like you, though. There's a reason I'm a hobbyist and you're a pro.” Kjell wiped his greasy fingers on his pant leg and said, “I think I'm going to try to get in another painting this morning before I start building my snowman.”

“Seems risky. You only have seven hours of daylight,” Nick warned. “Your snowman might end up being severely substandard.”

"I'll paint for an hour, tops. I'll set my watch alarm. I just don't want to waste this amazing light."

Kjell moved off, marching through the snow with the casual ease that other people walked down a sidewalk, without a single misstep or hint of awkwardness. This is what the old pioneer mountain men must have looked like, Peter thought, only with a lot more high-tech fabric and reflective jacket piping.

"He's a lot more sensitive than he looks," Peter observed.

"He's a lot better artist than he claims to be. That's just our family, though. Lutherans."

"What does that mean?"

"None of us have an easy time taking too much pride in our achievements. Especially not something as insubstantial as art." Nick laughed. "I'm just lucky my father was an atheist. It gave me a fighting chance at personal success."

Peter nodded again. He'd never met Nick's parents, though he'd spoken to Nick's mother on the phone a few times. His father was a retired career army officer, and his mother was a nurse, also retired. They lived in Arizona but spent most of their time crisscrossing the country in their RV, visiting their friends. The one time the RV had brought them north, Peter had found a reason to be gone. Not that he thought they were bad people. He was just a coward about meeting fathers—especially army fathers.

Or maybe cowardice was his new mode of interaction these days. Fathers, moves, career stagnation. The list kept growing.

Nick used a handful of snow to clean the grease out of the skillet and stowed the stove. Then he said, "Should we go look at our patch?"

Informal the competition might be, but it was still a competition and, as such, was taken very seriously by the competitors present. Though the sun had barely risen, apart from Kjell, Nick and Peter were last to start building their snowman, at the staggeringly late hour of five past eight a.m. To their left, Martin had already laid out a series of snow blocks, and to their right stood a waist-high column. The builder was nowhere in sight. Presumably he'd gone to get more material.

And there was already a controversy. Someone had obviously built their snowman early.

How this was possible, Peter didn't know, since they would have had to start molding snow in the frigid dead of night. But a snowman—or more accurately, a snow sculpture—already stood, or rather, lay—in the field.

Nick shook his head. “I get the idea of a recumbent snowman, and this one is pretty good, but I still think it's a cheat.”

Martin looked up from his building and said, “I think it's Rick's. I told him he couldn't start till sunrise, but of course he didn't listen.” Martin bent over his project again. He'd clearly laid out an elaborate schematic complete with measurements and some sort of timetable.

Nick shrugged equanimously. “It's not like we're competing for money. We should put a whiskey bottle in its hand, though. It sort of looks like a party casualty.”

Martin snorted. “Rick's the party casualty. He went down to Glacier last night and never came back.”

Peter did the math, and it didn't balance.

“If he went to Glacier and didn't come back yet, how did he make this snowman?”

Nick cocked his head slightly. Gave Peter that “you're being really nosy” look. Martin stopped working, seeming to also belatedly be doing the math.

“He must have done it before he left, 'cause he knew he was too big a pussy to spend the night in the snow and wouldn't be back until this morning. I mean, it's obviously a really shitty job, and Rick's the only guy here with no pride whatsoever.” Martin kicked the side of the snowman, and a chunk fell off. “All I can say is that he better be bringing a lot of whiskey back with him.”

“That's just what you guys need. More whiskey.” Janelle was walking toward them, a square pink bucket held in each of her gloved hands. She looked fresh, walked with a spring in her step. She unmolded the buckets, adding a couple of bricks to her monolith. Her husband was nowhere to be seen.

When Martin saw Janelle, he smiled, drew himself up, and brandished his plan. “I'm gonna kick your ass this year, Janelle.”

“Not possible.” Janelle smoothed the seams in her sculpture. “This year I am unstoppable.”

"I thought you said these weren't judged." Peter found himself suddenly feeling very competitive.

"They aren't, but you know how it goes. There's usually somebody whose sculpture is clearly better." Nick cast a glance back. "Or clearly worse."

"Do we have a plan?"

"I had the idea of trying to build a block, then carve bas-relief people out of it." Nick produced a piece of paper with the sketch of what he planned to build.

"It looks...difficult." Peter chewed his lip. It looked exactly like the kind of thing he'd screw up. Sensing Peter's hesitation, Nick pocketed the design.

"That's just an idea, though. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking of two snowmen holding hands," Peter admitted sheepishly. "You know, with the stick arms. But that would be incredibly gay, wouldn't it?"

Nick nodded. "It would be incredibly gay, but we could do it anyway. Freezing Man could use a little gaying up." He took out his pencil and drew the new idea. Twin Frostys in love. "So these guys are so easy that we can do it the old-fashioned way by rolling up three big snowballs and still have enough time to go on a hike before it gets dark."

"*Easy* more accurately describes my artistic skill level," Peter said, relieved.

While at first their gay Frostys design drew some scorn from the more ambitious snow sculptors, their quick, done-by-lunchtime execution—and the subsequent free time that gave them—produced at least one jealous stare. This was from Martin, who seemed to be weighing his ambition to destroy Janelle against the pleasure of showshoeing on a perfect afternoon. Janelle looked blissfully blank, content in the way artists in the thrall of their work often could be.

Building the snowmen hadn't presented any opportunity for an intimate conversation, but the hike would. They'd be away from people. Peter took a deep breath, preparing himself. It would be okay.

Chapter Four

All Nick said was, "Please tell me you're joking."

Peter gulped, staring up at the beautiful snowflakes falling from a gray sky. Finally he managed, "I'm not joking."

The muscles in Nick's jaw clenched and flexed. Although Peter could not actually see this through the beard, he could see Nick's whiskers moving, which amounted to the same thing.

"You realize that if you get this job, you're going to have to move to Austin, right?"

"It's not like I wouldn't want you to come with me," Peter said. "I would. I do. I want you to come with me to Texas. I'll admit it's not that romantic, but they have good steak there. And I'm pretty sure eating out is tax deductible if you're writing a restaurant review."

"I can't move to Texas," Nick said. "I don't have any connections there."

"You'll make new friends."

"I don't mean friends. I mean other artists, gallery connections. You really have no idea how I make money, do you?"

Stung, Peter's patience began to thin. "You're an artist. You can do art anywhere, but there are only so many newspaper jobs available. There are only so many newspapers left."

"Painting is not a job that you can do just anywhere." Nick pulled off his polarized sunglasses and rubbed his eyes. "Painting is a deeply regional profession, and it takes years to build up contacts with local galleries. Even palates are considered to be regional. In essence, I would have to start from scratch."

"But that doesn't make sense. You show in Germany and Prague."

"I show as a Pacific Northwest artist," Nick said.

"Listen, I don't think the *Hamster* is ever going to pay me enough to even buy my own car, let alone fund my retirement."

“Fund your what?” Nick stared at him as though he'd suddenly begun speaking in tongues. “You're only twenty-nine. Wait a minute... That's what this is about, isn't it? You're panicking because you're going to be thirty.”

“No, I am not. I'm trying to make a reasonable upward move in a very difficult business with increasingly dwindling openings.”

“But the reason you're trying to make the upward move is that you're scared about being thirty.”

Peter's temper flared. He could feel his face reddening. “Why is it that whenever I talk about having ambition, you always think I'm trying to compensate for something? I am ambitious. There's a difference. For the record, I'd like to get this clear. I do not think I'm inadequate. If anything, I think this town is inadequate to my needs in that it lacks any kind of major newspaper, free or otherwise.”

“And I think Texas is inadequate because it doesn't contain this town,” Nick replied.

A silence settled between them, and they only went a few more yards before Nick said, “We should turn around and go back.”

It took about forty minutes to walk back, and neither spoke the entire time. Peter cursed his stupidity at bringing up a touchy subject while in an environment where they couldn't get away from each other and where yelling could trigger a deadly avalanche. Frankly he didn't know if he could find his way back to camp without Nick, and worse, Nick knew this. They walked together out of Peter's dependence and Nick's sense of obligation. And suddenly Peter wondered if this walk mirrored their relationship—if he stayed with Nick because Nick was the best he could do in a small town, and Nick stayed by him because...

Honestly he didn't know why Nick was with him. The beauty of the snow and cedars faded, and all Peter felt was the cold.

Once at the edge of the camp, Peter finally felt like he could speak again. He said, “So it's my career or yours?”

“I guess so.” Nick squinted at the sky. “I think I might go borrow Kjell's paints while there's still some light.”

Peter nodded. “I need to jot down some notes and get some action shots of people enjoying themselves at the festival.”

He forced himself to get out his Moleskine and stubby pencil just so that he would think about something other than Nick.

With only an hour of daylight left, the pace picks up at the Freezing Man. Some sculptors put the finishing touches on masterpieces of snow, while others scramble to repair cracks or even catastrophic structural collapse.

