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Choir Practice

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Northern Michigan University

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CHOIR PRACTICE

By

Terri L. Martin

THESIS

Submitted to
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For the degree of

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2011

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Terri L. Martin is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

CHOIR PRACTICE

By

Terri Martin

A haunting, mysterious woman asks to join the church choir where Janese Trout and others are rehearsing for a Christmas cantata. It seems that since the woman, Derry Parks, came to town, things are not so peaceful in the northwoods community of Red Rock. When Weasel Watkins' frozen corpse is discovered in a taxidermy meat locker, police first think it is an accidental death. As things point toward foul play, Janese is drawn into the widening gyre of the investigation because of a possible connection to a competition that she organizes. George, her enigmatic live-in lover's name keeps coming up in cryptic phone calls, and people are disappearing. Janese's life is further complicated when her overbearing mother arrives, unannounced, and systematically intrudes into her daughter's life.

While grappling with the perplexing events in Red Rock, Janese's world transforms from quiet solitude into chaos. She contemplates her relationship with George and the possibility that she may be facing a change-of-life pregnancy. As Janese unravels the mystery of Weasel Watkin's death, she struggles to weave the pieces of her life together.

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2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Wayne, and to my first writer's critique group, "The Waite Street Writers."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank all the phenomenal and dedicated English professors and English department support staff at Northern Michigan University. Special thanks to my thesis director, Professor Katherine Hanson, who encouraged me to *yearn* as a writer.

This thesis follows the format prescribed in the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Choir Practice, a novel-in-progress, takes place in a rural setting well above the 45th parallel in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The narrator, Janese Trout, who is rapidly approaching middle age, would prefer to hide from the world in her cabin in the woods. However, the drama of her personal life and mysterious events in the village of Red Rock set the scene for anything but peace and quiet.

Though there are many essential elements to a successful work of fiction, the final product can succeed only if it resonates with the voice of its author. A strong, consistent voice bonds the reader and writer, and provides the foundation from which all other elements work organically. *Choir Practice* projects a strong narrative voice supported by an energetic pace, idiosyncratic characters, and humor that exposes the flaws and self-doubts of the story's narrator.

Donald Stewart explores the subject of self-discovery and finding one's voice in his book, *The Authentic Voice* (Brown, 1972). Stewart suggests that there is an almost spiritual self-revelation that a writer must go through in order to put life—or voice—into his or her work. A writer who tries to force another voice in her writing will produce work that is unconvincing and unlikely to engage the reader. As the narrator, Janese Trout's character emerges, so does the *signature* of the author through the narrative voice.

In *Choir Practice*, the use of the first-person narrative facilitates the reader/writer connection. An itinerant point of view gives the reader a sense of action as the story moves from the inner sanctum of the protagonist's mind to the outer limits of an

omniscient narrator. David Jauss in his book, *Alone With All that Could Happen: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom About the Craft of Fiction Writing* (Writers Digest, 2008), describes manipulating the distance of the narrator's point of view as a vital technique in fiction writing. In *Choir Practice*, the reader will experience a close-up shot of the protagonist's psyche through direct interior monologue, exposing her fragmented musings—her frustrations, fears, and desires. This voyeuristic mode, described by Jauss as “inside” the narrator, is intense, so the story cannot dwell there indefinitely. Shifting to the mid-range, indirect interior monologue puts us a comfortable distance from the protagonist, but maintains her voice. It is from this point of view that the narrator, Janese, tells us about other aspects of the story: her father, her love interest, her job. When setting the scene, *Choir Practice* will switch to Jauss's long shot, shifting to a less-biased, omniscient point of view, such as the description of the town, its local bar, and the weather.

Authentic voice, shifting point of view, quirky characters, humor, pace, and plot are the strengths that must work organically in *Choir Practice* to provide an entertaining and successful work of fiction. As the pieces build upon each other, the narrator's story emerges, and the mystery of Red Rock unfolds.

Chapter 1

She just showed up one night, saying, “Hi. I’m Derry. I’d like to sing in the choir.”

It sounded a bit like an AA introduction. Nonetheless, we all smiled idiotically and mobbed her in order to extract as much information as possible, mainly if she sang soprano (God, please) or alto.

“Welcome, welcome!” bellowed Pastor Sam Saara, as he extended a beefy hand toward her. She touched his fingertips delicately, as a Victorian lady might do.

Where had this woman come from? She had not been within our humble walls that past Sunday. Usually, people shopping around for a church sneak in after the service has started and sit discretely in the back pew. However, anyone—especially anyone female—who wanders in does not get past the RRUM women. RRUM stands for Red Rock United Methodist Church. The RRUM women are a tenacious group of church ladies who strive to fulfill their God-mandate of recruitment for “auxiliary activities.” Any woman, lady or slut, who dares enter the handicap-accessible doors of the Red Rock United Methodist Church will undergo a kind of toned-down inquisition. Before her hand has cooled from multiple welcoming grips, she will be asked to join the RRUM women.

This new woman appeared to be in her thirties. Blond hair cascaded around her head like a flaxen halo. I judged her jeans to be about a size six. She wore a stretchy top that displayed a tease of cleavage. She studied her surroundings with hooded light-blue eyes—bedroom eyes. In spite of blushed cheeks and bright lipstick, the woman exuded a pale, haunted presence.

“So, Dairy is it?” I asked. “Spelled like Humbolt’s Dairy?” Maybe she was from Wisconsin where they take their dairy products very seriously. I was used to odd names. I live in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula where people *proudly* call themselves “Yoopers”.

“Well, actually, it’s spelled D-E-R-R-Y,” she said. “Parks. The last name’s Parks.

“Very glad to meet you,” I said. “I’m Janese – rhymes with geese. JanESE,” I repeated. “Last name’s Trout, like the fish.” Needless to say I had gone through my whole life with my first name being mispronounced and my last name being ridiculed.

A warm presence prickled the back of my neck. It was James. Not Jim, mind you, James, like in the Bible. Although our James was no saint, quite the contrary.

“James Rush,” he said, extending a manicured hand toward Derry. “Baritone,” he said, “and your friendly television news reporter. Perhaps you’ve seen me anchoring the TV13 news?”

“I’m afraid not. I haven’t been in town long and don’t watch much television.”

James regaled Derry with a toothy, veneered smile and reached up to correct any hair that may have strayed. He did this with his left hand in order to display his bare wedding-ring finger. James had been married and divorced three times, much to the consternation of our pastor. Not that I have any room to judge, what with my supposed “jaded” living situation. I needed a roommate and George came along; so there you have it.

“Will your husband be joining us?” James asked. He could be so obvious.

“I’m a widow,” Derry said.

That took us aback for a sec.

James arranged his face into a perfect display of condolence. “I’m so terribly sorry—and you are so young.”

“Thank you,” she muttered.

I was beginning to feel like a third wheel or fifth wheel or whatever.

“Let’s get started,” our choir director shouted. His name was Hannu, which is Finnish. Nobody can pronounce his last name, so he’s just Hannu. Like “Cher” or “Prince” or “Lassie.” Well, maybe Lassie isn’t a good example. Hannu was a saint and hardly ever yelled at us. I attribute his tolerance to his strong Christian spirit. I do not believe, for one minute, that the rumors are true about the misuse of communal wine or prescription drugs. Alcohol, though frowned upon by the Methodist Church, can serve a legitimate purpose when carefully monitored. I allow myself one glass of wine a day, except on days when two glasses seem more appropriate, such as after a long, meeting-plagued day at work at the Copper Country Community College.

“All right people,” Hannu bleated as he banged his baton on the music stand.

“Take your places.”

Our pianist, Azinnia Wattles, pounded out a few scales while we noisily clambered up onto the choir platform that we shared with the pulpit and the stained-glass window of Jesus. The scene depicted in the window suggested good times. Jesus was surrounded by bunches of fruit, sunshine, and lush foliage. He wore a toga and sandals and held a lamb in the crook of his arm. No matter where you were in the sanctuary, you could not escape Jesus’ gaze. His normally benevolent expression had taken on a more reproachful look that evening.

“Where do you want me?” Derry asked.

“Squeeze in there next to Janese,” Hannu said.

This bit of shifting would cause the usurping of Eleanor Heimlick from her ordinary seat to a folding metal chair perched on the edge of the platform, and she was not a person to take such a maneuver lightly.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Eleanor, scoot over,” Hannu snapped. “It won’t kill you to sit on the folding chair.”

