

CHAPTER ONE

The room was cold. It still smelled like Lysol, floor wax and death.

Charlie McGinley cowered in a corner. He and his wife had almost died here three years ago.

Another bad thing was about to happen. Charlie wasn't sure how he knew. He just did.

It was 11:37 a.m. On a Tuesday.

Why do bad things always seem to happen on Tuesday? The thought swirled around in Charlie's head. You're prepared for bad stuff to happen on Monday. How many songs have been written about that? "Monday, Monday...Can't trust that day." You'd have to be pretty lame to get caught by bad stuff on a Monday.

But Tuesday just lays there, pretending everything's fine, then it lowers the boom.

"Are you that stupid, Jerome?" Jack Vello hissed as blood gushed from Jerome Bigelow's nose. His right eye was already swollen shut.

Jack brought down his knife, impaling Jerome's hand to the desk.

Jerome screamed, as blood cascaded over the scarred wood and onto the floor.

Charlie couldn't move. He also couldn't look away.

Jerome gaped at his hand, then Jack.

"I asked you a question, Jerome."

Jerome stopped screaming. He took a breath, then in a perfect English accent, muttered, "Sorry. I just had a thought. What if I say—"

Before he could finish, another voice interrupted him. It was loud and angry.

"Cut!"

The Norco Institute for Solid-State Hypothermia was a cryonics lab in Coyote Falls, New Mexico. The term *institute* suggested cutting-edge technology, ivy-covered walls, and serious research. This institute was a gray, one-story, cinder-block building. In another life, it had probably been a body-and-fender shop. Across the face of the building, in large blue letters, was painted "We Put Death On Ice."

A cryonics lab is a place where people go to have themselves frozen, in the hope that in twenty, or thirty years, when doctors have found a cure for the horrendous diseases that killed them, they can be defrosted and brought back to life. Charlie McGinley, along with most doctors, scientists, and rational life forms, believe fish sticks should be frozen, not people.

But be that as it may, the Norco Institute was once a flourishing business. At least it was until it went belly up after becoming a crime scene for a string of grisly Mob murders.

Now it was the set for the low-budget film *Death of Cold*.

Charlie stood by the craft-services table eating an onion bagel with cream cheese. He wasn't hungry. Charlie was a stress eater. He had been since he was kid. When the going got tough...Charlie started eating. His three ex-wives were constantly amazed by the gargantuan amounts of food he could devour when he was having a tough time. They were even more astounded and frustrated by the fact that when Charlie consumed can after can of Pringles, he usually lost weight.

Charlie was having a tough day.

He cowrote the film script for *Death of Cold*, which was based on the *Johnny Dent* mystery novel he wrote with his wife. The plot was based on a true story—how Charlie had almost been murdered by the real Jerome Bigelow at Norco.

It had been three years ago, but Charlie's hands shook as he thought about being locked in the freezer with a bunch of dead bodies. He tried not to dwell on the fact that he'd been a few minutes away from being frozen to death by the real Jack Vello.

Charlie finished off the bagel and eyed a cupcake.

The day's filming was scheduled to take place in the tiny front office at Norco. A blue polar bear depicted on the wall smiled down on a room full of equipment, crew, and extras. Below the bear was a caption: No Jive. We'll Bring You Back Alive.

Scott Lassiter, the actor playing Jerome Bigelow, had shown up late. His call was for nine a.m. He arrived on set at ten thirty. Scott, fifty-six and English, had a tendency to show up late for things. He also had a tendency to wear ascots and powder-blue jump suits.

Scott was nominated for an Academy Award in 1997 for Best Supporting Actor. The film, *Father Was a Spy*, was an international sensation. Since then, alcohol, alimony, and a rapidly growing disdain for the acting profession had led Scott to make numerous less-than-stellar life and career choices.

One year ago, he married his fifth wife, Vanessa Tanner.