Speaking of that, one of their snowmen's tree-branch arms had fallen off. He rose and started pushing it back in, careful not to wreck the image of super gay happiness that they had created. Above all, he didn't want the straight people to see him weep.

He had to stop being so maudlin. All around him, people were having a great time. He just had to catch a little of that enthusiasm.

Peter got out his camera and wandered from sculpture to sculpture snapping shots of smiling faces and truly awesome snowmen. He cheered a little. Their nearest neighbors, Martin the engineer and his somewhat-less-intelligent buddy, Shane, approached their art sculpture as if it were a military campaign. Diagrams abounded. Shane did as he was told, clearly taking little joy in the act of creation but eager to please Martin.

Janelle was just the opposite, smiling and humming to herself as she stacked blocks of snow atop each other. Her husband, Henry, had apparently opted to sit out this part of the sculpture-building activity. Peter wondered if he'd gone down to Glacier for snacks.

Just as he was finishing, Nick's boots walked up beside him. Peter leaned back so that he could see the rest of Nick, keeping his expression calm. Janelle and Martin were right there, so he didn't expect Nick to say anything meaningful. Just small talk. What Nick said was, "I can't find Kjell."

"Maybe he went into town," Peter said.

Nick shook his head. "His car is still here, but no one has seen him since this morning."

Janelle stopped working and drifted nearer. "That's a long time, even for him."

"I know. I'm going to go look for him," Nick said.

"Alone?" Alarm prickled at Peter's skin. "Isn't this how whole parties freeze to death on the mountainside? By going one by one to search for each other, getting separated, and dying?"

“He's right. You have to have your transponder set to receive if you're going to try and home in on Kjell's signal,” Martin commented.

“See?”

“Or you can take mine if you want, and switch. Then you'll have one to search with and one that will transmit a signal in case you get knocked out.”

Peter glared at Martin. His problem-solving skills were beginning to test Peter's patience. Or rather with his insistence on only solving the problem of how to make ridiculously dangerous activities seem safe.

“It's still not smart to go alone,” Peter said. “I could—”

“You're not a good-enough snowshoer to go with me,” Nick said flatly. “It's close to dark, and you don't know the terrain.”

Peter's temper flared at the high-handed truth of Nick's statement. Their eyes locked as a torrent of profanity began to swirl up Peter's throat.

“I'll go,” Janelle broke in. “We'll both have our transponders on, and we'll take Martin's to search.”

“Right. If we don't come back in an hour, drive into Glacier and call search and rescue.”

Nick tossed Peter his keys. Then, almost as an afterthought, he leaned forward and gave Peter a quick kiss. He murmured, “I'm not going far. Really. I just have to see.”

“Don't fall in a tree well and break yourself,” Peter mumbled back.

As he watched him walk into the dark forest, Peter realized that he loved Nick. Truly and deeply now. But loving a man didn't erase Peter's desire to take his career to the next level. It only eroded his determination and screwed up his priorities so that he had actually had, for the first time, to contemplate that he might not be willing to sacrifice everything to the gods of journalism. He might just end up sacrificing journalistic advancement to the god of love.

And that shook him. It didn't sit right alongside his Investigative Reporter's and Editor's Award. It made him feel...weak.

He stared again at the rough snowman laying next to him. The heat kicked off by Martin's portable campfire was starting to melt away the details, and so he moved it farther away.

A chunk fell off the snowman.

Peter could plainly see that there, buried in the snow, was a human hand.

Chapter Five

For exactly one second Peter wondered if the hand was part of the art.

He carefully reached out and touched the hand. Ice-cold. Unresponsive. This hand, if it was attached to anything, was attached to a corpse. The wind whipped up, swirling heavy snowflakes around his face, momentarily blinding him.

“Martin?” he said. He didn't know why he called Martin, except that he knew his name.

“Don't worry about it. Nick and Janelle won't stay out if this wind keeps up.” Martin didn't glance up from his snowman to say this.

The hand was not only cold, it was frozen. For a horrible moment, he thought it was Kjell, but no, the snowman had already been here this morning when he and Kjell had been eating breakfast. So who?

“Martin, I think you should come look at this.”

“I'm running out of light.”

“I don't think your snowman matters so much right now. I think I might have found Rick.” Peter began gingerly to unbury the arm. He felt for a pulse that he knew wouldn't be there, but he felt for it anyway. Nothing.

Martin straightened. “Look, I know nobody but me cares about beating Janelle this year, but I—Holy shit!” He dropped his trowel and rushed forward. Martin dropped to his knees, clawing at the snow.

“Martin—”

“We've got to get him out of there.”

“Martin, he's dead.”

“He might just be in a deep state of hypothermia.” Chunks of snow fell away, revealing snow pants, the side of a Patagonia jacket. “Fuck! It *is* Rick.”

Peter said, "This snowman has been here all day."

Martin kept digging. His frantic action attracted Shane and Henry.

"Martin, wait!" Peter grabbed Martin's arm and was instantly shoved aside. He fell back into the snow.

"Don't fucking touch me!"

Peter fought to maintain his calm. "Don't you get it? He didn't fall inside a snowman by accident. Somebody put him there. He was killed. You're disrupting the crime scene."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Martin stood, chest heaving, but controlling himself. Attracted by the noise, Janelle's husband, appeared, looking pale and ill.

Peter tried his phone. No coverage. Of course. "I'm saying that this snowman is part of a crime scene."

"What are you saying, man?" Shane, stepped up. "What crime?"

"Rick has obviously been killed."

"How do you know he didn't do it to himself?"

"How do I know he didn't *bury* himself?" Was Shane really that stupid? Or was this some kind of clever diversion? Peter studied Shane's face. He did not seem clever.

"It would be like Rick to bury himself as a joke and then end up freezing to death. He really liked practical jokes like that." Martin sniffed, dragged an arm across his nose. "He was such an asshole."

Peter could not quell his skepticism at this theory. "I just can't believe he buried his own face with snow, then buried his own hand."

"Maybe someone helped him," Shane offered.

"Did you help him?" Peter asked. Shane shook his head.

"We don't even know for sure that it's Rick." Shane's cheeks reddened, and Peter started to feel sorry for him. Clearly he was the sort of person who dealt with stress by denying the obvious.

Martin balled his mittened hands into fists. "It's Rick, okay? That's his jacket."

"But we don't know for sure."

“For fuck's sake, Shane! Here—” Martin clawed at the snow covering the body's face, uncovering Rick's frozen profile. He still wore his goggles. At the back of his head, a vibrant, red mass of frozen blood glittered. Martin recoiled, flicking the sanguine crystals off his hands.

Shane staggered behind a quinzhee and vomited.

“I think we can rule out death by misadventure now,” Peter said drily. He retrieved his camera and took a few more photographs. When Shane gave him the stink eye, he said, “I'm a reporter,” by way of explanation.

Martin had slumped over, hands on his knees, breathing hard. His hands were bare, his mittens lying in the snow a few feet away.

Peter said, “Someone needs to drive into town and get the police.”

Henry seemed to have the same idea. Or some idea that required complete expedience, because he beelined for the parking lot, leaped into his car, and tore out, tires spinning in the snow.

Only Peter watched him. The other two were still staring, aghast, at Rick's frozen corpse. Peter gained his feet and followed Henry. Was he running to get help or running from the scene of the crime? Wind gusted again, encasing him and them all in a wall of dim, cold white. When it quieted, he started forward again, running clumsily through the unevenly trampled snow.

Henry's car weaved, fishtailed, and then as Peter watched, slammed directly into a tree. His car perfectly perpendicular, blocked the narrow road.

Peter ran in earnest then, pulling frigid air into his lungs, sprinting toward the still-running car.

Henry lay slumped across the steering wheel, unconscious.

Peter tried the door and found it open. He carefully reached around and turned off the car, then undid Henry's seat belt. The man stirred, and Peter jumped back, still unsure. Martin and Shane had made it to the car and pushed their way forward, shaking Henry by the shoulder, rousing him.

Henry shifted groggily. “I've got to get to town.”

“It's no use,” Peter said. “The guy is already dead.”

“We've got to get the police. Where are my car keys?”

"I have them." Peter held them up.

"Give them back to me."

"I'd rather not. I don't think you should drive." Peter stepped farther away, out of reach.

Henry put his face into his hands. "My head hurts. Am I bleeding?"

"There's a little cut."

Henry took stock of his situation and said, "Help me dig this car out. I've got to get to town."

"I don't think anyone is going into town tonight."

Turning, Peter saw Kjell moving toward them, coming out of the darkness of the road and storm. Something about the way he moved seemed suddenly sinister. Or maybe it was his statement that seemed sinister. If Peter were honest with himself, he had to admit that Kjell could easily have buried Rick into that snowman. He was up there alone and wouldn't have to corroborate his story with anyone.

But then, what the hell was he thinking? Kjell was Nick's friend. More than a friend—family. On the other hand, if being a reporter had taught him anything, it was that anyone could do anything at any time, given opportunity and motive.

