

FROZEN STIFF

Chapter 1

by Sherry Shahan

Cody tried opening the door of the old pickup so that it wouldn't squeak. Darn! She should have greased the rusty hinges. Everything about the old truck was rusted and worn out. No wonder, with a constant gray mist strangling the sunshine in Southeast Alaska.

"Pssst! Derek!" she whispered through the rolled-down window. "Come on!"

Her cousin slammed the cabin door as always. He was as quiet as a bear breaking into a grocery store. How could they sneak off in a stolen truck when he was so noisy? Well, Cody thought wistfully, it wasn't really stolen. Just on temporary loan, without permission.

Cody tossed the last duffel onto the flatbed already loaded with canvas bags holding a tent, two sleeping bags, and other camping gear. There was enough food to last a week, though they would only be gone two nights. Two nights was the amount of time both their mothers would be in Juneau picking up supplies for Yakutat Lodge and Tavern.

Two nights alone on the fjord, without any adults. They would paddle their kayaks down the steep-sided seawater passage until their muscles ached, then scout a sandy bank and pitch their tent -- the image warmed Cody's insides. But first they had to drive to the fjord without getting caught.

“Quiet!” Cody hushed her cousin as the door on the passenger’s side creaked open. “We have to leave before someone from the lodge sees us.”

Cody’s mother managed the tavern during the summer, so Cody spent all three months with her mother in a log cabin behind the lodge. The cabin was private, although people were always coming and going and rarely knocked.

Cody’s space was a small loft upstairs, her sleeping bag spread on a foam pad. Her clothes were stacked in discarded cartons. Sometimes, since the divorce, that was how she felt. Discarded with a bold *D*.

Cody often wished she had a real bed and a dresser in Yakutat for her things, so that the loft upstairs would seem more permanent. But mostly she wished they lived in Alaska year-round. Then she wouldn’t have to think about her life on the “outside,” a term Alaskans used for any spot outside the state. Sunny California? She smiled at the irony. That was what other people called it. For three years now, any thought Cody had of the Golden State and its inhabitants -- especially certain inhabitants -- had been tarnished with bad memories.

Cody flicked on the windshield wipers. “I hate the way the truck rattles,” she told Derek while he tried buckling the broken seat belt. “It sounds like it’s saying *Help! I’m being stolen!*”

The truck splashed through the potholes that pitted the narrow alley between the main lodge and the smaller cabins out back. Cody watched the cabins fade into the gray mist in her rearview mirror. For a moment she wondered if she’d ever see the buildings again. Then she pushed the idea from her mind.

“Can I drive?” Derek asked, raking damp hair out of his eyes. Burnt-toast-

brown hair and dark eyes, just like her other brother, Patterson. Being around Derek kept her from missing Patterson so much. “When we’re out of town?” Derek was saying. “Okay?”

When did you learn to drive?” Cody turned onto the unmarked road that twisted through an old forest that had recently been clearcut. There was nothing now but acres of pitiful stumps. “You aren’t even old enough for a permit.”

Normally Cody would have laughed at someone calling Yakutat a town, with its tiny population of 750. There wasn’t even a road to the rest of the state; the only way in and out was by plane or boat. Still, Yakutat was the only community within hundreds of miles of the fjord. A one-hanger airport and its narrow landing strip bordered the lodge parking lot. Add a grocery store, Laundromat, and post office. That was about it.

“*You* don’t have a license,” Derek pointed out.

“That’s different,” she said. “I’ve driven this truck three summers now.” In her mind she added the words *ever since the divorce*.

Cody sometimes drove the truck to the beach even though she didn’t have a driver’s license. It wasn’t any big deal. The native kids started driving when they could barely see over the dashboard.

When a van pulled out from a wooded area Cody slumped in the seat. Normally she would have waved and whistled. But not with two of the lodge’s foldup kayaks in back, one of their bear horns, and a water purifier. All borrowed without permission.

The uneasy feeling in her gut told her she should have called her mother in

Juneau. She should have asked to spend a couple of days camping in the fjord. Mrs. Lewis might have said okay -- the laid-back Alaskan lifestyle had changed her in so many ways. Giving Cody more freedom was one of them. Still, it was Aunt Jessie's and Derek's first visit to the forty-ninth state, and they had only been in Yakutat ten days. Aunt Jessie would have said no loud enough to be heard back in California.