Eleanor had a logistical problem in that she was over six feet tall, not counting the chignon hairdo, and tended to block voices from the back row. I suspected this was a strategic move on Hannu’s part who hoped to position Eleanor where she would block the least amount of voices. If she capitulated to the folding chair, which she had not yet done, she would be sitting smack behind the pulpit. Anyone stuck there spent the entire church service staring at the assortment of paraphernalia on the hidden shelf within the unit. One can ponder a box of tissues and the “pennies for pastors” jar only so long before boredom sets in. However, Eleanor was tall and rigid and towered above us all, even when sitting. I wondered if, while perched on the folding chair, only Eleanor’s hair would be visible to the congregation and that somehow it would line up just right atop Pastor Sam’s head. Of course she wasn’t *that* tall, but the image made me giggle, which earned me a deadly look from Eleanor. A chill passed over me. Rumor had it that Eleanor was once part of an obscure religion from down South (I did detect a drawl) where they spoke in tongues and “handled” snakes. The story, if you believe it, was that her husband, who happened to be the minister, died of snakebite. Eleanor moved to Red Rock, where she had some family connections, and took a job teaching first grade at Red Rock Christian

School. She quickly moved up in rank among the RRUM Church women—mostly because she terrified them—and became the queen/president of the organization.

Eleanor shifted her distain of me to the substandard chair that was to be her new place.

“I can sit on the end,” Derry said.

Azinnia was still hammering out scales. Most of the choir had started to warm up their voices—except the soprano section, which was in turmoil because of the seating debacle.

“I want you between Janese and Eleanor. Sit!” Hannu barked.

We all sat abruptly with a unified thud. The piano music trickled to a stop.

Hannu always gets testy during cantata time. Every year, in addition to our regular Sunday anthems, we pull a musical program together for the community. Predictably, it has a religious theme and the plot is generally the same each year: People of the world are living in darkness, despair, and gloom. They have nothing to look forward to, since the afterlife had not yet been confirmed. Christ Child is born in a manger in a lowly stall because the inn is full. This is the innkeepers “humanitarian” solution for a young woman in the throes of heavy labor. A special star shines—presumably a sign from God that a major event is occurring in Bethlehem. Shepherds, while tending their flocks at night, marvel at the heavenly phenomenon and summon up some angels from the realms of glory. Wise men come from afar, following the star. They bring some nice gifts of gold and frankincense, and also the myrrh, which is a funeral embalming material. This particular gift does not bode well on the youngster’s future. The story plays out through the robust singing of the choir. The practices are brutal.

Hannu's sparse hair takes on a maniacal Gene Wilder appearance and large rings of sweat stain his underarms.

This year's cantata may have a welcome shot of freshness, due to the timely entrance of Derry. She was not only a soprano, but we quickly learned during warm-up that she was also solo material. This would do nicely for the solo piece where Mary sings to Baby Jesus laying all the world's problems on the little tyke and telling Him, with a multitude of high notes, that He is the world's savior. Derry sat primly, staring down at her lap. She smiled, but it wasn't a joyous expression—more fixed, like a mannequin.

The whole thing put Hannu in a very good mood. Perhaps, if the rumors about his habits were true, which I am not saying they are, he would be able to sleep without help that night. However, Eleanor Heimlick, likely still stinging from the chair downgrade, had been singing the solo “just for practice purposes.” Eleanor, nostrils flaring, glared at Derry who focused rigidly on the music folder that she held in her lap.

Somehow, James had managed to position himself behind Derry, which was not his normal place. As choir practice got into full swing, Derry and I were assaulted with James' vigorous singing— obviously intended to impress. I felt, as I'm sure she did, his spittle land on my hair with each word beginning, ending, or in any way containing the “S” sound. I was plotting ways to decommission James when Hannu noticed that something was askew in the back row.

“What are you doing there?” Hannu snapped at James. “You move to where you are supposed to be. You won't project there. And watch the S's. You sound like a leaky radiator.”

James slunk to his normal place where he would properly project for the baritone solo he was to sing. Now, when he sang of the lonely shepherd in the desert doing God-knows-what with all those sheep, the S-induced spit would find its way elsewhere, possibly hydrating the poinsettia plants that looked a little droopy anyway.

Once practice ended, I managed to elbow my way through the crush of yakking choir members into the brisk night air. I flapped open my coat, trying to catch the brace of cold. This peri-menopausal stage of life was for the birds. Snow had begun to fall, lazy and innocuous. What seemed so lovely that night—so Christmassy and all—would lose its appeal as winter progressed. The sparkling fairy-tale world would all too soon evolve into a cold, white monster that would make the gloom and despair that people endured B.C. seem like a walk in the park.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Derry said. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

There she was again. The woman simply materialized from vapor.

“So, where are you from?” I asked, trying to sound as if she hadn’t unsettled me.

“Oh, originally not too far from here.”

“Back to see family?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, welcome, um, we are happy to have you.” Boy, was that lame.

“My pleasure,” she said, equally as lame.

The unmistakable voice of our very own Channel 13 newscaster and baritone soloist wafted into the night air. I turned to look at the door as the choir straggled out, with James leading the way. He always talked in a booming voice, as if on stage for a Shakespearean play.

The Pastor's wife, Kaaron Saara, worked her way through the crowd and snagged me. "We have a funeral on Monday. Could I get you to bring something in on Sunday to contribute to the luncheon?" she said.

"Sure, I guess," I said. "Who passed away?"

"Paavo Luukinen, poor dear. He was ninety-three."

I had no idea who Paavo Luukinen was, but suspected he was another nursing home casualty. I had only rudimentary kitchen skills and always resorted to making a trip to the IGA to buy a bakery item—usually peanut butter bars—that I removed from the plastic container and put on a plate to pass off as homemade.

"Bring your peanut butter bars?" Kaaron said. "They are always so much better than one ones I buy at the IGA?"

The question at the end of her comment implied that she was on to my fraudulent bakery offerings.

"See you Sunday," she said.

"Peanut butter bars—Sunday. You can count on it," I said.

When I turned back to find Derry and suggest we car pool next time (a clever way to find out where someone lives), she was gone. No crunch of footsteps in the snow, no car door shutting, no engine turning over. Just gone.

I went straight home after practice and found George up in the loft throwing a pot. Wet clay hung from his beard and his bib overalls were a mess.

"Damn. Too wet," he muttered.

I could have been standing there buck naked with my hair on fire and George would not have noticed. When he was working on one of his pots, you might as well forget finding out if he wanted peas or corn for dinner or if he had paid the electric bill. All of those trivial things didn't matter one iota when George was in a creative mood.

That didn't stop me from trying. "Did you have any dinner?" I asked.

"Hmmm." He was furiously working a long funnel of clay that looked a teeny bit lopsided to me.

"Want a cheese sandwich?"

"Hmmm," he repeated as he moved his hands to the top of the piece where he tried to close it in a bit, presumably to form a neck. I figured he was making a vase. He actually made some nice ones, considering he had only been doing pottery for about a year. It was something his doctor recommended—as therapy. George's craft had moved very quickly from therapeutic to commercial. The Community Center—located on the campus of the Copper Country Community College where I worked—couldn't get enough of G. LaFleur pottery, which never sat on display long before someone snapped it up. Some said each piece had a story hidden within it. I admit the blobby, drippy stuff that he glazed on did seem a bit peculiar. Sometimes a face would emerge; sometimes a tree. It was a little creepy, if you ask me. I'm not much of an art critic.

I turned and went back down the loft steps into the compact kitchen of my cabin and poured my first glass of White Zinfandel.

"Well, I'm hungry and I'm making a grilled cheese. You can just be a starving artist," I yelled. I knew darn well that I'd make a sandwich for George, too. I thought about opening a can of tomato soup.

I heard a soft, tragic *splut* followed by a string of curses; the whirl of the potter's wheel stopped.

Uh oh, I thought, taking a generous swig from my wine glass.

George thudded down the steps from the loft. It had originally been a guest loft for the occasional visitor that wanted to see how “Mrs. Henry David Thoreau” lived, as Mother called me. When George moved in, he converted it into his pottery studio. I broke out into a cold sweat every time I looked at it: clay hardened on the floor, walls, and windows – even the skylight. If Mother ever saw it—

“Fuck it,” George said, and headed toward the bathroom, presumably to remove the clay from his person and deposit it on the walls and floor of the shower.

I buttered some bread and slapped it on the griddle, and added a few slices of shiny, yellow cheese. I decided not to bother with the tomato soup. I topped off my wine glass.

Eventually, George emerged from the shower. He slumped down into his seat at the table and absently picked up half of his sandwich. His dark blond hair, still wet from the shower and in desperate need of cutting, gave him a slightly wild look. The beard could have used a trim, too. However, his body—well, no complaints there—had kept good muscle from all those logging years. While he made his way into the second half of his grilled cheese, he seemed to come out of his defective-pot funk.

“Hey, Trout, thanks for making this,” he said. Calling me by my fish last name was George's way of being affectionate. Of course, if we got married, my last name could be LaFleur. I would gladly abandon “Trout”, which was the last name of Mother's original husband who had also been my father. I was their little surprise. My father, who

Mother described as a free spirit, died hang gliding while stoned on pot; a double high, so to speak. His death, which occurred when I was still toddling, left Mother with nothing but me. I guess it was tough, bringing me up alone with no family to speak of. Mom managed a motel and restaurant in town and worked long and hard to make ends meet. I think that was when the RRUM church became so important to Mother and me. Just about the time I graduated from college, Mother met husband number two: Sherman C. Caldwell *the third* who took a vacation every year in the Copper Country where he could shoot animals and gamble at the casino. Shermie, as Mother called him while they were courting, conveniently died during the honeymoon (probably because he was 86) leaving Mother a sizeable fortune. This turn of events helped build my cabin in the woods. Mother sometimes shared; there were always strings.