Kjell continued. "We should probably take Henry up to the lodge. This snow's getting heavy, and I don't think he should be outside. I think he's got a concussion."

Kjell coaxed Henry out of his car and then supported him while he staggered back toward the rest of the camp. The sun dipped dangerously low on the horizon.

Kjell came alongside Peter. "Nick has a sled, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, up by the quinzhee." Peter fought the urge to move out of easy grabbing distance. He would not make Nick's cousin the primary suspect in Rick's murder, not when he had a whole camp full of total strangers to be suspicious of first. Not when he had a man apparently fleeing when the corpse was discovered.

Still, he couldn't help but ask a couple of questions.

"Where have you been all day?"

Kjell gave him that same level look that Nick often did. "Are you my wife too now?"

"Nick went out looking for you because no one had seen you since morning."

"I've been painting like I said, just over that ridge."

"You stood in the same spot all day long?" The guy truly was insane.

"I had to, to get the series right."

"How are your toes?"

"Cold," Kjell said. "Did I hear someone say that a guy was dead?"

On the way back to the camp, Peter explained about Rick. It was a short story, really, so it only took about a minute to tell, even with dramatic embellishments.

"So I, a man who frequently disappears for hours, was assumed to be dead in a crevasse, but the actual guy who went missing wasn't noticed until he was dead? That's a little sad."

"I don't think it's sad. At least you have people who like you enough to go after you. Even Rick's friends just thought he was being a douche bag." Peter stuck his hands in his pockets. "That is a little sad, actually, now that you mention it."

Kjell nodded. "Is that Nick's pulka? It looks like he made it out of a kid's sled."

"I think he did."

"Well, let's get Henry on it. It will be easier to get to the lodge while there's still some light left."

"I want to wait here for Nick."

"That kid Martin can tell Nick where we've gone. I could really use a hand with this, and Nick can get to the lodge blindfolded. We'll have the fire going for him when he gets back."

Peter weighed seriously the possibility that Kjell was the murderer. If he was, the last place in the world Peter wanted to go with him was a deserted lodge in the winter. What if the reason Henry had tried to escape was because he was a witness—because he'd known who killed Rick?

What if Kjell wanted to get both Henry and himself, the nosy reporter, out of the picture?

A brief *The Shining* scenario ran itself through Peter's mind before he talked himself down.

First, Salmon Ridge Sno-Park was not haunted.

Next, he hadn't even started nosing around asking questions yet, so Kjell would have no reason to want to lure him to a remote location to whack him.

Kjell was merely administering the first aid that any responsible adult would give in this situation. Thus Peter trusted Kjell enough to draw close and say, "But what if Henry is the killer?"

He tried to get away pretty fast when we found the body. What if we take him to that lodge and he goes nuts and makes us into snowmen? What if he's trying to create his own demented snowman army?"

Kjell grinned. "You know, you really are funny. Nick always says so, but I never noticed it until now."

"You can always pull that pulka by yourself," Peter said, unamused.

"If Henry's the killer, he's rattled his brains well enough that he's not much of a threat to us tonight. And if he's not the killer, we could kill him by keeping him out in this cold. Do you want that on your conscience?"

* * * * *

Pulling the deadweight of an injured man on a pulka is hard. Your legs ache, your shoulders ache, and although the guy in the pulka may not have what would be called a life-threatening wound, your mind still goes straight to the worst-case scenarios. What if the weather gets worse? What if you, too, fall? What if your boyfriend, Nick, never makes it to this lodge, and you have to spend the night with two men, one of whom might be a murderer?

One of whom...

Really, there was nothing to say that they couldn't both be murderers, working together.

God, he wished Nick would arrive. He could finally feel safe and actually think about what had happened. He closed his Moleskine and ambled to where Kjell crouched, feeding split logs into the large stone fireplace.

The lodge was surprisingly spacious. It had a great room and two bedrooms on the main floor and a ladder that led to a third bedroom upstairs. It was the standard northwest A-frame cabin architecture. Two-story windows faced south from an interior made primarily of stone and unstained blond wood. There was electricity for baseboard heaters but no indoor toilet. The kitchen nook included a tiny, apartment-sized stove and unplugged refrigerator.

Confused but docile, Henry had happily gone to lie in one of the ground-floor bedrooms. He remained there, resting, clearly visible through the open door.

The sky outside was dark, an ethereal lavender. Snow fell as if it were down drifting from a torn ski jacket. Fear crept in again, and Peter used that energy, turning it around.

He said, "How do you and Nick know about this lodge?"

"My friends own it. They rent it out to skiers during the winter but always make sure it's vacant during Freezing Man, just in case we need to use it." Kjell cast a glance to the bedroom door. "I guess we finally did."

Peter dropped his voice to a whisper. "Do you think he's really hurt?"

"He's got a pretty big goose egg on his skull."

"How well do you know him?"

"Are you asking me this as a reporter?"

"I'm asking as a person who saw him very blatantly flee from the scene of a crime." Peter unzipped his coat. The fire and heaters had begun to work their magic, and although it was probably only forty-five degrees in the cabin, that was at least twenty degrees warmer than he had been in over twenty-four hours. Kjell, of course, was already shoeless and shirtless.

"I met him at the first Freezing Man about five years ago. We meet sometimes at gallery openings or at events that he and his wife are catering, but we don't go over to each other's houses."

"So you don't really know that much about him," Peter concluded.

"I know that he's a great cook and his wife is an excellent ice sculptor."

"Do you know if he had any connection to Rick?"

Kjell shook his head. "I've never seen Rick until Wednesday when we all came up."

Well, that took care of Peter's next line of questioning. He was beginning to regret coming up to the lodge when so many unknown and un interviewed people remained behind at the campground.

He stared at the snow outside, then saw a star, low on the horizon. A very blue star, bouncing along through the trees. Not a star, a headlamp.

Chapter Six

He rushed to the door and stood on the wooden steps, shivering as the figure approached. Nick led three other people along the track Kjell and Peter had left. Snow clung to Nick's beard. Peter's restraint failed. He ran forward through the deep snow and threw his arms around Nick like an actor in a one of those “there's no place like home” airline commercials.

Nick did not hesitate to wrap his arms around Peter, returning his hard embrace, nuzzling his frigid nose into Peter's warm neck.

“I'm sorry too,” he whispered. “When we came back and saw that body in the snow, I thought for a second—”

“That I'd managed to get myself killed after all?” Peter finished; he felt Nick shrug.

“I wish *my* girlfriend was here,” Shane murmured.

“He's not my girlfriend,” Nick said flatly.

“Don't mind him. He just wishes he had a girlfriend at all.” Martin tromped past them.

“Is Henry inside?” Janelle's worried voice jolted Peter out of his Hallmark Holiday Moment. Sensing his sudden tension, Nick released him.

Peter suddenly felt the cold through his thin sweatshirt. “Henry is lying down in the back bedroom. We should go in.”

Janelle nodded and made for the stairs. “Martin said he tried to drive into town, and hit a tree?”

“That's right.” Peter reached into his pants pocket. “Here are his car keys, by the way. Kjell thinks he has a mild concussion.”

Peter waited for her to go ahead of them. This might be the last chance for them to talk alone.

Nick seemed to sense this. “Where did Henry think he was going?”

“He said he needed to get the police. I think he may have panicked when he saw Rick's body. Sometimes people get that way when they see a corpse, but I don't know. He had a certain look on his face.”

“What sort of look?”

“Horrificed but not shocked. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect.” Nick dropped his voice lower. “You think he's the guy, don't you?”

“Not necessarily, but his actions are not what I'd call lacking in suspiciousness.” Peter shuddered and rubbed his arms. “And Kjell's got no alibi either, incidentally.”

“You don't seriously think my cousin killed Rick, do you?”

“No, but that doesn't change the fact that he's got no alibi. I'm just giving you the facts as far as I know them. How did Janelle react to the body?”

“Both shock and horror. I think you'd better go in now.”

Nick laid a proprietary hand on Peter's back, steering him toward the lodge door, where Martin and Shane stood stomping the snow off their boots and stripping off their heavy gear. Peter slid by them and ducked inside. Kjell and Henry were where he had left them. Janelle leaned over Henry's bed, holding his hand, talking too quietly for Peter to hear.

Martin and Shane stayed outside for a few minutes more, smoking a spliff and passing a bottle of vodka between them. Peter couldn't tell if Martin had actually liked his friend Rick or not. He'd certainly never had anything good to say about him. Martin also seemed like the kind of guy who covered up his sensitivity with extra doses of machismo.

And when machismo didn't work, apparently weed and vodka did.

Nick greeted Kjell with a bear hug and a huge smile. “I see you built a fire for me.”

“It was the least I could do after you rallied the unnecessary search party.”

“What else could I do? You're my favorite cousin.” Nick sat on the sofa next to Peter, their knees casually touching. “God, what a hell of a New Year's Eve.”

“It's not over yet. Want to see what I got done?”

“Sure thing.”