"Mom doesn't even like it when I leave the lodge," Derek had argued two days ago when the idea began unfolding. "She's all freaked out about grizzly bears. And close encounters of the moose kind."

"What would she say if she knew you hitchhiked?" Cody had asked.

"That was only one time. Besides, it was an emergency."

"Surfing? Some emergency."

"Waves like that don't hit California every day," he said. "And I didn't have a ride to the beach."

"You've always been too trusting, Derek."

So the cousins had made a bet to settle the argument about asking permission. If Cody won, she'd ask her mom about the camping trip. If Derek won, they wouldn't ask. Cody lost. How had Derek known that a caribou was the same animal as a reindeer?

"Come on," Derek pleaded. "You can teach me to drive."

Cody sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. She hated sneaking around. "Forget it."

Only one outfitter had a wilderness permit to lead expeditions into Russell

Fjord Wilderness of the Tongass National Forest. Cody had gone with their expeditions many times, as an unofficial assistant. She had helped set up tents, cook meals, break camp. “Pack it in. Pack it out.” She’d heard the rule a dozen times.

No trips were scheduled this late in the summer, she knew, so no one would see them once they were on the water. And they were planning to return home hours before the flight from Juneau landed late Sunday night with their mothers.

“Just a little way. Plee-eease?” Derek kept at her. “I won’t go fast.”

“You’re such a nag,” she said lightly. “Maybe on the way home if there’s time.”

The old truck pushed through the heavy mist to a sloppy dirt road, which twisted alongside a patch of berry vines until it dead-ended. Bears hadn’t raided this patch yet: The vines were still bright with salmonberries. No one used this narrow road except the outfitters.

Cody eased the front of the truck into the tangled vines and hid the keys under the back bumper. “Let’s start unloading,” she said, looping the arms of her rain slicker around her waist. A pair of shorts with Velcro pockets covered her dance tights. If the sun came out, she would shed the tights. “We have a three-quarter-mile hike to the beach. It’ll take a few trips to carry all the gear.”

On the last trip to the beach Cody lost one of her knee-high rubber boots in a soupy muskeg, a swampy hole of dark decayed matter. Her boot was sucked right off her foot. “Darn. Now my only pair of socks is drenched.” Wet socks produced instant blisters. “How many socks did you pack?” she hollered back to

Derek, who was behind her.

Derek was wobbling in a mudhole studded with knotted roots. There wasn't much of a trail and his heavy pack made it difficult to balance. "None."

"You aren't wearing socks with your boots?" She couldn't believe it. "Don't you think your feet will get cold?"

Derek had figured out how to rest without taking off his pack, by leaning against a tree. "What for? We're going camping. Not to a Christmas parade."

Cody shook her head. "The kayaks will be on the water with glacial runoff. *Glacial*, get it? As in a frozen river? Ever hear of frostbite?" No one ever got frostbite this late in summer unless there was a freak storm. Still, she thought it sounded impressive.

Derek tried to shrug but it was impossible with the heavy pack.

"Did you bring long underwear?" She hated sounding like Aunt Jessie but this was important. Preparation wasn't everything in the wilderness. It was the *only* thing.

"My underwear is none of your business," he shot back.

Cody hadn't said anything about his jeans, which would be totally useless. Much too heavy. Once they got wet they never dried out. But not socks? Stupid! She was just as mad at herself for not packing an extra pair.

Something deep in her gut told her to turn back, to forget the whole thing. She'd been camping, with the outfitters, many times, and she'd go with them many more. A trip that started out badly would only get worse. She knew that for a fact.

Why not spend the next two days in the lodge, watching videos and munching microwave popcorn? If they got bored, they could count drunk fishermen on holiday from the Lower-Forty-eight as they staggered out of the tavern.

Derek finally caught up. He helped her pull her boot out of the boggy hole. It made a sound like a sink draining.

“Tell me again what a glacier looks like up close,” he said.

“Not now.” Cody hated being such a grouch but nothing made her as miserable as wet socks. “We’re leaving this load here. Then we’re going down to the beach to collect the rest of our gear. We’re heading back to the lodge.”

“What do you mean? This is the last of the stuff and the truck is a half a mile back. *Uphill.*” The sun went behind some heavy clouds, and the scream of mosquitoes rose from the trees. Derek swiped at the air several times. “If those suckers are going to follow us they could at least carry something.”