Currently, Mother—known to most as Madeline and to her closest friends as Maddie—was on a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico, taking a break before the holiday rush at the Superior Breezes Inn. She owned the place, which was clear at the other end of the Upper Peninsula (praise God) in St. Ignace. Thanks to Shermie, Mother no longer worked at a motel: she owned one.

George let out a huge sigh. “I guess I tried to make the damn vase too tall,” he said. “I still got the other two to go to work with you tomorrow for firing.”

Since the average home doesn’t include a kiln room, George used the one in the art center at the Copper Country Community College—we called it the 4Cs for short—to fire his masterpieces. That was where we met—not in the kiln—but at the art center in an enrichment class. My job at the 4Cs, among other things, included coordinating community enrichment classes, such as art, dancing, basket weaving, kantele lessons and

other life-altering opportunities. One night I had decided to stop in and try pottery. What the heck, it was free to 4Cs' employees. However, since I never will see a blob of clay for more than a potential mess (George says I'm anal), I gave up my wheel to a senior lady who wore a bright floral smock and, God love her, called me young lady. Though I failed miserably at pottery, George and I hit it off.

I thought about Mother and her occasional surprise visits. I had not yet told her about George who was forbidden to answer the phone. Quite frankly, I was sure she would either try to run George off or trick him into marrying me. Even though my biological clock was winding down at an alarming rate and the potential for grandparent-hood remote, Mother was intent on meddling in my life, giving me ridiculous advice about men. According to her, a woman should be married at least once, even if she were to get divorced. Like having lots of shoes, it was something women do. I looked at my wine glass, which was empty, again. Had I already had my daily allotment?

"Earth to Janese," George said.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I was thinking about Mother."

We sat in silence for a while. George probably thinking about clay and me thinking about *her*.

"Um, so how much for the pieces I'm taking?" I asked.

"Oh, seventy-five—the usual. Ah, how was choir practice?"

"Same ol' – except there is this woman, Derry, who just showed up. She sings beautifully and wanted to join. She's never been in on Sunday, at least that anyone's noticed, and I have no idea why she's in town." My glass was still empty and I got up to refill it. I didn't offer George any because he didn't touch the stuff—at least not anymore.

“Yeah? Well, maybe they came here because of the hiring at the prison,” George said.

“See, that’s the thing,” I said, sitting back down at the table. “There is no *they*. She says she’s a widow. Don’t you think it’s strange that a single woman—a widow at that—would come here? I mean she might have family, but she was kind of vague about it. And she’s quite attractive,” I added. Those pale blue eyes were still with me.

“Ah, then I bet Rushinski was sniffing around her.”

Rushinski was James’s real last name. He had shortened it to “Rush” for show-biz purposes. On those rare occasions when George attended church, he made a point of calling James *Jimmy* or *Jimbo*, just to annoy him. Somewhere, over the Wisconsin border, George and James shared a history. I could never find out much about it, except it went back to their days of working for Plante Forestry Products. As one might guess, forestry products are trees. To Plante, trees are potential logs, but they don’t call them logs, they call them forestry products, which is more politically correct.

“So this Derry woman just showed up, eh?”

“Yeah, and she can sing. I think she’s going to do the solo for the cantata. I don’t think Eleanor is happy, either.”

“Oh yes, Heimlick. She’s the old battle ax that screwed me outta getting that custodian job at the school,” George said.

“Well, you have your pottery now,” I said.

“True. But if the disability pay stops—”

“You’ll get a job. There’s always the prison.”

George smiled. “Don’t think I’d check out with them.”

“How come?”

“Oh, that’s between me and my shrink,” he said.

“Same as the logging accident.”

“What do you want to know about the accident?”

“You never said what *really* happened, only that someone died, and that you could have prevented it.”

“Yeah, well I don’t exactly remember it; that’s why I go to the head doctor. He says I’m suppressing things.”

“And he’s trying to *un-suppress* you?”

“I guess. Let’s not talk about it, okay?”

George had been living with me for several months, and refused to open up. He went to regular court-ordered appointments with a psychiatrist or psychologist—someone in the mental health field. I hadn’t seen much progress.

I cleaned the congealed cheese off the griddle while George put the dishes in the dishwasher. I retired my wineglass for the evening and headed for the bedroom. Once the guest loft had become a potter’s studio, George had the choice of sleeping up there on the futon or with me in my nice pillow-top bed. The man liked his comfort, and since I wasn’t collecting rent in the conventional sense, I felt due some sort of compensation. Normally, George was quite accommodating. However, that night he instantly fell asleep. I thought about his vase that apparently self-destructed when it was stretched too thin. Sometimes I felt that way, stretched too thin and ready to ooze into an amoebic puddle. I envied George’s quiet strength—his resolve to invert his soul and emerge with a new identity; to reshape like a lump of clay. It made him maddeningly unreachable, and

alluring. George was different than the other men I had known who basically wanted sex, beer, food, fishing, and football, in varying order.

I dozed off, thinking about ropes of clay and the stacks of projects on my desk at work. I dreamed that I was ensconced in an igloo with no windows and no doors. I lay there, cocooned in the oppressive, hot confines of a mummy sleeping bag with no zipper. The heat was overwhelming; another damn hot flash; God, I hated those. I saw the rheumy eyes of my gynecologist as he said in a nasal monotone: *they can go on for years; it's still not too late*. . . . The igloo started to drip, melting away. I was in my office, the igloo builders all pounding on my office door, calling me names.

And then George shouted something weird that sounded like “gaaa”, which jolted me awake, *thank God* not in a mummy sleeping bag or an igloo, but instead in George’s house of horrors.

George moaned like a distant foghorn, low and painful.

“George, wake up,” I whispered, nudging him gently. “You’re doing it again.”

“Moomooooo.” The words ran together, sounding like a deranged cow.

“George! Wake up!” This time I jabbed him. That did it.

He sat up in the darkness. “Hey Trout, was I snoring? Take it easy. I’m gonna have a bruise,” he said massaging his ribs.

He turned to me. “Was I having the dream?”

“Apparently.”

“I guess we’re both wide awake,” he said.

“Yeah. I was having a doozie of a dream myself.”

“What about?”

“Igloos.”

We were quiet a moment.

“Igloos,” George said.

“Uh huh. Probably because of the New Year’s Eve thing,” I said.

“Mmm?”

“You know, the igloo building competition that 4Cs sponsors. It started out as a spur-of-the-moment-fun-alternative-to-getting-drunk on New Year’s Eve and now it’s, well, it’s just ugly. Do you know that people cheat?”

George gave a snort. “Really?”

“I mean they’re supposed to wait until December 26th,” I said. “They can’t start until the day after Christmas, and I’ve heard that Bucky Tanner—you know Bucky’s Taxidermy—stores stuff he makes ahead in his big walk-in freezer that he’s supposed to keep animal carcasses in. Yuck. All so he can beat Weasel Watkins.”

“Those two go way back,” George said. “So you have to run the thing?”

I gave George my most withering look. I had told him all about how coordinating the igloo contest had fallen on my desk. It had been Brenda Koski’s idea—only she called it an Eskimo contest—but somehow the project had gotten shoved off on me. Brenda was the resident floozy and ditz at the 4Cs. Her title varied, depending on who she was chummy with. I had been racking my brain to come up with a way to pay her back, but so far had only been able to think of things that would get me fired and possibly arrested.

George and I lay in the semi-darkness, listening to the silence. George shivered.

“Want some hot cocoa?” I said.

“Nah,” he said looking at me.

I had seen that look; I liked that look. It was my turn to shiver. I prefer to think it was desire causing my chill rather than the slick of peri-menopausal sweat that I had produced. Whatever the cause—and I was pretty sure it was George’s finger tracing down my. . . Anyway, I didn’t want any cocoa, either.

Chapter Two

As I parked in Lot B at the Copper Country Community College, I noticed that I had beat Brenda Koski in—or at least her big, pretentious Lincoln Navigator was not there. When I got to my office, the evil red eye on my phone message light blinked at me. I started some coffee, booted up my computer, and dialed into my voice mail. The first two messages were people asking about getting entry forms for the igloo contest and the third was from someone inquiring about folk dancing lessons. The fourth message took me a while to figure out.

“Yeah,” it began. “Tell that prick—‘scuse my French—tell that jerkwad Weasel Watkins to quit poking around my place, eh? If he’s gotta beef, he needs to come face to face. Next time I call the cops—or worse.”