Kjell went to get his paint box, a wooden case with spacers in it that enabled a painter to slide wet paintings in and store them without having them touch each other. "Look out for the edges. They're still wet."

"I thought you said you were through with oils," Nick said.

"In the summer, sure, but in the winter it's too damn cold to use the acrylics. I have to drag out the oils, but then I keep forgetting how long they stay wet." Kjell held up his paint-smeared hands. "I think I've managed to stain everything I own this time out."

Nick eased the paintings out, laying them side by side on the coffee table. They were quick gesture sketches with little detail but exquisite color and light. Cycling through all eight of them was like an animatic of how the sunlight moved over a particular ridge throughout the course of the day. Nick paused over one. "Did you run out of cad orange?"

Kjell chuckled. "Yeah, I used it all on this sunset I painted last night. I had to switch to the pyrrole today."

Peter studied the paintings as well. He couldn't see the difference that Nick had mentioned, and said so. Painting shoptalk still eluded him to some extent.

"If you look at the orange in this painting, you'll see it's more muted, more natural than this one. Only mineral colors like the cadmiums gray down like that. Right here you can see where he ran out of cad orange and switched to a brighter, modern pigment."

"You can't get anything by Nick." Kjell said, shaking his head.

At last Martin entered, Shane in tow, red-rimmed eyes excusable because of drunkenness.

He flopped down on the sofa opposite the one where Nick and Peter sat.

"Thanks for letting us come up here," Martin said. "I don't think I could stand to stay down there tonight. I owe you one. Seriously."

"It's no problem." Kjell threw another stick on the fire. "If you really feel like you owe me, you could share a little of that bottle with the rest of us."

Martin silently passed the bottle over, and Kjell took a swig. He offered it to Nick, who found a shot glass, poured himself one, and slid both the bottle and glass along to Peter, who poured but chose to sip. He wanted to keep his mind sharp. The question was how to interview Martin without seeming unbelievably crass.

Martin saved him the trouble of asking.

"I don't know who would do it," he said. "Nobody up here had even met him before today."

"What about people who weren't up here?" Peter asked.

"Rick had plenty of ex-girlfriends who hated him," Shane said. "But none of them were planning to come."

"I don't want to talk about this." Martin suddenly stood. "I want to have a fucking awesome New Year's Eve. That's what Rick would have wanted."

Peter thought of pointing out that Rick would have most likely wanted his killer found and brought to justice, but then maybe Martin did know what Rick would have wanted.

But what Rick was, was dead. What Peter wanted was to find out what Henry knew about the murder. And he wanted a story. There. He admitted it. He wanted a story that he could sell to somebody outside this town. He wanted to believe that his desire sprang from some humanitarian sense of justice, but really he just wanted the story. The chagrin must have showed on his face, because Nick said, "Want to help me make some cocoa?"

Once they were sort of alone by the small stove, Nick cast a long glance sideways at Peter. "I can sense you sleuthing from here."

"I don't deny it." Peter tore open four envelopes of Swiss Miss.

Nick filled the kettle. "I think you need to be careful about what you say, especially to Martin."

"I think that now that you're here, I don't have much more to say to Martin right now. I think I want to talk to Henry."

"Now that I'm here?"

"To back me up."

"Back you up how?"

"In case he comes after me when I ask him questions."

"So you just want me around to be your muscle?"

"No, I want you around to be *my* muscle." Peter pulled what he felt to be a brazen smile, under the circumstances. "I like having you around."

"Then why even consider leaving?" Nick spoke so quietly, Peter could barely hear him.

"I wasn't considering leaving you. If I go, I want to take you with me," Peter said. "I didn't realize it would be so complicated."

"My job?"

"Your job, our relationship, life... I thought it got easier as you got older, not more complicated," Peter said. "I guess this is just a tiny bit related to turning thirty."

Midway through trying to sink his tiny, freeze-dried marshmallows, he suddenly felt Nick's whiskers, then soft lips as he pressed a kiss against Peter's cheek and whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"At least being honest."

* * * * *

In any relationship, trust is key. But honesty? Is complete honesty completely necessary?

Peter tapped his pen against his notebook. He couldn't really run with this subject. He thought maybe you had to be some sort of relationship expert to write articles about how to live your love life.

Relationship expert... Yes, he could consult several experts or at least paraphrase them.

What was that, honestly—a relationship expert? Somebody who'd been married a lot? That seemed more like a failed-relationship expert than an expert on how to handle being in love or even being married.

He cast a glance to Janelle and Henry. She was sitting by his bedside, rubbing his back and watching him sleep. He couldn't imagine watching Nick sleep. Okay, maybe if Nick had a concussion and it was medically necessary to watch him sleep, Peter could probably manage to keep up with Janelle's level of devotion, but only until qualified professional help arrived. Peter had a restless body and a restless mind.

So why did his heart, which had heretofore been prone to sailing the seas of love, suddenly feel like it had dropped anchor for good?

After downing their cocoa, Martin and Shane had gone up to the loft to stow their gear, while Kjell and Nick had pulled out the checkerboard.

In the other bedroom, Henry mumbled something in his sleep, and Janelle quieted him. Then, apparently noticing how they all started every time Henry made a noise, Janelle closed the door.

“You know, I’ve been thinking”—Kjell paused while he jumped one of Nick’s checkers—“about what happened to Rick.”

“What about it?” Nick asked.

Kjell dropped his voice to a nearly inaudible hum. “I think Janelle might have a motive.”

“A motive?” Peter scooted closer on the couch.

Kjell said, “I might be wrong about this, but I’m pretty sure that Rick was the same guy who was riding with Nanette when she was killed.”

“I thought that guy lived down in Snohomish County.” Nick stopped playing checkers.

“People move sometimes.” Kjell tapped the checkerboard. “Are you going to take your turn or just forfeit?”

Nick scowled and took a turn. Peter couldn’t believe Kjell could care equally about checkers and murder. “Who is Nanette?”

“Janelle’s younger sister. About five years ago she was killed in an avalanche while out riding on snow machines with a couple of boys. She was fourteen at the time, and Janelle took it pretty hard.”

Skepticism welled up in Peter. “Janelle doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who would murder a man for an accident.”

“Even if the boy she was riding with was not only five years older than her little sister but so drunk that he went to his car and passed out without ever alerting search and rescue?” Kjell hopped another of Nick’s checkers.

Peter had to concede. “That does change things a little bit. Are you sure that Rick is the same guy?”

“Not really,” Kjell admitted. “It’s hard to remember faces you saw once in the newspaper half a decade ago.”

“I’m sure it’s him,” Nick said.

“Why?”

“Janelle and I talked about it when we were looking for Kjell.”

“Why didn't you tell me this?”

“Because I didn't want you to start cross-examining her. We all have to stay here tonight, and being grilled for details by a veritable stranger does not make for a comfortable and screaming-free evening.”

Copy flashed before Peter's mind's eye: *Local artist Nick Olson was cross-examined today during the trial of Bellingham's infamous Snowman Murderer. When asked why he failed to identify the murderer's motive to this reporter, he said that it didn't seem polite.*

Aloud, he said, “It didn't occur to you that spending the night locked in a cabin with a killer might be dangerous?”

Kjell emitted a short laugh. “Janelle weighs a hundred and sixteen pounds soaking wet. Nick and I could definitely take her if it came to a fight.”

“If she's the killer, she's already managed to whack a healthy young man to death,” Peter pointed out.

“If she's the killer, she has no reason to kill anybody but Rick, so we're in the clear.” Kjell dealt Nick a crushing quadruple jump. “King me.”

“If PBS has taught me anything, it's that a killer will kill again to cover up the first murder,” Peter said.

“That's only if a snoopy reporter starts digging,” Nick countered. “You can see why I didn't want to tell you about Janelle. I was afraid for your life.”

Kjell snorted, and Peter's cheeks burned. “How can you think this is funny?”

“I don't. I really did think preventing you from investigating was the best way to guarantee your well-being.” At first Peter thought Nick had suddenly become a master of deadpan; then he realized that Nick was just dead serious.

“Of all the high-handed, arrogant—”

“What he's saying, in his dumb way, is that you're really good at finding out the truth. I think I'd take that as a compliment,” Kjell muttered.

Nick nodded in agreement. “What he said.”

Peter let it go...for now. "Okay, then, what if it isn't Janelle? We still have Henry's weird behavior. What if it's him?"

"Head-Wound Henry doesn't scare me," Nick said.

"What if it's a husband-wife team?" Peter pressed on.

"What if it's you?" Kjell asked with what Peter had now characterized as a familial bluntness.

"Me? What reason would I have to kill Rick? I've never met him before."

"That's what you say, but how do we really know that?" Kjell asked. "Nick's my cousin, so I trust him when he says he didn't do it, but you..."

"I—" Peter spluttered.

"Ease up, Kjell." Nick put his arm around Peter's shoulders.

"I'm just trying to make a point. I like you, Peter, but you're being really insensitive. People don't like to be accused of murder or questioned or second-guessed."