Cody laughed at that one. “Some people think they should be named the state bird.”

It was as if the mosquitoes had invited all their friends for the human feast. Cody batted wildly to keep them out of her eyes. “Get away!” she shouted. “Now I know what nose hairs are for . . . to filter out bugs.”

Derek’s forehead was already a mass of bites. “I think I swallowed one.”

“The mosquito nets for our hats are in the duffel on the beach,” she hollered, and stumbled downhill toward the strand of coarse sand. “And I packed DEET.”

On the beach, Cody tore into the duffel bag. Without even removing her pack she dug frantically for the nets. Then the sun broke through and the mosquitoes disappeared. Derek was scratching like crazy, making the bites bleed even more. She decided not to warn him about infection. “Grab another pack,” she said instead. “We’re heading back.”

Derek stopped scratching. “I’m not going.”

Cody stared at him. “You can’t stay here alone. You don’t even know how to put up the tent.”

“I’ll sleep on the ground. The sleeping bag will be warm enough,” he said, then turned abruptly and stormed down the beach. His words clung to the heavy air.

Cody wondered how long she should wait before chasing after him. “Stubborn,” she whispered angrily. “Just like Patterson.” Thinking about her brother felt like an added weight to her pack. She dropped onto the drab green mound of duffels and let the pack slip from her shoulders.

Since her parents’ divorce three years before, Cody had only seen Patterson one or two weekends a month and on some holidays. The judge had let them each decide who they wanted to live with. Patterson had picked Dad. Cody didn’t understand it. Wasn’t the divorce bad enough? *Divorce*, as in to dissolve or cut off. She’d looked it up in the dictionary. Her mother never used the word *divorce*. She always said, “We split up.” Cody thought that sounded just as bad, like a chicken being split in two.

Cody felt as if she’d been divorced from her brother too. Brief chats on the

phone weren't the same as invading his bedroom and talking for hours. But she couldn't live with her father. She wouldn't even see him much, after what he'd done. Mostly only through the sheer curtains in the living room when he dropped off Patterson. Telephone conversations were short and to the point. She just answered his questions, which were mostly about school.

Poor Mom, Cody thought miserably, she'd never had a job outside their home. Never cashed a paycheck or balanced a checkbook.

Cody wondered how *wife* and *mother* looked on a job application. It must have looked all right to the owners of Yakutat Tavern, where her mother was hired. Mostly Mrs. Lewis fixed sandwiches for the visiting fisherman and poured beer. Whipped up supper in the evenings, and listened. Sometimes, she said, she felt more like a psychologist than a tavern manager.

Cody jumped, startled by the sound of leaves rustling behind her. "Derek?" She tried looking beyond the trees into the dense forest. Nothing. *Don't freak out*, she told herself. "Derek?"

Farther down the beach, the shiny white bark on a band of dead trees stood as a vivid contrast to an understory of dwarf dogwood and bog orchids. It was hard to remember that this inlet was filled with water from the Pacific Ocean until she spotted a pile of mussel and barnacle shells. Probably an otter's dinner . . . though sometimes bears picked at shellfish during low tide.

Cody shuddered, wondering for a moment if that sound in the trees might be a fifteen-hundred-pound grizzly with razor-sharp claws. But she knew they preferred salmon to people. On trips with the outfitters she'd never seen a bear.

Not one. In fact, the only bear she'd ever seen had been raiding the Dumpster behind the tavern.

Still, she snatched the bear horn from the duffel, all set to trigger the siren at the first glimpse of fur. "Derek? If this is a joke I'm not laughing. I'm going to put the kayaks together. Come on, I need help." She decided to let him paddle around for a couple of hours; then he'd wear himself out and want to go back to the lodge. Without socks his feet would be frozen in no time.

She studied the shore for signs of Derek. Still nothing.

Cody pushed a tangle of copper hair off her face. Mosquitoes had attacked her through the dense dance tights. She kicked off her rubber boots and peeled down her muddy socks. The drizzle for which Southeast Alaska was famous would eventually rinse her feet.

"I'm not mad," she hollered, using a new strategy. And she wasn't, either. She just sat on the lumpy canvas, scratched her mosquito bites, and worried about her cousin.