The gravelly smoker’s voice was unmistakable: Bucky of Bucky’s Taxidermy. Every year, when Bucky won the igloo contest (this year’s first prize was two season tickets to the Green Bay Packers football games) Weasel Watkins swore he cheated. According to Weasel, Bucky stashed pre-fab igloo parts in his freezer before December 26th. What had begun as a wholesome and fun activity had evolved into a monster.

The first contest had been on a New Year’s Eve when we had a big, wet snowfall—perfect for packing. Kids were out cruising the three blocks of Red Rock when the girls challenged the boys to a quinzhee-building contest. While igloos are constructed of ice, quinzhees are basically hollowed-out piles of snow that provide emergency shelter in a winter wilderness setting. The kids who built the make-shift quinzhees selected one boy and one girl to be lodged in their respective shelters and see who could stay there the

longest. Plans were made for food, soda pop, and sleeping materials. However, sanitary facilities were not part of the construction, which forced the girl—who had had an extra large Diet Coke for dinner—to default. In the spirit of fairness, (the girl being at an anatomical disadvantage and less inclined to seek relief where she was to sleep and eat) a tie was declared and the couple was crowned King and Queen of the quinzhees. A brief coronation ceremony took place, which involved snowballs being crammed down the king and queen’s backs and the brutal destruction of the quinzhees. During the contest, the citizens of Red Rock abandoned their television programs and came outdoors to cheer on the kids. Everyone sang Auld Lang Sang and went home with rosy cheeks and a blood alcohol level of .0. Eventually, the Copper County Community College had agreed to sponsor an annual contest. The activities expanded to include the whole community (with the king and queen still being selected from the teen population) and involved a chili cook off, tug of war, sled races, and various other wholesome activities.

Somewhere along the line, it got ugly.

I deleted Bucky and cued the last message. I got up to get a cup of coffee while it played. Whoever it was, spoke in a loud, distorted whisper. I stopped mid-pour to listen.

First time through, the cryptic message made no sense—other than two words: *ask George*. That didn’t actually make sense, but at least I understood it. I replayed the message. It sounded like the letter L then the letter T followed by some numbers. I played it again. *L T 3-4-2-9-9* a pause, then *Ask George*. Was it some kind of weird phone number—maybe in Canada or something? They had odd zip codes, but I thought that their phone numbers were like ours. And was it a man or woman? Damned if I knew. It

was either a man trying to sound like a woman or vice versa. I wrote down the message: “L-T-3-4-2-9-9, with a side note: “ask George.”

Speaking of George, I remembered that I had his pottery in my car that needed to go over to the art center for firing in the kiln. I vaguely recalled him warning me that it shouldn't get too cold or too hot or something. I dashed out of my office—never did get my coffee—and hurried to the parking lot. Brenda Koski's big Navigator SUV was parked so close to my car that my driver's car door could only be opened about six inches. Perhaps someone anorexic could squeeze through, but not me. I also noticed that the wheel wells of her SUV had huge mounds of snow packed up in them. For some reason, I loved kicking snow out of wheel wells—felt compelled to do it. George said it was my obsessive/compulsive disorder. There, on Koski's car, was a prime icy snow hump begging to be dislodged. I casually gave it a kick, which scuffed the toe of my boot and hurt my instep. The ice held steady. I opened the hatch of my car and got a hammer out of my tool kit. My blows with the hammer only produced a few chips of ice, one of which lodged between my contact lens and my eyeball. I blame my blurred vision on the inaccuracy of my next hammer swing. Did you know that splash guards are really flimsy—brittle, actually, especially when encrusted with ice? There was a bad noise—a cracking sound, and an impressive slab of ice fell to the parking lot with a fractured piece of plastic splashguard imbedded in it.

Uh oh.

I stood and looked around. I was the only one in the parking lot. The distant scrape of a snow shovel reverberated off the buildings. I was certain that Brenda had insurance—good insurance. Anyway, that's what happens when you park so close to

another car. It gets the owner all upset and the adrenalin pumping. I would have just gotten into my Subaru and driven off if there hadn't been the problem of *how* to get in my car. Besides, you see all kinds of things that are far more intentional than a little chip in the splash guard—well, ok, a fairly good-sized break. You see obscene things written in the salt residue, like, “wash me bitch” or scratches that you know were intentionally done with keys, or major dings in the doors. No, a little nick—well, ok, a fairly good snap—in the splashguard, which is really just ornamental anyway, is certainly no cause for concern. Just a victim of the harsh Michigan winters, as I saw it.

I quickly put my hammer away, took one more look around, and climbed into my car through the passenger door. I crawled over the console, careful to avoid a bodily violation by the shift lever and maneuvered into my seat. In the process, I tore my coat pocket, which hooked on the shift knob and one of my gloves (leather—a gift from Mother) fell into the muddy slush on the floor mat. I was feeling less guilty about the tiny bit of damage that had happened to Brenda Koski's car.

My brain was completely numb after enduring one of those long, boring meetings that makes you either contemplate suicide or vow to cast off civilization and become a subsistence-living recluse. I could make my own shelter, hunt and gather food, and make my clothing from the animal hides. I would have no phone, no computer, no fax machine, and, best of all, no meetings. I would talk to myself—listen if I wanted, or ignore myself. Mother would never find me. George—well, I'd like him to come, too. He could set up a manual potter's wheel. We'd live on the proceeds from selling his pottery. Eventually, we'd build a crude cabin—strictly primitive: no electricity or running water. I thought

about going to the outhouse in the winter. I'd done that once on a winter camping trip. The toilet seats had been colder than the surface of Pluto.

Or, I could have a little wine and enjoy a quiet dinner with George. After all, it was Friday, with two glorious days of no bizarre phone messages, long-winded meetings, or moral dilemmas. I did a mental inventory of my wine and food supply. I was pretty sure the wine was low and certain that there was nothing much to eat in the fridge. Also, I (miraculously) remembered that I had promised to bring "bars" to church Sunday for what's-his-name's funeral that was on Monday afternoon. I would have to stop at the IGA. Of course, their wine prices were exorbitant. If I wanted a bargain, I knew I had to stop at the Bayview Bar and Grill for a box of my favorite White Zin. I hated going in there, with all the old farts sitting at the bar, watching me as if I were an alien from outer space.

The IGA had the peanut butter bars and I picked up some ground beef and hamburger buns, a bag of chips, and some deli baked beans and slaw. As an afterthought, I selected an apple pie from the bakery. I had sworn off desserts until my clothes quit shrinking. George, of course, looked like an ad for a crop walk (also an event that I coordinate) and could eat all he wanted without gaining an ounce.

Inside the Bayview Bar and Grill, the air hung stale with decades of smoke and a spilled-beer-Friday-night-fish-fry smell. It was dark, which was probably for the best. At one time, there had been a large picture window with a view of the bay. Herb Heinkkala, who is the Bayviews's proprietor and perpetual bartender, boarded it up after the health department nearly shut him down. His logic is that if they can't see the grime, nobody cares. I shudder when I think about the kitchen. Once, when I went to the fish fry, (that

hot grease will kill *anything*) the cook came into the dining room to talk to Herb. He sported an apron that appeared to have been worn when he pulled the engine on his snowmobile. His hair hung in greasy strings, and the grizzled stubble on his chin bore evidence of his chewing and spitting habit. Hot grease notwithstanding, after meeting the cook, I avoided the Bayview's cuisine.

Country music thumped so loudly that I suspected the cockroaches were packing up to move. Eventually, my eyes adjusted to the hazy dimness and I headed toward the wine cooler that stored the take-out beverages. Several men sitting at the bar rotated on their stools and watched my progress. I endured this inspection, as did every woman, each time I came in the place. I took a quick look around. It was pretty empty. Two guys were playing pool; one had a cigarette hanging on his lip. A couple sat huddled in the far table, crouched over their drinks. I recognized the coiffed backside of the man's head. It was none other than our church choir's finest baritone, James Rush. And, well, I'll be damned, I thought, if it isn't the lovely and mysterious Derry Parks sitting across from him. She appeared to be rummaging in her purse for something, so didn't notice me—I hoped. I admit that I was a little surprised to see that Derry had succumbed, at least to the degree of meeting in a north woods bar, to one of James' propositions. I sidled over to the cooler and snagged a box of Gallo White Zinfandel, and set it on the bar by Herb.

"Hey, Janese," Herb shouted to be heard over the blaring music. Then he said something about my cottage.

"What? My cottage? I yelled back.

"COLLEGE. HOW-ARE-THINGS-AT-THE-COLLEGE?"

“GREAT, HERB, JUST GREAT,” I shouted back, straining my vocal cords. They were out of whack anyway, since cantata practice had started. At least I didn’t have to worry about James and Derry overhearing me.

I think Herb told me how much for the wine and I slid my debit card toward him. He looked at the card as if were toxic. Of course he couldn’t fudge the books if there was a record—like from a debit card. Mercifully, the song ended.