"I know, but ease up. Peter's got a valid point." Nick made a series of moves that finished mopping up the rest of the board.

Kjell sighed. "Dammit, how do you always do that?"

"I wait until you get distracted doing something like chewing out my boyfriend, and then I make my move." Nick gathered up the checkers and folded the board away into a battered, old cardboard box. He leveled his gaze on Kjell. "I do want to know one thing, though. If you're so worried about upsetting people with questions, then why bring up Nanette in the first place?"

Kjell moved back to the fireplace and sat, back to them, feeding the fire. Finally he said, "I just think that if she did it, she had a pretty good reason, that's all. I thought since you're obviously going to be writing a story about this, you should consider what might have made her do it."

"Murder is still murder, whether you've got a good reason or not." Though the temperature in the room did not change, Peter felt as though ice crystals had suddenly formed in the air between him and Nick's cousin. "But I appreciate what you're trying to do. I think I'll go lay out the sleeping bags."

As he was going, he heard Kjell say, "Your boyfriend's a real prick, Nick."

And Nick replied, “No, he's just a reporter.”

Chapter Seven

Alone in the small bedroom, Peter fumed. He yanked the sleeping bags out of their stuff sacks with unnecessary force and hurled them onto the double bed. It didn't take long for Nick to appear. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, arms crossed, keeping his distance.

"This is not the New Year's celebration I envisioned."

Peter cracked a tiny smile. "Me neither."

"The first night was good, though."

"It sure was." Peter sat on the bed, patted the space next to him. "You can come sit down."

Nick did. His thigh pressed against Peter's; his arm draped around Peter's shoulder.

He said, "If we were in a movie, this would be the scene where we have makeup sex. Do you want to make up?"

"I didn't think we were still in a fight."

"We're not, but..." He rubbed his hand along Peter's thigh.

He caught Nick's hand and held it. "I'm a little bit worried that we're in the sort of movie where having sex results in being immediately killed."

Nick laughed. "No, if Kjell's right, we're in a story of tragedy and personal revenge. People who have sex manage to make it through those kinds of movies okay. Sometimes they're even healed."

"What if Kjell's not right, though? What if we're in a slasher flick? The second I get your cock in my mouth, there's going to be some psycho breathing at the window, drawing up plans, about to make us into his snow sculpture."

Peter couldn't keep his eyes from going to the frosty windowpane. No killer lurked outside.

At least none that he could see.

Nick also appeared to be searching for the bogeyman. Their eyes met, and they shared an embarrassed laugh. They kissed, but not a smoldering kiss. A brief, reassuring transaction. Peter's eyes flicked up to the window again.

This time there was a face. Through the frost-smudged glass, he could definitely see the shape of two dark eyes peering in. He leaped back from Nick, pointing.

"It's him!"

The face vanished before Nick could turn.

"Who?"

"There was a face at the window." Peter backed toward the door. Nick went forward, cautiously but not timidly. He pushed the pane up.

"Don't stick your head out, for God's sake," Peter blurted out.

Nick ignored him, leaned slightly out the window, and said, "The outhouse is over by the woodpile."

A softly slurred voice outside replied, "Sorry, man. Hey, have you seen my phone? I think I dropped it someplace."

"Did you check your gear?"

"Yeah, it's not there. I guess I can't call anybody anyway, but it was a nice phone."

"I'll let you know if I see it." Nick closed the window and drew the thin red-and-white-checked curtain. "Martin's taking a leak out there."

Peter sagged in relief, took two steps, and flopped face-first onto the bed. "That scared the crap out of me."

He heard Nick approach, felt the bed dip as he climbed on, then felt Nick's big hands on his back.

"Baby, you're tense. That's to be expected. You found a dead body." Nick gently massaged his shoulders. "Relax a little."

"I found a murdered corpse," Peter clarified. "I am now having a difficult time relaxing."

"But if you manage it, then you'll stop scaring yourself with imaginary psychos and maybe be able to think rationally." Nick's hands moved down to the small of his back.

"Aren't you afraid at all?" Peter murmured into the pillow.

“Not really. The chance of there actually being some serial killer lurking in the snowdrifts is really slim. For one thing I'd have seen tracks, and the only footprints I saw in the snow led directly to Martin's fine entry into the yellow-snow-making contest.”

“But what if the killer has snowshoes with branches on the back of them that brushed out his tracks so that he could move like a phantom through the dark night? You have to keep in mind that this is Bellingham. We've already hosted Ted Bundy, Kenneth Bianchi, and John Allen Muhammad in our town. We're obviously a lightning rod for homicidal lunatics.”

“While it's true that they all lived here, they mostly did their killing outside of Whatcom County,” Nick countered.

“And then there's Gary Ridgway in Seattle and Robert Pickton right across the border.”

“All incarcerated or executed.” Nick kept up his gentle ministrations, and Peter found the tension in his muscles slipping away.

“Okay, if an unknown person who is sexually obsessed with snowmen did not kill Rick, then that means one of the other five people in this cabin most likely did. How is that better?”

“It's better because they have no reason at all to hurt you, as long as you don't antagonize them.” Nick rolled him over and comfortably settled his body beside Peter's. The pleasant, warm weight of Nick's thigh fell across his own. “If we can just all get through tonight, then you can start asking questions again once we're not all confined together. I'm not asking you to stop being you. I'm just asking you to rein it in for one night. You can ask questions after the police get here.”

There was a certain intelligence to Nick's line of reasoning. Peter said, “Does that door lock?”

Nick rose and demonstrated that it did, then, without being asked, locked the window as well.

“Can you get the lights?”

“Does this mean that you think we can make it without getting killed?”

“It means I want to make it without having Martin peeking through the curtains.”

Nick smirked. “And here I was thinking you liked the danger of almost getting caught.”

“Not by grieving, drunken bro brahs.”

“Agreed.”

Nick killed the lights, and Peter felt the bed dip as he climbed on and resettled himself against Peter. Again he took the lead, his soft mouth finding Peter's, teasing it open, going deeper.

After the previous night's semiclothed and frigid engagement, it was nice to let Nick undress him, to feel his hot skin, the tight curls of chest hair scraping against his nipples. Peter's cock moved against Nick's as they leveled up from sweet and comforting to hot and hard.

The world beyond the bedroom door receded into a universe made up of him and Nick and the friction between them. Then, in a blind and shuddering moment, it was over, and Peter was once again in a little lodge in the big woods.

But at least he had someone by his side.

Chapter Eight

A knock on the door roused them from a mutual doze.

“Are you guys going to stay in there all night?” Martin sounded slightly less drunk than before and slightly desperate. Peter supposed that Kjell and Head-Wound Henry weren't the New Year's Eve companions he'd been hoping for.

“We'll be out in a minute,” Peter called.

“What time is it?” Nick rubbed his face.

“Seven fifteen p.m.” Peter gave Nick's chest a last friendly scratch before rising to retrieve his clothes. As he did, he remembered the camera in his pocket.

He switched it on and clicked through the pictures he'd taken. The quinzhee. Sculptures. His and Nick's gay Frostys.

Then came Rick. He'd shot at least twenty images, figuring one of them would be good.

Nick finished zipping up his pants and glanced over Peter's shoulder. “Oh sweet Christ, I thought you agreed to give it a rest for now.”

“This is not questioning. This is reviewing my photos. And for the record, I agreed to nothing.”

Nick gave him a withering scowl—the kind of narrow-eyed, daggers-through-the-skull glare that gave even Peter, who was normally impervious to evil looks, pause.

He backpedaled immediately. “But I am, right now, agreeing that I will give the interviewing a rest.”

“Good.” Nick leaned closer, drawn, against his will, by the images. Once a visual artist, always obsessed by visuals. Peter angled the camera so that he could see it better. Nick watched impassively as Peter pressed Next, Next, Next. Then, “Wait. Go back one.”

Peter complied, wondering what had caught Nick's attention in the previous frame. It seemed virtually identical to the ones directly before and after it, just closer up. After Nick stared for a full minute, Peter was forced to ask, "What are you looking at?"

Nick pointed to a smudge on Rick's jacket. "That looks like paint."

"Yeah?" The significance of this eluded Peter momentarily.

"It looks like cad orange. It's an artist's color. I didn't realize Rick was a painter; that's all." Nick straightened up.

"Maybe he isn't. Isn't that the paint Kjell was—"

Nick cut him off with a silencing hand. "You said you wouldn't."

"But you brought it up."

"I know. I shouldn't have."

Nick started to open the door, and Peter rushed forward to stop him. "Please, can I ask just one more question? That's all I'll ask, I swear. I just want to ask Martin if Rick was a painter too."

"No, you can't."

Peter leaned in, whispering. "Will you ask, then?"

Nick shook his head. "I'm your muscle, not your legman."

"But what if Kjell truly did kill Rick? He seemed really sympathetic toward the idea of Janelle killing him for revenge. Maybe Kjell has a reason we don't know about yet. Maybe the girl was his secret, illegitimate daughter."

"No, that is not possible."