Vanessa, at age eleven, had achieved stardom on the Disney Channel, playing a precocious fifth-grader in *Mr. Clark's Classroom*. The show was cancelled after three seasons. Over the last twenty years, Vanessa had made a number of forgettable films. Most of them never got released in the States. For some unknown reason, she had a sizable following in Denmark. The Danish fans didn't help her career much.

Now thirty-three, Vanessa was overjoyed to be cast alongside her husband in *Death of Cold*.

Scott arrived on set in the same clothes he'd had on the day before. He also smelled like he'd taken a bath in gin. The film had been shooting for almost three weeks. This wasn't the first time Scott had shown up with a snoot full.

Charlie avoided making eye contact with Mitch Hearn, the film's director, as he marched toward Scott. Charlie knew Mitch was one of those guys who was always looking to put a chip on his shoulder. Most days, with Scott around, he had lots of reasons.

"Did you forget you have a knife stuck in your hand, Scott? It hurts. A hell of a lot. So, you scream!" Mitch bellowed at Scott. Mitch grew up in the Bronx, so he bellowed just about every time he spoke. "You don't talk. With a knife in your hand, you don't talk. You scream!"

Scott nodded. "Right. But how about if I—"

"Just once, could we do a scene like we rehearsed it?" asked Mitch of nobody in particular.

Scott forced a smile. "I really think it would be stronger if I—"

"Nobody cares what you think, Scott!"

Scott nodded again. The crew was watching him. He removed the prop knife from his hand.

Rick Layton, the actor playing Jack Vello, eased toward his chair. He'd worked with Mitch before and knew this little confab wasn't going to end well.

"Christ on a crutch, now we have to reset. Props." Mitch didn't bellow this time. This time it was more of a screech.

Scott wiggled his fingers, then looked over at his assistant, Theresa Wolfe. "Baby wipes."

Theresa blushed as everybody in the room now stared at her. She reached into her shoulder bag, pulled out a baby wipe, and handed it to Scott.

Scott cleaned his hands, then with a dramatic flourish, turned to Mitch. "Apologize."

Crew people squirmed. Phil Carew, the assistant director, peeked at Mitch over the top of his bifocals.

The director took a deep breath. "Let's reset and go again."

Scott dropped the soiled wipe on the floor. "I said *apologize*."

A rush of chemicals pulsed from Mitch's brain. He seriously considered strangling Scott. "You want me to apologize?"

"Yes."

"You show up late, half in the bag, and screw up every take, and you want *me* to apologize?"

"Yes."

"Why would I apologize to a hack like you? You should apologize to me for ruining my film."

"*Your* film?"

"That's right."

Scott chuckled. "We'll see whose film it is. I'll be in my trailer." He turned and sauntered out of the room. Theresa hurried after him.

Mitch stomped back to the video monitor. He picked up a glass of milk from a small side table and took a gulp.

Mitch Hearn, all five foot two of him, stole his first car when he was fourteen. He was caught after theft number seven because he was so short. The police stopped him because they thought a child was driving a Pontiac Grand Prix. Mitch bounced around to various correctional institutions over the next ten years. During that time, he expanded his criminal resume. He dabbled in everything from breaking and entering to racketeering. He finally made the big time, ending up at Sing Sing—fifty-five acres of caged awfulness—doing a four-year jolt for manslaughter.

While doing his time, Mitch had an epiphany. He was given a video camera by the prison shrink to help him come to terms with his "inner demons." After two days, he decided he wanted to be a filmmaker instead of a very short criminal.

After being paroled, he finagled a scholarship to NYU's film school. When he was twenty-nine, he made an indie film that won a wheelbarrow full of awards. He then managed to alienate just about everybody he met and steadily worked his way down the showbiz ladder of success. His last major feature, *Terminal Velocity*, was made three years ago. It starred Sylvester Stallone as an aging nuclear physicist who was a former navy seal. It was considered by many to be one of the worst films ever made. The movie bombed. Mitch, who wrote, produced, and directed the opus, was being sued by fifteen different litigants. He had lately been relegated to making Hallmark films about reluctant princesses. Mitch's agent told him he needed to relax and enjoy life more. If he didn't, he was going to develop an ulcer.