“Sorry. I forgot to hit the ATM—no cash.” My voice rasped like I’d been shouting at a football game. He sighed and scanned the card, then tossed it back. I signed the appropriate slip and scuttled past the men at the bar.

“Ya gonna have a little party, eh?” One of them said. Another snickered. I wondered if saving a few bucks on wine was worth the harassment. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder at Derry and James. She had her head tossed back and was laughing. I’d have bet anything he had his hand on her knee, but of course I couldn’t see. Well, to each their own, I thought as I passed through the squealing door into the brace of fresh air and brightness. I remembered how aloof Derry had been toward James at choir practice—avoiding him, it seemed, when she disappeared so quickly outside the church. Still, he could be charming in his own, narcissistic way. When I got to the parking lot, I saw that someone had parked a truck so close to my driver’s door that I couldn’t possibly get in. Ditto on the passenger-side. I may have said a bad word or two as I hit the unlock button and flung open the back hatch. “Why me?” I muttered. Perhaps I should have reported the damage to Koski’s car. After all, even though there were no witnesses, God was watching, and He sends signs. Monday, first thing, I’d fess up. Maybe.

It was nearly dark when I pulled onto my road. A couple of inches of snow had fallen and a single set of fresh tire tracks wound its way down the street. George may have taken the truck and run out somewhere. Sometimes he went to the Silver River Tavern to get a deep-fried donut. It was a strange thing, having fried donuts and beer on the same menu. I wondered if I should try to grill the burgers in the garage or fry them in a pan. I had pretty much decided on the frying pan when I pulled into the driveway and saw not only George's truck still parked there, but another car as well. It looked vaguely familiar, but was so caked with road salt that I couldn't even tell what color it was. Whoever it belonged to had blocked the garage door, forcing me to lug the groceries in through the service door.

I clamored into the miniscule entryway of my cabin, as the peanut-butter bars slipped out the grocery bag and smashed onto the floor.

"Well, sh—, MOTHER! —what're you doing. . .I thought. . .aren't you on a cruise?"

She was sitting in George's favorite chair and he was perched on the edge of the couch, as if ready to bolt.

"Hello to you, too, Janese," Mother said, rising from her chair. She and I met in the middle of the living room and exchanged an airy kiss. "Cruises do come to an end—thank God. Are you growing out your hair, dear?" she asked, her eyes scrolling me like the cursor on a computer screen.

I absently touched my hair. Perhaps the roots were starting to show.

"Being a blond is so much trouble, isn't it? That's why I'm back to my natural color," she said.

I hadn't noticed, until then, that Mother's hair was an unlikely shade of red. Was that new? She sat back in her chair and smiled. "George, here, has been a wonderful host. Thank heavens for instant coffee!" She took a sip, winced, and set the mug on my oak coffee table. My eyes shifted to the mug, wondering if it would leave a ring.

"I am so sorry I didn't call first, Janese. I tried, but I kept getting your answering machine."

"Did you leave a message?" I asked.

"Of course not dear. I refuse to talk to machines." Her eyes shifted around the room. "I see you've done some, uh, rearranging of things." She gazed up at the vaulted ceiling of the living room and her eyes darted toward the loft/erstwhile guest room. She lowered her chin and looked at George who moved even closer to the edge of the couch.

"Well!" I chirped, "Isn't this just lovely? I'm going to fix some burgers for dinner. George, come help me."

George shot off the couch and retrieved the box of wine that I had dropped in the middle of the hallway. We stopped briefly in the kitchen to deposit the groceries and, without speaking, moved toward the bedroom door where we became entangled until George backed off and allowed me to enter. I gently shut the door behind us.

"What is she doing here?" I hissed. "Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"You told me not to, remember? And I tried to call *you*," he snarled. "Don't you ever have your cell on?"

"I keep forgetting. Why did you let her in?"

“Like she gave me a choice.” George shot back. “I was doing some sketching in the loft when someone knocks on the door. When I open it, she hardly gives me a look then sashays in and asks where are you and who am I.”

“And you said . . .?”

“I told her you were at work and that I was George, a friend. And she says is that so? I still didn’t know who the hell she was and when I asked, she said she was Madeline, your mother. I had just gotten her some coffee and sat down when, thank God, you came home. Why the hell do you pay for a cell phone if you never turn it on? Christ, it feels like the inquisition has arrived.”

“It *has* arrived, George,” I said in a chilly, calm voice. “And if you chose to leave—and it is a choice that I would not make lightly—please know that I will put all your stuff out in the driveway and set fire to it. That includes your potter’s wheel.”

George looked as though he were considering his options.

Could he fit through the bedroom window? It was one of those crank-out jobs with a screen that always hung up in the mini-blind. There really was no escape, except directly through the belly of the beast whose name was Madeline.

I slid into the kitchen and put the groceries away. Mother was no longer sitting in the chair and I spotted her fiery-red hair moving about in the loft. That hair would keep her safe in the woods during hunting season. I also noticed her overnight bag—a very large one—sitting at the base of the steps. She came to the loft railing and looked down at me.

“What, in God’s name, is all this—this, stuff up here?”

I stuck my head in the fridge, trying to buy some time.

“Wine, Mother?” I asked.

“I asked you a question, Janese. What is this . . . mess? And yes, wine would be nice. I need to get that nasty taste of instant coffee out of my mouth.”

Thumping came from the bedroom. Maybe George was trying the window. I was deadly serious about my threats of arson. All the men in my life had abandoned me: my father, a couple of boyfriends, and my fiancée Randall who, I found out, was already married. Of course my father died, but that was because he was acting like a fool rather than a responsible family man. The others, well, they—

I heard a crash. Had George broken a window? No, it was Mother.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I wonder what that thingy is—was.”

George poked his head out of the bedroom. He was only wearing his boxers.

“What th’ hell was that?”

“Nothing, George, just a thingy,” I said, waving him off. “Why did you take your clothes off?”

“I need a shower. Keep her away from my pottery,” he snapped, slamming the door.

“Right. Keep her away,” I muttered. For some reason it all seemed very funny and I started to giggle. I had poured two glasses of wine: one for *her* and one for me. Mine wasn’t completely full anymore. I silently thanked the nectar gods for the brand spanking new box of White Zin in the fridge.

“Mother, please come down, and leave, ah, George’s things alone. Here’s your wine.”

“George’s things?” she said. “I thought maybe you had taken up—whatever it is that’s up there.”

“No, it’s George’s,” I said, not offering any more information.

Mom clacked down the steps into the living room. How she could stand those high heels was beyond me.

“So,” she said, “tell me *all* about George.”

I busied myself making hamburger patties and setting the table.

“Nothing to tell. He’s a friend. I gave him a place to, um, live for a while.”

“I see.”

She seemed thoughtful, which was unsettling. I got a pan out and slapped the hamburger patties in it. I opened the fridge and put my wine glass under the little spigot that came with the box of White Zinfandel. As I emerged, I had the ketchup and mustard and an onion of questionable vintage—and a full glass.

“Ah, well, men . . .” she said, almost absently.

I gave her a covert look.

“So, tell me about the cruise to—where was it?”

“Well, truthfully, Janese, I never went. A bunch of old, desperate people trying to pretend they are having a great time. Not for me,” she said as she took a generous swallow of wine. She smiled. “I’d rather be with my darling daughter than with a bunch of old farts who want to get it on with me, or worse yet, they want a nurse or a purse.” She waved her wine glass around and spilling a couple of drops.

“What about the motel and restaurant?” I asked, sitting on the couch and trying not to stare at the bright pink drops on my rug.

“Yes, well, I closed it down for a few weeks—until Christmas—you know, while I was on the cruise and then had the renovations all lined up.”

“What kind of renovations?”

“Oh, the usual. A little paint and personnel change.”

“Personnel change?”

“Yes, dear. You remember Billy?”

“Sure,” I said. “He’s the wiz, according to you; runs the restaurant and the motel. You positively *love* him.”

The bedroom door opened. George sidled into the kitchen and touched the frying pan.

“He’s a queer,” Mother said matter-of-factly. “I let him go.”

The bedroom door slammed shut.

“Queer, as in a homosexual or gay? You can’t fire him for that,” I said, straining to see toward the bedroom.

“Well, he was putting the moves on Rick, the nice young man who works the night shift. I can’t have that kind of behavior. It’s sexual harassment. I could be sued.”

She sighed. “So hard to get good help these days. Used to be the people you worked with were family—family,” she repeated, looking directly at me.

I leapt off the couch and hurried into the kitchen.

“Need any help, dear?” she asked.

Oh, I needed help alright. “No thanks. So, you don’t want to oversee the renovations—the painting and such?”

“Oh Janese, you know I’m allergic to latex,” she said. “Do you have any more wine?”

I got her wine glass and refilled it. Mother had many allergies of convenience: paint, animals, cleaning products. “So how long will the fumes be keeping you, um, here?”

“Oh, only a week or two.”