"But you yourself admit that it's exactly the same color Kjell used in the painting he was doing when we saw him the day we arrived."

Nick pushed the camera aside. "You can't even be sure that that's paint. It could be anything."

"It could be, but we could solve that question right now. We could go back down and look at the body again."

"You want to hike back down there in the dark? No. It's way too cold to do that. And it's stupid to go outside when we don't have to."

"I think we have to be sure. If only to know that we can rule Kjell out completely." Peter kept his voice reasonable, calm, hoping that his tone alone would inspire reciprocal reasonability. It didn't.

"First of all, Kjell's right about one thing: it's not up to you to rule anybody out. I don't know who you think you fucking are sometimes."

"I'm an investigative reporter. I investigate. It's my job."

"Investigative reporters investigate things like political scandals and corporate corruption. They read and decipher fine print. You are just a curious motherfucker who thinks he's Miss Marple and can't stop taking pictures of dead bodies."

"I do not think I'm Miss Marple, asshole. I think I'm Jim Rockford."

Nick gave him a long, perplexed look, as though he couldn't decide whether he wanted to laugh or punch Peter in the face. Finally he said, "Yeah, well, you're not. If you fall anywhere on the continuum of fictional detectives, you fall within the nosy-old-woman category. And as a reporter, you're sort of an ambulance chaser."

"They're one and the same," Peter replied archly. "And I'd like to point out that I am an award-winning ambulance chaser, so fuck you. But you are not going to derail my inquiry by insulting me. If you want me to believe that your cousin is innocent, take me back down to Rick's body and prove to me that what I saw wasn't paint. It's only seven thirty, for God's sake. We can make it there and back before prime time is over."

"You realize that even if we do this, it won't eliminate Kjell from our pool of suspects. It won't tell us anything except that the spot is or is not paint."

"But I still think it's important to know."

"And if I do that? If I go along with your absurd demand, what will you do for me?" Nick remained stoic.

A glimmer of optimism sparked up in Peter's chest. Nick was softening; he knew it. "I would think that clearing your cousin's name would be enough of a reward, but what do you want?"

"First, I'd like to reiterate that proving something to you doesn't clear Kjell's name, because you have no legal authority whatsoever. But yes, I do want you to believe me when I say that he wouldn't knock out a complete stranger's brains."

"Maybe he wasn't a complete stranger," Peter put in quickly.

"Are you going to listen to my terms or not?"

"Please, go ahead."

"After dinner, I will take you back down to the camp. If we go down there and find out that you're wrong and that it's not paint, you have to reconsider going to the interview in Austin."

"So if this one lead turns out to be wrong, I have to give up my chance at a better job? That is incredibly fucked-up, Nick."

Nick shrugged. "I'm desperate. What did you expect? If you're right, and it is artist-grade paint, then I'll move to Texas."

Without question, it was the dumbest proposition he'd ever heard. What did the identity of Rick's killer have to do with their relationship? Nothing. And yet before Peter opened up his mouth to say so, he was struck by the fact that they were arguing about where they would live together. Not *if* they would live together, but where. By default that meant that they would stay with each other—that Nick would follow him if he needed to go.

Great tenderness welled up, dissolving most of his anger—though not his sense of irony that Nick would arrange the challenge in a way that linked staying in Bellingham with intellectual failure. But that was an artist for you. Much emotion, minimal analysis.

"You've got a deal."

Chapter Nine

Peter lagged behind, not eager to face Kjell again, and not just because of the problem of the paint on Rick's jacket. He'd been called a prick by plenty of people. Men, women—probably some cats and rabbits thought he was a prick as well but had merely been unable to communicate their disdain. But Kjell's special status as Nick's favorite cousin made him want to make it right between them—elevate himself out of the doghouse.

That desire warred with his internal reporter.

Building a timeline of events came to Peter as naturally as breathing. The smear of cad orange on Rick's jacket meant that Kjell had put a hand on him the night he died. More than that, no one could verify where he'd been or what he'd been doing all that night and most of the following day.

But was that smear of color even paint? To be sure they'd have to go back down to the camp, and making that trek would be impossible for him without Nick. He just wasn't that good at orienteering in the dead of night through a snowy forest.

So Janelle had a motive, and the man who could back up her alibi not only had a concussion, but being her husband, Henry would be naturally inclined to support her, even if that meant he had to lie.

And Henry had attempted to flee the scene. Why?

Peter's eye fell on Shane, who stood in the kitchenette helping Kjell rehydrate freeze-dried camp fare. What was his story? Could he have killed Rick? He didn't seem intelligent enough to have tried to hide the body in plain sight in a snowman. Then again, that plan clearly had flaws, as had been demonstrated when the snowman fell apart.

Martin beckoned them over to the sofa, pouring out more vodka shots.

"This one's for Rick." Martin lifted his glass. Peter politely sipped, and to his surprise, Nick resisted the temptation to slug the liquor back. Peter took this as proof positive that Nick did feel at least a marginal amount of tension regarding their unsolved-murder problem.

Nick said, "I didn't get that much of a chance to know him."

"He was just the average shredder prick, but he was my friend." Martin sniffed. "This shouldn't have happened."

Peter almost asked if Rick had any hobbies, say, painting, then forcibly bit his tongue. To his shock he heard Nick say, "He must have been a little bit of an artist, though, right? Otherwise why would he have been up here?"

Martin laughed sadly. "He was up here because he knew Shane's sister was supposed to be coming up tomorrow. He's been following her around for a couple of months."

Ah, perhaps Shane did have a motive after all.

"How do you mean he was following her?" The words were out of Peter's mouth before he realized he was going to be speaking. Nick didn't seem to mind, though.

"Not in a creepy way. Just going to parties he knew she'd be going to, like guys do when they want to score with a girl." Martin suddenly seemed nervous. "I mean guys like us. I don't know what you guys do."

"Pretty much the same thing," Nick said. "Only it doesn't take months to get to bed."

Silent until this point, Shane said, "That must be so cool."

"You're welcome to join our team at any time, but there are some hefty dues that I don't know you want to pay," Peter called back.

Shane pinkened, laughed nervously. "That's okay. I'm pretty good where I am."

Silent until this point, Kjell said, "I'm going to go see if Janelle and Henry want some dinner." He gave Martin a short, severe look. "Maybe we should stop talking fondly about Rick for a while."

Martin nodded, though surliness edged his apparent compliance. "I get it. She doesn't want to have to think about him like he was a human after what he did."

Kjell coaxed Janelle and Henry out of the bedroom with the promise of reconstituted food. They sat close to each other, Janelle rubbing Henry's back intermittently.

Shane found a pack of cards and dealt out hands for gin rummy. The game provided a good distraction for all of them, except Henry, who was still too disoriented to play. He talked about the food, musing over various gourmet dishes that could be freeze-dried.

"Sushi would be funniest, don't you think?"

Peter gave him a smile. "Steak tartare would be pretty hilarious too."

Henry cracked a grin and laughed, then held both his hands to his head. "God, what a headache."

"That sucks that your car got wrecked," Shane said.

"Yeah, man, why were you driving away so fast?" Martin laid down three jacks.

Peter did not allow himself a smug look at Nick. He merely listened intensely.

"I guess I panicked." Henry prodded his food with his spoon. "I've never seen a dead body before. I just thought that I had to get help. I guess I screwed up."

"It's okay, baby." Janelle squeezed his hand. She laid down her cards and leaned back against the couch. "He asked me to forgive him, you know. Rick, I mean. He said he'd gone into treatment, and he had come up here to speak with me personally."

Absolute silence settled across the room. Peter didn't dare meet Nick's eyes as he asked, "What did you say?"

"I told him there was nothing to forgive. I said I hated him, and I always would. And I still do." She stood and brushed herself off. "I think I need to use the restroom."

"It's out back about twenty feet," Kjell said. "There's some paper by the door."

After she went, Martin began to cry. Tears leaked down his cheeks, and he brushed them away, glaring viciously at his cards.

"It's my fault," Henry announced into the dismal atmosphere.

"What's your fault?" Peter asked.

"Rick came to me beforehand and told me he was going to do it." Henry rubbed his face. "I told him that if he sincerely asked to be forgiven that Janelle might do it. He did feel remorse, I think. I believe that. But I didn't think he'd confront her here."

Martin threw down his cards. "He was a dumbass if he thought that would work. Nobody forgives anybody, really."

Shane said, "Sometimes it works."

Martin shook his head. "Only if people believe in God."

Nick shocked Peter by saying, "Then what do you think happened, Henry? Do you think Janelle..."

"No, no. Janelle wouldn't ever hurt anybody. Not even Rick. I think I know her well enough to say that. Besides, she was with me all night."

A gust of cold wind announced Janelle's return. She stomped the snow off her boots and announced that she'd called the sheriff's department.

A ring of puzzled faces greeted her. Finally Martin said, "How? By smoke signal?"

"No, for some weird reason the phone works in the outhouse. I only know because my phone rang while I was in there. They're a little bit behind because so many people are stuck on the roads, but they're sending two guys up on snowmobiles." She shrugged off her coat. "They said they could be up here around midnight."

