

Winter of Secrets

By Vicki Delany

Published by Poisoned Pen Press. 2009 1

Chapter 1

They don't often get big snow storms in the Kootenay area of British Columbia. Lots of snow, that's a given; sometimes the air is so full of snow that the daytime is as white as the night is black. But there isn't much wind in these mountains, and the snow falls thick and fast and straight down, where it lies deep on the ground. The word "whiteout", meaning when high winds whip falling snow around, reducing visibility to nothing, isn't often heard in Trafalgar.

Tonight it would be.

It was Christmas Eve, and as Constable Molly Smith began a twelve hour shift the storm of the decade was settling in over Trafalgar. She'd scarcely had time to say hi to the earlier shift, the lucky ones who got to enjoy the evening with their families, before the first 911 call came in. The first, of what would be many.

Pedestrian struck by a car on Front Street. Appear to be injuries.

Smith reached for the keys to the truck, but she wasn't fast enough. "I'll drive," Constable Dave Evans said, tossing the keys in his hand and heading towards the back door and the parked vehicles.

"You'll be with Evans tonight," Sergeant Caldwell, the shift supervisor, shouted after her. "It's going to be rough in this. And it's supposed to get worse."

Grumbling under her breath, Smith climbed into the passenger seat. Evans flicked on the wipers to get rid of the snow that accumulated since the vehicle had been parked. Which hadn't been long: the truck had turned in as she'd walked up the steps to the station.

Caldwell's prediction came all too true, and Smith and Evans spent their Christmas Eve running from one call to another.

Cars in the ditch. Cars spinning out of control in the middle of the highway. Pedestrians slipping and sliding all over the place. Holiday revelers who'd started into the Christmas cheer a bit too early, and too heavily, but thought they could still drive.

In late December, in a town surrounded by mountains, it was dark before four-thirty. The night was a strange shade of shifting white as the lights of cars and homes and streetlamps reflected off snow cutting through the black sky in near-horizontal slashes. The snow was blinding; there were times when Smith could barely see the front of the truck as they drove.

The radio crackled with activity, everyone was out, and even Caldwell had grabbed a car and was answering calls.

A few minutes before midnight they were called to an accident on Cottonwood Street.

Smith and Evans arrived to find a fender bender. Two vehicles, a top of the line, fully-loaded SUV, and a rusty old van, had met in the middle of the road. Not hard to do, as drifts of snow had reduced the road, one of the steepest in a town built on the side of a mountain, to a one-lane track.

When the police arrived, blue and red lights reflecting off falling snow like manic Christmas decorations, the drivers were standing in the road, inches apart, screaming in each other's faces. Additional yelling came from the ditch and Smith could see two women on the far side of the cars, waving arms. Wide-eyed children peered through icy windows of the SUV. Cars began lining up in both directions, horns honking as drivers leaned out of windows.

Evans glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "Merry Christmas, Molly," he said. It was one minute past midnight.

"Let's go spread some seasonal cheer," she replied.

It was a battle just to get the truck door open, but she proved to be stronger than the storm. Snow and wind hit her full in the face. If it were possible, the power of the blizzard seemed to be increasing.

Without discussion, Evans approached the arguing men and Smith walked around the cars. The two women stopped fighting at the sight of the police officer, trying to keep her footing in the calf-high drifts lining the road.

"What's going on here?"

Whereupon the women resumed screaming, at each other and at Smith.

She wanted to ask them what had happened to their Christmas spirit. Instead she flashed a light into the back of the SUV. Two small, round white faces looked back at her.

"Why don't you get into the car, Ma'am. Your children seem distressed."

"They're fine," the woman snapped. She wore a beige fur coat, either real or a good fake, and leather gloves. Knee-high boots were planted firmly in the snow. Her chin-length blond hair was a wet mess and thick lines of black mascara ran down her face. "That fool came out of nowhere, and..."

"Don't you call my Ed a fool. If your goddamned husband had been watching where he was going he wouldn't have..."

"Wait in the car, please," Smith interrupted. "My partner's taking the details of the accident. Your children are bound to be upset and in need of some care."

The woman had the grace to look embarrassed. Her shoulders lost their fighting stance, and she put her hand on the SUV door.

"You tell her, Molly," the other woman said.

That was not helpful.

The fur-clad woman swung around. "What the hell's this? You're going to pin this on Roger because they're locals, is that it?"

"I'm not going to pin anything on anyone. You can look after your children or I'll radio for someone from social services to come and do it for you."

"You can't..."

"And as for you, Mrs. Morrison," Smith said, "if you don't get back into your vehicle, right now, and sit and wait quietly while Constable Evans talks to Mr. Morrison, I'll arrest you for interference. Decide ladies, but do it fast."

A tree groaned and let loose its full weight of heavy snow. A substantial portion of which found its way down the back of Smith's neck. Involuntarily, she yelped.

United in their anger at the female police officer, satisfied at her small bit of humiliation, the two women returned to their vehicles. Both doors slammed hard.

The radio at Smith's shoulder crackled. Two people were waving liquor bottles and screaming at each other outside the

variety store on Aspen Street. The caller reported that she knew them: the LeBlancs. Smith groaned under her breath. Them again. She'd been called to their house in the summer. Husband and wife each as drunk as the other, both of them off to spend a night in the cells. Police had been at that address at least once since. Tonight, Dawn Solway responded and said she'd take it.

Evans put his notebook into his coat pocket and told the men to move their cars. People trying to get past were getting restless, and a few figures stepped out of the swirling snow to see what was going on. There didn't seem to be enough damage to either car to prevent them from moving.

Grumbling, and with shouts of 'see you in court' and 'I'll sue you for everything you've got,' the men joined their families.

"Five-one?"

Smith answered the call. "Five-one here."

"Car off the road at the bottom of Elm Street."

"We're almost clear."

"The car has gone into the river."

"On our way. Move it, Dave, we gotta go. This could be a big one." She jumped into the truck, heart pumping. Evans climbed behind the wheel. "What we got?"

"Car in the river."

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"Jesus." He started the engine, while Smith punched lights
and sirens on.