This time a crash came from the bedroom.

Mother smiled at me. “Are you still singing in the church choir, dear?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Is Azalea still abusing the keyboard? God, she must be in her eighties.”

“Her name is Azinnia,” I said. “And the answer is yes.”

“And that hunk—what’s his name? His voice is positively hypnotizing—Jasper, Jason?”

“James,” I said. “He’s still there.”

“And is he still single?”

“Mother!”

“Well, now that I’ve fired Billy, I’m available.”

“What!” I said. “Billy and you . . .?”

“Well, I guess he was—how do you say—AC/BC?”

“That’s AC/DC, Mother.” I felt my face flush. Way too much information. Billy was approximately my age, for God’s sake. He and my mother?”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with a younger man. After all, I don’t want another repeat of Shermie. I mean the honeymoon killed him, God rest his soul. I think he had

taken some special medication, not the prescription stuff, but something that they advertise on T.V. and meant for much younger men. I will say that he was really lively, I mean REALLY lively, until—”

“We have someone new in the choir!” I blurted out

Mother seemed wistful for a moment, no doubt reflecting on that fatal wedding night. I told her about Derry, including spotting her in the Bayview with James.

George re-emerged from the bedroom, tentatively lurking around the stove. I left Mom with her memories and went into the kitchen to cook the burgers and refill my wine glass. I was a little tipsy and tripped over a rug and fell into George. I glanced over at Mother and saw that she had her suitcase open and was rummaging around inside. I took the opportunity to turn to George and give him a meaningful kiss, complete with a little tongue. The hamburgers sizzled. It was going to be an interesting night. I was glad that George hadn't escaped. I really didn't have the energy to drag all his crap out into the driveway to burn it.

Chapter 3

George was lucky. He had a pottery show that Saturday morning, which allowed him to vanish. When I awoke, only the faint smell of his cologne wafted from the bathroom. Mother and I sat bleary-eyed over our coffee and our giant home-fried, gut-bomb donuts from the Silver River Tavern. My stomach gurgled a little, trying to deal with the artery-clogging grease that accompanied each donut. (I'd had two.) Mother sipped her coffee and studied me. This always made me uncomfortable.

“Um, so was the futon ok?” I asked. When George and I had converted the loft into his studio, we had put a futon bed up there, which we had to cover with a drop cloth to protect it from splatters from George's pottery wheel. When it was determined that Mother would be best off sleeping in the loft, George had begrudgingly collected his pottery paraphernalia and put it away for safekeeping. The floor and bath were given a quick cleaning.

She gave me a sour look. “What's in the mattress of that—that thing?”

“The futon?” I asked.

“Yes, the very same. Is it stuffed with ball bearings?”

“Well, no, I think it's stuffed with, ah, stuffing. You know, cotton and stuff.”

“What happened to the nice guest bed that I gave you?” she said.

“It was in the way, so we—I guess we donated it to a needy family.”

It wasn't entirely a lie. Since there wasn't room for George's potter's wheel and the bed, we had actually sold it and used the money to buy the futon. I was pretty sure only someone who was needy would buy a used mattress.

Mother sucked in her breath. “That was an expensive bed—motel quality. They make them to last. You simply gave it away?”

Before I could stammer out an answer, the telephone blessedly rang. I jumped up and snatched up the handset.

“Hello?”

I could sense someone on the other end, but they didn’t speak.

“Hello?” I repeated. “Who is this?” I was getting tired of annoying phone calls. Until that moment, I had forgotten all about the weird call at the office that recited some code—numbers and letters and such—and that told me to *ask George*. On the other hand, cell phones were responsible for a lot of misunderstandings. Maybe someone was calling me from their cell.

“I can’t hear you,” I bellowed into the phone. I heard something faint.

Mother had gotten up and was clattering around in the kitchen, which didn’t help. I gestured at her to be quiet. She cast me a dirty look and flounced out of the room.

“You’re breaking up,” I bellowed.

Then a very soft but clear, genderless voice said: “Tell George he’s next. His partner’s in the cooler.”

“What? Who is this?” I demanded. I looked at the caller ID, but it displayed something cryptic—a series of the letter “U.” The line went dead.

George was next for *what*? And *I* was his partner. Cooler, like for beer? Sometimes cooler was a euphemism for jail. I stood there frowning and pondering the little mystery when the phone rang again. I looked at it for a moment before I ripped it off the stand; nobody was going to intimidate me.

“What the hell is this all about,” I snarled.

“Janese?” said a tiny voice on the other end.

“Yeah?”

“Oh, well maybe this isn’t a good time, I—”

“Who is this?” I demanded.

“It’s Aileen Watkins. We met at the ecumenical church bazaar last fall. I was in charge of the white elephant sale. Clarence’s wife.”

“Clarence?”

“Well, of course most people call my Clarence by that disgusting name.”

“Weasel!” I shouted. “Right, sorry Elaine, it’s been a little crazy here this morning.”

“Oh, I understand. It’s Aileen, not Elaine,” she said. “Why, things are perfectly crazy for me, as well. Besides my normal volunteer efforts, I’ve been trying to line up stitchers for making the Quilt of Faith. Have I ever talked to you about our quilting club, Janese? Now most of us are Lutheran, but we welcome any sister of Christ into our circle.”

“Yes, well, I’m not very domestic,” I said hurriedly. Mother was once again lurking in the kitchen. She gave a snort, apparently in agreement with my statement.

“Think about it, dear,” she said. “Anyway, I’ve gotten myself side-tracked—my Clarence says that I jump around more than a flea in a dog kennel—anyway, I called because it’s just not like him.”

It seemed that she expected some kind of response.

“You mean *Him* him, as in Jesus, or God?” I asked. “Perhaps your pastor—”

“No, for heaven’s sake, Clarence.” She said tersely.

“What about him—Clarence?”

She gave a loud, exasperated sigh. “My goodness and people call me scatter-brained. Anyway, well, it’s got to be all about this gosh darned igloo thing, you know. That’s the only reason he wouldn’t come home. He’s been sober for years, *years*. I’m calling you, dear, because you are the one in charge of all the nonsense and I thought you might know what happened to my Clarence.”

Perhaps suicide? I thought. No, he would have killed her first then turned the gun on himself. I found my thoughts turning ugly. Also, I distinctly remembered seeing Clarence—Weasel to most of us—sitting at the bar at the Bayview when I picked up my box of wine the night before. Had it only been the night before?

“And since you are in charge, I am holding you responsible,” she continued.

“Responsible for what?”

“Well, if he got himself all worked up—you know that Bucky cheats, and my Clarence is a good Christian man, and that would just be intolerable to him—and went and did something rash, or worse yet, turned to drink again, or—”

“Maybe Clarence got an early morning start to go fishing.”

“Fishing, are you insane, *insane?*” she shrieked. “There’s barely a skim of ice on the bay. Oh dear. You don’t think? No, of course not. He hasn’t done anything so foolish since the spring break-up three years ago when they had to rescue him from that ice floe. That taught him a lesson. That was when his life turned around, you know, because he saw Jesus, *saw Jesus*, who took him in his arms and they huddled on that ice floe until

that nice Native American man—Joe something—was driving by and managed to get help, and—”

“Hunting!” I said.

“And his guns are still here, so I know he didn’t go hunting,” she added, without missing a beat.

I was somewhat relieved to know his guns were all accounted for.

“Elaine, I really don’t know—”

“Aileen,” she corrected. “My, but you are forgetful, aren’t you? How do you manage with your important job, when you can’t remember names? Well, anyway, Janice,”

“Janese.”

“It’s not pleasant to have one’s name screwed up, is it?” she said, her voice icy.

I was speechless.

“I’m holding you personally responsible, *responsible!*”

“I—”

“I know it has something to do with that Bucky! You must go find him.”

“Bucky?”

“You have an annoying habit of repeating everything, dear. Yes, Bucky. I think that Clarence went over to Bucky’s to make certain that no shenanigans were going on. As I have said, my Clarence is a good Christian, and *someone* needs to oversee these things,” she said, implying that I had not been living up to that responsibility. “And he never came home! Well, everyone knows that Bucky and Clarence have an ongoing—ongoing—”

“Feud?” I offered.

“Well, you see Bucky and Clarence were both sweet on me when I was just a girl,” she said, sounding wistful. “Bucky had the looks, but my Clarence had the brains.”

As far as I knew, Clarence didn’t get the nickname “Weasel” for his brains, although the name does imply someone crafty, underhanded, and sneaky. I tried to recall the story about Bucky and Weasel, and their pursuit of—what *was* her name? Aileen. I was thinking there was some sort of beer chugging contest to see who would get to put the moves on Aileen, and Weasel won—or lost, depending on how you heard the story.

“And the two boys—they were just boys then—had a contest of wits, and Clarence won. He asked me out and we were married, um, a few months later,” she said.