"Did you tell them there had been a murder?" Peter said. He would have thought a murder would have ranked higher than stranded motorists.

"I said there had been an accident. I figure he's already gone, and we're all safe. There was no use taking up their time on a guy who's beyond their help, right?"

Peter did not like the sound of Janelle's reasoning at all, but liked it even less when Kjell, Martin, and everyone but Nick agreed. He began to formulate the idea that maybe they were all in on it somehow. That the entire Freezing Man festival had been a setup to kill Rick, *Murder on the Orient Express*-style.

He began to feel distinctly unsafe. Turning to Nick, he said, "Didn't you promise me a stroll after dinner?"

Nick nodded. "I did."

"That's not too smart," Janelle remarked.

Nick waved her concern aside. "We won't go too far."

Kjell said, "You better not. We don't want to have to mount two search parties in one day."

Chapter Ten

In the darkness of the forest, the abandoned Freezing Man camp seemed like a ruin of some ancient snow kingdom. When they got to Rick's body, Peter found that someone had covered it with a blue tarp. Drifting snow had nearly reburied him.

Happy that no one was around to see them tampering with the crime scene, Peter peeled away the tarp to reveal Rick. He carefully brushed the snow away from the mark on the sleeve. Up close, Peter could see that he had been absolutely right. The mark could be nothing but paint.

"See, it's right there." He pointed.

Nick leaned in close, not touching the fabric but examining the smear of cantaloupe-colored paint for a long time. Finally he straightened up. "I guess I'm moving to Texas."

And suddenly Peter wanted to be wrong, not because he didn't want a new and better job, but because of the naked pain visible on Nick's face.

Shakily he said, "Don't pack your bags yet. Just because it's paint doesn't mean Kjell's the killer."

"No, but it does mean that he knows something he's not telling us. I could see him not telling you, but holding out on me..." Nick gazed up at the wild night sky. "Maybe we should move. This town is screwed up."

"It's no more screwed up than any other place. It's just that other places don't have good reporters in them, so you never find out how screwed up they really are."

Nick appeared to take no comfort in this thought at all. "When we get back to the lodge, I'll talk to Kjell. But I want it to be me, alone."

Peter agreed, and together they carefully drew the tarp back over Rick's frozen body, tucking in the edges. It was as Peter was doing this that he found Martin's cell phone. He must have dropped it when he was trying to dig Rick out, when he still illogically thought Rick could be saved.

At least that was one mystery solved.

They made their way back up to the lodge, Peter following in Nick's footsteps, unspeaking. He wondered what was going on behind that beard but left it alone. More than Peter, even, Nick disliked being questioned about his feelings.

Peter left Nick at the cabin door, his heart once more warring with his professional pride.

He had absolutely wanted to have his theory validated—to have caught a break in the story, and yet he absolutely did not want Kjell to have had anything at all to do with Rick's murder.

He stared up at the fat snowflakes, still falling out of the pink winter sky, wondering if Edward R. Murrow ever had this problem. He couldn't imagine it. Whatever his personal feelings on the matter, he still had to write a story for the *Hamster*. Human-interest feature turned into a weird murder wasn't too bad an idea to pitch to his editor. He decided to phone it in.

He tromped through the snow toward the back of the lodge and the outhouse where Janelle had reported actually getting bars. Sure enough, somehow the exact geographical conditions in the frozen shitter were perfect for cellular reception. Just as he was about to dial, he remembered Martin's phone.

In fact, he remembered it with a kind of burning curiosity that made it impossible to keep from drawing it out of his pocket. Once the thing had come out, snoopiness won the day. He very casually checked for missed calls. There were thirty-four. Peter momentarily marveled at Martin's popularity.

The first five names appeared on the small screen. No one Peter recognized. He scrolled down and saw that the seventh name to appear was Rick's.

Nothing special about that; they'd been going to meet each other.

The call had been placed on Tuesday night at nine eighteen, after Rick was supposed to have left to go back to Glacier. The call itself was evidence that Rick had indeed left, or at least gone far enough toward town to pick up a signal. Why, then, had he come back?

Peter faced a quandary. If he listened, then Martin would almost certainly find out that he'd played his phone messages, an infraction on par with drinking your roommate's last beer while also wearing the guy's socks and underwear. But then, he didn't have to tell Martin that he'd found his phone yet. If he listened to the message from Rick, he could wait until they were about

to depart to return the phone, and he'd still have the inside scoop on what was probably Rick's last phone call.

Ethical quandary solved.

He started to listen to the messages. The first two contained references to paying Martin back, and the next four contained oblique references to pot and whether the caller could score some. None of them mentioned the drug specifically, but four consecutive phone messages that requested Martin provide poinsettias for people's New Year's Eve parties formed a distinct absent reference that took the shape of a five-fingered leaf. Martin was, without question, a dealer, probably of marijuana.

So what, though? In Bellingham, half the city sold pot. His best friend, Evangeline, had supported herself for an entire year selling "pot holders."

Last came Rick's message. Hearing the voice of a recently deceased person always gave Peter the chills, but static and distortion made Rick's voice that much more ghostly.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't take it anymore. I don't deserve it. I'm going to tell Janelle the truth when I get up there, and then you can fucking deal with her hating on you for a change. I don't care anymore. I have more than paid you back. I just want her and her fucking husband to leave me alone."

Oh my.

After pausing only long enough to locate his pen, Peter jotted down Rick's exact message, including the time; then he pocketed Martin's phone.

He needed to find Nick. He'd been going at the story all wrong. If Rick was going to tell Janelle a specific truth that would make her hate Martin and leave Rick alone, that could only mean one thing. Martin had been the other snowmobiler who had been with Janelle's sister and Rick on the day that she died.

He shoved open the heavy wooden door and immediately got shoved back inside. He fell back onto the wooden seat; Martin's hand clamped around his neck.

"Give me back my phone." An edge of hysteria tinged Martin's voice. Tears streamed down his face.

Peter clawed at Martin's sinewy arm, but the other man's grip was too strong. He kicked hard at Martin's legs. The man gave out a grunt and slammed his fist into the side of Peter's head.

“Why do you have to be so fucking nosy? I didn't want to do this. I don't even know you, man. Why did you have to make me do this?”

Peter hissed out two words: “fuck off.” He got his hand down, found Martin's cock, and twisted as hard as he could. Martin crumpled with a yelp, and Peter broke the choke hold long enough to take a breath. Then Martin's body slammed into him, pinning him into the deep snow. Against the side of his neck, he felt the unmistakable press of a gun barrel.

Chapter Eleven

“When I get off you, you're going to stand up and not make a fucking sound. Got that?”

“Yeah, I got that.” Peter coughed, barely able to get a word out. Not making a fucking sound was going to be pretty easy, he figured. Martin shifted off him, and Peter pushed himself to his feet. He kept his hands in plain sight. Only twenty feet away, the windows at the back of the lodge leaked warm yellow light onto the snow.

He stared at the window, willing anyone to look outside, to see the tableau, to help him, but no face appeared in the window. They were all in the front room by the fireplace. He wondered when Nick would come looking for him. How many minutes it would take for him to start thinking that Peter had fallen or gotten lost. It depended on how the conversation with Kjell was going, he supposed. One thing was certain—it would take less than a second for Martin to blow his head off.

“Walk.” Martin ordered. Peter obeyed, his feet sinking into the deep snow. Past his knee on some steps. Slow going. Martin marched him through a stand of trees, directing him on a course that he seemed to know well. Gradually the trees obscured the light from the lodge.

Nick would come for him; that was sure. And he'd be able to follow their tracks in the snow. The important thing was to buy himself a little more time.

“It must have been hard for you,” Peter said.

“Shut up.” Martin shoved him hard, and he went down in the snow. His gloves were still in the outhouse, and his hands numbed almost instantly. Peter struggled back up to his feet.

“I figure you're going to kill me now.” Peter continued reasonably. “I just wanted to say I think I can understand why you did it; that's all.”

“Why I did what?”

“Killed Rick.”

“Oh yeah, why did I kill Rick?” Martin's voice had a strange quaver, like he would start to cry again. Did he really feel remorse? Maybe.

And maybe Peter could parlay that into a few more minutes.

“I think you were really the person on that snowmobile with Janelle's sister. I think that you convinced Rick to take the fall for you.”

“I didn't convince him. He offered. He owed me.”

“Owed you?”

“Money. A lot of money. I don't even know why I'm talking to you.”

Because you're drunk and you're scared and you feel bad for what you've done, Peter thought. Aloud, he said, “Rick offered to take the blame for the snowmobile accident, and then he changed his mind five years later?”

“I know. It doesn't make any fucking sense, but Rick didn't make any sense. He paid the restitution, went to jail for manslaughter. All that without saying a fucking word, and then suddenly he gets into some damn twelve-step program, and he says he wants to make amends.”

“That's kind of a dick move,” Peter remarked.