Mitch opted for the ulcer.

"That was pretty harsh, Mitch," said Phil.

Mitch stood by himself, whispering into his cell phone.

"Mitch, are you listening? You have to get Scott to come back."

Mitch, ignoring Phil, listened to the person on the other end of the phone. "Yeah. You heard me. Do it." He disconnected the call.

"Go talk to him."

"No."

"You knew how he'd react. He's a diva. And he's English."

"The man is a no-talent ham."

"I don't disagree. But we have a full day scheduled with that no-talent ham."

"*You* talk to him."

“He won’t speak to me or any of the other lowly crew people. Contractually, he only has to talk to the director.”

Mitch took another swig of milk.

“How’s the ulcer?”

Mitch’s face twisted in pain. “Do you need to ask?” He took another slug of milk. “We’ll just shoot a scene he’s not in.”

“There aren’t any. We set up the schedule to block shoot the last of his stuff.”

“I warned Al about him.”

Mitch’s cell dinged as he received a text. He eyeballed it.

“Go talk to him,” Phil pleaded as Mitch’s ulcer flared.

Charlie was still at the craft-services table. He was now munching on a jelly donut. Mitch spotted Charlie. It took a second for him to remember that Charlie had written the screenplay. “You,” Mitch hollered at him. “Come here.”

Charlie swallowed the last of the donut. “Me?”

“Yeah.”

Charlie ambled over to the video monitor. This was the longest conversation Charlie’d had with Mitch since shooting began.

Mitch finished off his glass of milk. “Charlie, right?”

Charlie nodded.

Mitch raked his fingers through his hair, then turned to Phil. “Will Scott talk to the writer?”

“Cowriter,” added Charlie.

“Cowriter,” Mitch barked at Phil.

Phil furrowed his brow. “It’s not in the contract, but he might.”

“Okay. I want you to go to Scott’s trailer and tell him to come back.”

Sweat formed on Charlie’s upper lip. “I barely know him.”

“That’s why I’m sending you. Anybody who knows the jerk, hates him.”

“I’m much better at writing about conflict than actually dealing with it.”

Mitch’s face looked like a red balloon that was about to burst.

Charlie forced a smile. “I’m probably not the best person to—”

“You wrote this movie?”

“Cowrote.” Charlie towered over Mitch.

Mitch’s face got even redder. His eyes bulged. “In the future, do you want to *cowrite* more movies?”

Charlie wondered if this was a trick question. “Yes.”

Mitch had a stool that he stood on to look into the camera viewfinder. He pulled it over, stepped up on it, and placed his hands on Charlie’s shoulders. It wasn’t a sign of affection. “I *strongly* suggest you go talk to Scott. Now.”

Charlie felt Mitch’s tiny hands tighten on his shoulders. He wasn’t sure if Mitch was going to derail his writing career...or choke him to death. Neither seemed very pleasant.

There were several portable dressing rooms and equip-ment trucks parked in the Norco lot. There was also a thirty-two-foot Winnebago sitting off by itself. Charlie’s feet crunched on patches of ice as he approached the RV. A Christmas wreath hung on the door. There was a cardboard name tag below it: *Scott Lassiter*.

Charlie knocked on the door. “Mr. Lassiter?”

Silence.

Charlie saw his breath in the cold air. He wished he'd remembered to bring his gloves. He rubbed his hands together, then knocked again. "Mr. Lassiter, they'd like you to come back to the set."

Charlie tried the doorknob. Unlocked. He opened the door and peeked inside. "Mr. Lassiter?"

On the wall was a framed movie poster from *Father Was a Spy*. Scott, years younger, and with a lot more hair, winked.

"Mr. Lassiter?"

The real Mr. Lassiter was nowhere to be seen.

Charlie, happy to avoid a confrontation, turned to go, then he saw Theresa, Scott's assistant, sprawled on the floor, unconscious.