The story was coming back to me. In the olden days, they called it a shotgun wedding. There was a pause on the line while each of us contemplated our version of the blessed union. Mother came back in the kitchen and looked at her watch. She had earlier announced that we were going into Marquette to shop. She had some scary ideas about decorating and fashion. She never could accept the fact that I hated to shop and that I’d rather spend the day shoving slivers under my fingernails.

“So it is your responsibility to go over there and find out what happened to him!” Aileen blurted out.

“Over where?”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “To Bucky’s! *To Bucky’s!*”

“Did you call him, *call him?*” I asked. Now I *was* repeating everything.

“Well, I tried and nobody answered. I just know something is terribly wrong.”

The thought of going to Bucky's was marginally more appealing than shoving slivers under my fingernails, and wildly better than going shopping with Mother.

"Oh, ok," I said. "Give me your number, Aileen (was that right?), and I'll call you."

"Thank you, dear," she said, giving me her number. "Please consider the Quilt of Faith. We do have such fun, *such fun!* God's peace," she said, and abruptly hung up.

I carefully placed the handset back into the cradle and went into the kitchen to tidy up, Mother on my heels like a puppy. A short time later, someone pounded on the door, making me jump backwards, stepping on Mother's toes and causing her to spill something hot down my neck.

"Now what?" I asked, hurrying to the door and yanking it open. Bucky's hulking figure filled the doorway.

"I tried to call you, but the line's been busy," he said, wiping his feet ineffectually on the entrance mat.

Very little of Bucky's face was visible beneath the greasy, matted, beard. He was holding his Stormy Kromer hat in his hands, twirling it nervously. His large shoulders were hunched, as if he were trying to disappear into himself.

"I got trouble back at the place," he said. "I called the cops. I told them you could vouch for me."

I could feel Mother's presence behind me. She was putting on a show of dabbing the coffee off my neck.

"Mornin', ma'am," he said to Mother who nodded her head in response.

"Trouble—what kind of trouble?" I said.

“See, I wasn’t cheatin’ and he had no right to come around,” Bucky stammered.

“Who—Bucky, what’s going on?”

Mother had quit dabbing. She was all ears.

“Well, see that darn fool got himself shut in somehow. It wasn’t me that done it. I seen him first thing this morning. I think he’s dead, eh?”

“Dead—who?”

“Watkins—Weasel, he’s in my meat locker, deader ‘n a doornail,” Bucky said.

Mother sucked in her breath.

“I had nuthin’ to do with it. The cops want yous to come out because of the igloo contest—I told them that Watkins was probably snooping around and got himself shut in. You need to come and explain things. That girl cop is there. She said more police are coming.”

My head was spinning. Weasel Watkins dead? In a meat locker? Wasn’t that sometimes called a walk-in cooler?”

“You need a ride?” he said.

I remembered that Bucky had lost his driver’s license some time ago and either drove an all-terrain vehicle or a snowmobile, depending on the season.

“No thanks. I’ll drive my car,” I said.

Bucky left, leaving a muddy puddle in the entryway. Where was George when I needed him? The art show—no phone and I had the cell. Mother reached for her coat and I felt instant panic. I did not think her presence at Bucky’s would make things go smoother.

“Mother! Don’t let this interrupt your trip to Marquette. Please go—to Marquette, I mean. I really do want you to get those things for the house we talked about. Valises.

“Valences, dear. For the windows.”

“Yes, please. Get them. A whole bunch—I always say, the more valences, the better. Keep the receipts; I’ll pay you back.”

Mother gave me a look, snorted, and flounced out of the room.

Chapter 4

Folks were boiling with excitement at church that Sunday. It wasn't every day that a member of the Red Rock community died under "unusual circumstances." Clarence "Weasel" Watkins, though not the most respectable member of the community, was nonetheless one of us and this abrupt departure from his mortal husk was unsettling. Nearly as disruptive was the presence of Mother, who drew clusters of people more pleased with her visit than I was. She patted her hair at regular intervals, smiling and making modest gestures as old friends lavished attention upon her. Mother's visits seemed to breathe life into everyone but me.

The excitement in the narthex was of no concern to our choir director, Hannu, who was having a meltdown because two key members of the choir had not shown up, namely: James and Derry. They were supposed to do a duet segment during the choir anthem, *You Raise Me Up*.

"Where are they?" he trilled as we robed up.

I was wondering the same thing. With Derry—well, she was new; she had not yet established a record of reliability or sustainability. It was not unusual for someone to try choir practice once and never be seen again. James, however, was a surprise. He never missed an opportunity to showboat. He and Derry had looked healthy as horses when I saw them Friday night at the bar. In fact, if anyone was out of sorts, it was me. I had spent several hours Saturday morning hanging out in the cold at Bucky's Taxidermy while waiting for the State Police crime lab to arrive and deal with the *deader 'n a doornail* Weasel Watkins. I was asked to stick around for a while since I had seen him at

the Bayview, and then there was the igloo contest aspect of the debacle. A preliminary investigation by our local state trooper, Roberta “Bertie” Vaara, suggested that the victim had died of exposure, perhaps exacerbated by a high blood alcohol level, when trapped for an undetermined period of time in the storage freezer at Bucky’s Taxidermy and Meat Locker. I had told her about my strange phone call, saying that George’s partner was in the cooler, which didn’t seem to connect any dots, since George and Weasel had no strong alliances. I hadn’t erased the message, so Bertie said she’d stop by the house later to listen. Could just be a prank, she had said. I worked at a college where pranks were commonplace. It was no secret that George had a small, but determined set of art groupies, most of them young women. Maybe a jealous boyfriend made the calls. I mentioned that the caller ID had just had a bunch of UUUUs on the display. Bertie had thought that meant it was a pay phone or an unlisted number—she would check.

Bertie and I had known each other since grade school. We had taken turns tormenting boys, who we thought were stupid. I remember Bertie hanging upside down on the monkey bars so that her dress hung over her head, curly red hair peeking below the hem. She let the boys have a good look at her underwear then slapped them for their transgression.

Bertie had let me compromise the scene with her. Well, I didn’t exactly go in, but I stood at the door of the freezer and watched. She had to make sure that Weasel was really dead. Slumped into a sitting position between two deer carcasses, he appeared to have succumbed peacefully. I detected a faint whiff of booze. His body was very stiff, either from being frozen or rigor mortis, or both. Oh, yes, Bertie had declared, he was most certainly dead. She said this casually, as one might announce that the pot roast was

done and dinner was served. I, on the other hand, was feeling a bit light-headed. The scene in Bucky's freezer was surreal, with Weasel sitting there, frozen, eyes staring and vacant from a pale, bloodless face. Bertie had gently closed his eyelids. The grisly scene wasn't at all like on television where the image is diluted during its journey from the T.V. to the viewer who, even if repulsed, knows it's not real.

Someone had called Aileen. She came shrieking in with a swarm of sisters-in-Christ from the Lutheran church. Before Bertie could finish covering the deceased with a blanket, Aileen got a gander at her beloved.

Instantly, her voice rose to an impossible decibel level. "Claaaarreeence," she wailed. She broke free from her entourage of support and thrust herself at me, grabbing my coat. "You!—You and your stupid contest. This is all your fault," she said while jerking at my lapels, nearly pulling me over.

"Aileen, I—"

Bertie hurried toward Aileen and me, muttering, "Damn that Bucky, he must have called her. Guess that's a positive ID." She gently wrenched Aileen off me. "Mrs. Watkins, my deepest condolences for your loss. You need to go home and rest, and we'll be in touch. Will someone be able to stay with her?" she asked the group of women who huddled together like a herd of frightened sheep.

One of the women stepped forward and took Aileen by the elbow. "Of course," she said. "Come on honey, you can stay with me and Don." Another woman took Aileen's other elbow. Slowly they led her off, hopefully for a hot toddy or better yet a dose of valium.

Eventually, Weasel's remains were removed from the freezer by two EMTs. At the direction of the medical examiner, they ensconced him in a humungous black zipper bag and placed him on a gurney. His legs had been frozen in a contorted, Indian-style sitting position, which made it difficult for the EMTs to zip closed the black bag. None too gently, they flattened Clarence's bent knees and worked the zipper until the bag was sealed. I wondered if frozen legs could snap off, like icicles. That would be an interesting thing to explain to the departed's kin. *Oh, well, you only need a four-foot casket, because well. . .* The crime lab had taken photos, dusted for prints, bagged a bunch of hair, which probably belonged to the dead deer. I was disappointed for some reason that there was no chalk line representing Weasel's final resting place. A Detective Burns asked me some questions and took down my name, address, and phone numbers.

"So you think Mr. Watkins was snooping around in the freezer and got trapped?" Burns asked.

"Well, that's what Bucky thinks," I said. "See, there's this igloo contest—"

"Yeah, I heard. I understand that there was some animosity between Mr. Tanner and Mr. Watkins."