“No shit. Who is he making amends to?”

Peter stumbled forward through the snow a few more feet. The ground had leveled off, and in front of him he saw a long, narrow clearing in the trees. It must be the river. He could see no water moving but knew the ice had to be thin in such a swift current.

Martin's plan became clear. He didn't mean to shoot Peter at all. He would force him out onto the ice until it broke beneath him. Peter slowed, falling down a few more times until Martin yanked him up by his collar. He prayed, to no particular deity, that Nick would be his old vigilant self and come outside to see what had happened to him.

Please.

“Keep moving.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did Rick owe you money for?”

“We'd gone in on a deal with some guys—big-time biker guys—to get a brick of weed and sell it. I sold my half, but Rick just gave his away to his friends. He didn't seem to be able to understand that these other guys would cut our balls off, you know? Asshole. When he finally

got it, he panicked. Said he was going to go to Canada and hide.” Martin gave a short, cynical laugh. “Like bikers can’t find you in Vancouver. Bikers own that town.”

“So you paid his half for him?”

“Yeah, I did.” Martin paused, and Peter could hear liquid sloshing in a bottle. Vodka, probably. “And Rick said that since I’d saved his life, he’d save mine.”

“Seems like a fair trade.” Peter barely moved forward now, inching along, trying to feel where the solid ground gave way to ice.

“I thought it was, but then he decided to go back on it and tell the truth. What good would that do? I have an engineering degree now. It’s all in the past.” Martin’s voice slurred slightly. Maybe he didn’t need Nick after all. Maybe if Martin were drunk enough, he could take him.

Or maybe alcohol would lubricate his trigger finger.

“Plus it would come out that you deal,” Peter added.

Martin shoved him forward again. “If you don’t keep fucking moving, I’m going to shoot you right here, and that’s going to really hurt. Once you’re in the water, you won’t feel anything. It will be easy.”

“You want me to just walk out there?”

“It’s all I can do for you.” Martin seemed on the edge of tears. “If you hadn’t stolen my phone, this wouldn’t be happening, okay? None of this would be happening. It’s your own fucking fault. Now move.”

“All right, I’m going.” Peter took two more steps. He knew he had to be out on the ice now, because Martin didn’t follow him. He took step after careful step, knowing that Martin would try to avoid shooting him if he could—to try to make his death look like an accident.

One more step and he heard a noise like thunder. The ice shook under his feet. In an instant he lay spread out on the ice. Dark, cold water swept over his feet. The rushing current pulled at him. He scrambled forward like a sea turtle moving through sand.

“Just let it happen,” Martin called. “It’s better this way.”

Peter struggled. Burning cold soaked his feet and legs as he pulled himself forward through the snow toward the bank, breath coming hard and fast. Swimming through the snow away from the dark water, the thunderous sound, the vibrations. At the edge of the river, he saw Martin

taking aim. Then from the thicket of trees Nick appeared, taking Martin from behind in a submission hold, forcing him to the ground.

Elation leaped in his heart. He had come. He knew Nick would come.

But the ice was still cracking.

Janelle rushed from behind Nick, heading toward Peter. "Stay right there!" She unwound her scarf and threw it out to him. Kjell followed close behind her.

Peter fumbled at the scarf. His numb fingers would not close around it.

"Just stay where you are!" Janelle had lain flat on the ice just out of arm's reach. Kjell grabbed hold of her ankle. With a last desperate movement, Peter shoved his arm out to her. He knew that her fingers were around his wrist, because he could see them, but he could not feel them.

"Okay, Kjell, pull!"

Suddenly he felt himself hauled up, out, free of the frigid water—and into a deep drift of snow. His body shuddered uncontrollably as he looked up at the sky, the snowflakes, and finally Nick's face.

He said, "Okay, you were right about antagonizing the killer. I won't do it again." He closed his eyes in sheer relief.

He felt Nick's gloved hand on his cheek. "Stay awake, baby. It's too cold outside to go to sleep."

* * * * *

Two snowmobiles were parked outside the lodge when they returned. The sheriff's department had arrived, cavalry-style, homing in on the GPS in Janelle's phone.

"We took a look at the body down in the sno-park." The older of the two deputies jabbed a finger at Martin. "Now, you want to tell me why that guy's tied up?"

Nick told the story while Peter shivered, naked and wrapped in a blanket, by the fire. The sheriffs decided to take Martin back down to town with them and advised the rest of the Freezing Man crew to stop by to be interviewed on their way back home. As they loaded Martin, weeping and drunk, onto the snowmobile, the deputy said, "We'll have somebody come up and move that car that's blocking the road in the morning. You folks have a happy New Year."

Epilogue

New Year's Day

Driving back on Highway 542, Peter didn't talk much and neither did Nick. The Audi rolled along wet blacktop, snaking through the canyon of snow that had so unnerved him on the way up.

Weirdly, Peter now felt no sense of impending doom, no fear that the walls would collapse on him.

Trust a near-death experience to adjust your personal threat level.

They reached Nick's cliffside house on Wildcat Cove just after noon. Peter went to make some coffee, glancing up through the great room occasionally to observe Nick's progress in unloading their gear. He hauled the sleeping bags, camp stove, and even the pulka into the foyer. Then he sat down on the birchwood modernist boot bench and pulled off his Salomons. He looked tired.

Peter brought him a whiskey-laced coffee.

They sat together on the bench in the foyer, as if neither one of them wanted to commit to fully entering the house. Or maybe that's just how Peter read it.

Finally Nick said, "I hated that."

"It did really suck," Peter agreed.

He let Nick drape an arm across his shoulders and pull him close. Peter curled closer to Nick's shoulder, resting his cheek against the fine cable of his sweater. Nick's hand rested lightly on the back of his neck. Nick said, "I won't hold you to it."

"What are you talking about?"

"The deal we made about Kjell. If you decide to go to Austin, I'll go with you."

Peter raised his head, searching Nick's eyes for any sign of resentment. He found none there. "But what about your career?"

"I'll find a way to work it out. It's not as important to me as you are." He spoke in such an offhanded manner that Peter nearly missed the significance of his statement. When he did, he felt tears prickling at the back of his eyes. His breath felt unsteady.

Touched but embarrassed by his reaction to Nick's admission, Peter said, "You're not just saying that because I almost got killed, are you? Because that shock and fear will wear off, and you'll still be in Texas."

"I *am* saying that because you almost got killed, actually, but I don't think that makes my reaction less valid. I think it's called a moment of clarity." He pulled Peter in close again and whispered, "You don't have to say you love me back. I already know you do."

Peter gulped, his throat tightened, and he could no longer see. He sat there, breathing deeply, trying to get himself under control. Failing to keep the quaver out of his voice, all he could say was, "I don't want to leave here. And I don't want to leave you for any job. Does that make me a failure?"

"How would that make you a failure?"

"Real men follow their ambitions. Always." Peter sniffed.

"I think you're thinking of straight men. Those real men don't have to try and live with other real men. Besides, plenty of guys follow their hearts. They just don't admit it out loud," Nick said. "And in regard to ambition, you seem to do a pretty good job finding news right here." Nick rubbed his shoulder. "Though I would prefer it if you could manage to just report news stories instead of actually being a news story yourself."

"But you have to admit, it gives me a great angle when I'm writing the piece."

"You're good enough that you don't need the extra angle."

"So just out of curiosity, did Kjell ever explain about the paint?"

"He did. He said that he broke up an argument between Martin and Rick the night before we got there. Just as he was saying that, it occurred to me that I should go find out what was taking you so long."

Peter blinked, sighed, and shook his head. “Well, dammit. I wish he'd told me that earlier. That's what I would describe as a critical piece of the puzzle that could have saved me a near drowning.”

“I'll mention it to him the next time I think he's holding out on me.” Nick petted Peter's back and shoulder for a long moment, then said, “Not to change the subject, but is that smell me or you?”

Peter laughed. “I think it's both of us.”

They managed, laughing, to get to the bathroom and get their clothes off without any further discussion of their lives or emotions, which suited Peter just fine. As he watched Nick strip off his remaining clothes, he thought, *This is mine.*

Aloud, he said, “I've made a decision.”

“You're going to stay naked forever?”

“Nice try. I'm not going to the interview, but I do want something in return.”

Nick watched him attentively, expression wary. “What is that?”

Peter laid a hand along Nick's jaw, scratching lightly at his whiskers. “I want you to get this thing off your face. You look like Grizzly Adams's biggest fanboy.”

“How about you take it off yourself?”

“You're on.” Peter found the trimmer and went to work, first carving Nick's mountain-man beard into various permutations, including the Vandyke and the seventies-cop handlebar with soul patch. Once fully shorn, Nick cranked the knobs on the steam shower. He picked up his razor and wagged it at Peter from inside the glass enclosure. “Don't start a job you're not willing to finish.”

Peter smiled. Getting a smooth, clean shave was going to be a lot of fun.

 THE END 

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“Red Sands”
Part of the anthology *Hell Cop*
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Nicole Kimberling

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