"Mr. Tanner?—oh, right," I said. I rarely if ever thought of Bucky as Mr. Tanner. "I guess you could call it animosity. They always had this friction, but I don't think—"

"And you say you saw Mr. Watkins at the bar on Friday night?"

"Yes. The Bayview. The owner can tell you that," I said.

"Bayview." Burns wrote this down in the same notebook that contained my vital statistics. "Did he seem intoxicated?"

"I think there was a good chance, but I didn't talk to him."

“Ok, thanks Miss—“ he looked at his notebook—“Trout. Interesting name. Do you fish?”

“Um, sometimes,” I said.

“We’ll get in touch for a formal statement.”

The detective slapped his notebook shut and went over to his 4x4 Chevy Tahoe with the words “Mobile Crime Lab” painted below the State Police decal on the door. You could hear the squawk of his police radio every now and then. He settled into the front seat and appeared to be dictating into a recorder.

“I called the missus,” Bucky said as he came out of his house—rather his mobile home with several cobbled-on additions.

“Been here and left,” Bertie said. She was standing at the door of the freezer, inspecting its contents. At least a half dozen deer carcasses, some whole, some headless and skinned, hung from meat hooks. There was no evidence of illegal igloo parts, though I wouldn’t have really known what to look for.

“Who got the ten-pointer?” she asked Bucky.

For some reason, Bertie, Bucky, and I all stepped into the freezer to look at the “ten-pointer.” Someone shut the door and a weak bulb barely dispelled the darkness. Bertie turned on her flashlight and directed it toward the door, which I’m pretty sure Bucky had closed.

“Why’n hell did you shut the door?” Bertie asked.

“Hey, it costs money to leave it open,” Bucky said. “Don’t worry, there’s an emergency release that you push, right here. If you get shut in, just push on this knob and the bar here flips up the latch on the udder side of the door. I made it myself. It works

perfect. That fool was so drunk that he didn't have the sense to work it," he said, giving the knob a good push. "That's funny."

"What's funny," Bertie said.

"She usually works like a charm." Bucky grunted, pushing with all his might on the release knob.

"Usually?" I asked.

"Seems jammed," Bucky said as he continued wrenching. "I've been in here a million times this week. Second week of deer camp, eh? My busiest time. Something's jammin' it."

"We be jammin'," I said, giggling. In addition to being anal retentive, I was also a teeny bit claustrophobic. I got "uncomfortable" in elevators, restroom stalls, and I hated stained-glass windows that blocked the view. Why have windows if you can't see out? Clearly, I needed to add walk-in freezers with cheezy homemade latches to my list of places to avoid. Bertie pointed the beam of her flashlight on my face for a minute. "You ok?" She remembered my hang-ups from childhood. She had shut me in a closet once.

In spite of the brisk temperature, the freezer was getting very close. Bucky was emitting a musky smell: a combination of B.O., woodsmoke, tobacco breath.

Bertie trained her light on the release.

"I'll be," Bucky said.

"You'll be what?" I said much too loudly.

"Damned—ah, pardon me ladies—darned. I'll be darned. Looky here."

Bertie and I leaned closer, squinting at where Bucky was pointing.

"Look at what?" Bertie said.

“This here’s been tampered with. Someone’s jammed a knife blade in here,” he said. “’til I get it out, we’re stuck.”

Tell George his partner’s in the cooler. I thought about that phone call again.

Was I smelling Bucky or myself or dead animals? I was feeling a little woozy. I think an antler was poking the back of my neck. Nothing made sense; I couldn’t imagine a partnership of any kind between George and Weasel.

“Maybe it was Weasel, trying to get out,” Bertie offered. “He was drunk and couldn’t operate the release, so tried to use his knife.”

“Maybe,” Bucky said. “I didn’t see no broken knife.”

“Well, I think the crime lab would have found it anyway. All they got was some hair,” Bertie said.

“Will you please get this fucking door open!” I said in what I thought was a perfectly calm voice.

My freezer companions again turned to look at me. What was that smell? “Who cut one?” I said, giggling.

“We better get her outta here,” Bertie said, waving her hand in front of her face.

“We need something to pull the knife blade out. You got anything, Bucky?”

“Nope. Left my Leatherman in the house. What about you—you’re the cop. Don’t yous have a tool set or something? We need some needle-nose pliers.”

“Sure, I keep them in my bra. You idiot! My tool kit’s in the patrol car,” Bertie said.

“Someone will miss us—right?” I said.

“Right, said Bertie. When they realize the patrol car’s not back, they’ll come looking—in two or three days.”

“Two or three days!” I said. I might have started pounding my fists on the door. I felt my knees buckle. Something shrill, like an air-raid siren, was ringing in my head.

“Hey, Janese, I was kidding,” Bertie said.

“You ok?” Bucky asked, grabbing my arm, slowing my fall to the disgusting, greasy floor. “Don’t worry Janese, we’ll get yous otta here. Ain’t that detective still out there? Hey! Someone!” he shouted at the door, which suddenly burst open. Detective Burns was framed in the halo of the open doorway.

“You guys gonna screw around all day?” Burns said. “Who said you could mess around in here; this might be a crime scene. We got the vic on the way to the morgue and we’ll know more after the autopsy.” He looked at the deer carcasses, then to Bertie.

“Hey Vaara, your old man get his buck this year?”

“I’m wery angry!” Hannu’s Finnish accent became more prevalent when he got emotional. “Janese, Eleanor, Joe, and Tom—you sing the parts. Let’s go now, we gotta practice.”

The choir always sang an introit and an anthem during each Sunday’s church service. The music we practiced was in addition to the cantata pieces we labored through each week. Due to time constraints, the anthem often got less attention than needed. And, of course, it didn’t help one bit when the Derry/James duet was MIA.

The whole situation seemed to please Eleanor Heimlick, who looked at me and raised an eyebrow; a corner of her mouth twitched into a smirk.

“I hope you can do the F sharp,” I said to her. “I think my voice is a bit raspy from being out in the cold.

We didn’t make it very far into our quickie rehearsal before Hannu flapped his arms with annoyance, bringing us to a dribbling stop. He gave me a withering look.

“Sore throat,” I said, pointing to my neck. “Sorry.”

Hannu released an ever-suffering sigh.

James Rush and Derry Parks were on my list of people to seriously injure or kill. They sure looked cozy at the Bayview. I suspected they were enjoying a duet of the non-musical kind while I was deeply questioning my reason for being in the church choir, punishing my vocal cords beyond their limit, and undermining my self-esteem. Furthermore, the music committee wouldn’t even buy me my own choir robe, and I had a hand-me-down that was too long and tripped me constantly. It was Mother who had signed me up decades ago. I was all grown up now. I could quit anytime.

Hannu motioned to the pianist, Azinnia, to begin the prelude. This time we stumbled all the way through.

“Good enough,” Hannu declared. “Line up.”

Because of Derry’s absence, Eleanor reclaimed her regular non-folding chair seat on the choir platform. Her hair towered impossibly high, dwarfing me.

“Don’t screw this up,” she hissed. “I have ways of making people suffer.”

I felt a rush of heat followed by a cold chill. I was trying to remember if her husband had died under mysterious circumstances—poison, snakebite?

Then she smiled sweetly and turned her attention to Pastor Sam who started the service by bellowing out his usual: “Good morning!” To which we parroted: “Good Morning!”

“Friends, as you know, we have lost a long-time member of our community, who loved the land, his family, his God. . .”

That got the pot stirred up, and a din rose then fell in the congregation as the pastor asked for a moment of silence for the shocking death of Clarence Watkins. Life goes on, and so did the service. Somehow, we had moved the Gospel lesson on to joys and concerns. My mother stood.

“Well, I just want to say what a *joy* it is to be here with my church family.” The congregation muttered its agreement then everyone looked at me, expecting me to leap up and sing a few choruses of *Halleluiah*. I conveniently dropped my hymnal. The pastor pushed on to the silent prayer time. My armpits began to tingle; the choir anthem was next. I could hear Hannu fidgeting a few chairs down, getting *You Raise Me Up* out of his music folder, fingering the pages. He moved to the music stand and signaled for the choir to rise. Joe and Tom would have the first verse. I tried to swallow but my throat was dry. I wondered if this was how a snake felt when it had underestimated the size of its prey—stuck in the gullet, wiggling a little. Eleanor was crowding me, making it awkward to hold my music. Azinnia started the prelude. Hannu cued; Joe and Tom sang:

*When I am down and oh my soul so weary
When troubles come and my heart burdened be
then I am still and wait here in the silence
until you come and sit a while with me.*

Hannu shifted his glare from the choir in large, who had sung the chorus, to Eleanor and me. Showtime. He gestured emphatically, giving us our cue. We sang, quite angelically:

You raise me up!

And then I was down.

Hannu fanned me with a church bulletin while Eleanor glared, pure hatred oozing from her. Mother was there as well, kneeling beside me, bright-red hair blazing as if she were consumed by fire.

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” she asked, loudly. I think I heard tittering.