



PROLOGUE

Del paused by a towering fir tree, his ears attuned to a low rumbling sound. His skis, at an

angle to the slope of the mountain, gave him a southeasterly view as he turned to look up the mountain. His breathing seemed to stop and his heart lurched in his chest.

“Avalanche,” he whispered, then shouted, “Avalanche.”

He immediately pushed off, lowering himself into a tuck position, getting to full speed. You can't outrun an avalanche, he thought. At least that's what all ski instructors say. With that thought in mind he did a forty-five degree jump turn sending him on a path away from the avalanche's flow and plummeted down the steep slope heading northwest.

Once off the ski run he straightened his posture to dodge the trees as he skied through numerous copse of fir and spruce. The sound, now like a thundering freight train, grew louder.

Why me, he thought, as he cleared a copse of trees, and lowered into a tuck position as he entered a large, treeless bowl. It was the last thought before the peripheral snow engulfed him. Now blinded, he still hurtled down the mountain.

11

Del lunged forward as he pushed off from the top of Rambling Run. The altitude ‘eight thousand four hundred fifty feet’ had been listed under the ski trail name, and Del could feel the thinness of the cold air as he filled his lungs. The crisp mountain air tingled as it rushed by his face. His skis made a shushing sound as he lazily christied down the steep slope.

The sun peeped atop Marvel Ridge spreading a million sparkles over the pristine area and a hawk began its lazy circles across the canyon they called Whiskey Gap.

Ahead he could see a strange, lopsided cross. X marks the spot, he thought facetiously. A turn close to a large pine sent a flurry of snow aloft, coated his black ski pants and sparkled on his cream ski parka and beaked hat.

As he neared the spot where the terrain flattened something appeared wrong. He could now make out someone lying on his back. One leg grotesquely twisted, its ski tilted at an angle toward the sky. The other leg, bent at the knee, accounted for the angle of the ski making the other half of the cross.

Del slowed his speed, edging closer and finally stopping in shocked horror. He could see that half of the person's face appeared to be gone and the blood spreading down across the yellow parka had turned into red ice. The rest of the face bore a surprised expression with one blank eye staring skyward through a dusting of recent snow which coated the eyebrows, eyelashes, and a fringe of gray streaked hair sticking out of what was left of a black and yellow stocking cap.

Not X marks the spot, he thought, more like here lies whoever.

Del attempted to look in all directions, trying to see tracks in the new snow. His track appeared to be the only one coming down the mountain and he could vaguely see, under the newly fallen snow, the dead skiers track running across the slope. His mind ran quickly over his morning. It had begun to snow while he ate his breakfast in the hotel, and had stopped by the time he reached the lift area. Because of a mechanical problem that morning the lift had opened late and he became one of the first skiers on the lift's first run.

A feeling of being watched made his skin crawl, but he could see no one. Del pushed off, his lanky form settling into a tuck position for greater speed. He inwardly blushed at his haste.

More to keep my own skin safe than to report a crime, he thought.

His skis threw a snow plume into the air as he stopped in front of the Ski Patrol hut. Quickly removing his skis and jamming their ends and his ski poles in the pile of snow by the entry way, Del rushed into the office.

“Who’s in charge?” he asked. He pulled the ski cap from his head and ran his hand through his longish, blond hair.

“I am,” said a muscular fellow in a turtleneck sweater.

He rose from a desk by the back wall and walked toward Del, his hand out-stretched in greeting.

“Carl Bergen,” he said in introduction.

His red sweater pulling against the muscle of his forearm and his gravelly voice emphasizing his willingness to serve the guests at Whiskey Gap Lodge.

“Del Channing,” Del said, and shook Carl’s hand.

“Mon Dieu, not ‘the’ Professor Del Channing -- from Massachusetts?” the dark complected youth seated at the front desk asked.

“Yes,” Del said. He felt something familiar about the young man.

“I’m Claude Minno. My uncle Marcel told me all about you.” He straightened the cuffs of his

immaculate, white sweater, making Del smile at the similarity between young Claude and Inspector Marcel Minno of the RCMP.

“Uncle Marcel said Toronto, she will never be the same,” Claude said enthusiastically.

“Hopefully he exaggerates,” Del said. His face grew grave. “You have a problem on Rambling Run.”

“A problem?” Carl asked.

“Yes. There’s a dead skier about a third of the way down.”

“Dead?” Carl asked.

Del noted his jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

“Very.”

“How did he die?”

“Shot, I’m guessing, by a large caliber gun.”

Carl ran back to his desk, jerking his blue ski patrol parka from the back of his chair.

“We’ve got to get him down the mountain before the guests see him.”

“Shouldn’t you call the police first?”

Del asked.

“It’ll take old Tremmerton an hour to get up here and then, he doesn’t ski.”

“Do you have a camera?” Del asked.

“I do,” Claude said.

“Be sure to take a lot of pictures before you get too close and spoil any evidence.”

“I will,” Claude said.

He pulled a camera out of his desk and then put on his blue parka and headed for the door.

“You’d better come along to show us where the body is,” Carl said to Del.

Reluctantly Del followed them out the door and put on his skis. He trailed behind Claude Minno to the lift that rose to the head of Rambling Run.

The ride back up the mountain did not hold the exhilaration the earlier trip had. Del felt his palms grow damp inside his insulated gloves, his breathing quicken, and his stomach churned for he dreaded facing the corpse again.

Del stopped where he had first noticed the skis forming a cross. “Better get a picture or two from here. Concentrate on the tracks. You can see mine,” he said gesturing ahead, “going down and a vague impression of the skier’s track coming across from the east.”

Claude clicked the camera’s shutter several times then descended a few yards for some more shots.

“You know his uncle, then?” Carl asked.

“Yes. He’s with the RCMP in Toronto,”

Del said.

“But Claude said you were from Massachusetts.”

“I am. Actually I’m from Amherst. I teach history at UMass. I attended a Global History Conference in Toronto. That’s where I met Marcel.”

“Surely you didn’t work with him?” Carl said.

“No. That is, not in an official capacity.”

“Kind of unusual, isn’t it?”

“Rather,” Del said, “but as I’m not used to people shooting at me or killing my friends, I got involved.”

The next move Claude made caused a shifting in the soft snow.

“Swing wide,” Carl yelled, “and get below the body.”

Claude did as he was instructed ending in position below the body where the head could be viewed. He took three pictures before he pushed off to a nearby tree and holding on to the trunk, lost his breakfast.

Carl, white-faced, maneuvered his toboggan in a wide arc around the body ending below it and efficiently removing the skis he lifted it onto the toboggan. He stood for a moment, his whole frame shaking.

“Can you make it down by yourself?”

Del asked quietly.

“Piece of cake,” Carl said.

“Good. I’d like to take Claude and the camera and try to follow the skier’s tracks.”

“Claude,” Del said, “Will you please ski uphill from the trail. I’ll take the downhill side.”

Claude nodded and sidestepped behind where the body had lain, to a position some five or six feet above the faint track. Del kept parallel some six feet below the track. They were silent, trying to watch not only the trail but for other skiers trying out the fresh power.

Del thought it odd that the trail remained level instead of heading down hill.

Arriving at the edge of Good Time Run for intermediate skiers, they lost the trail. This run now seemed alive with colorfully clad bodies hurtling down hill with an exhilarating abandon that allowed Del to be distracted from his grim find not an hour ago. Both he and Claude managed to get across Good Time Run but search as they would, could not pick up the dead man’s track.

“Claude, since we haven’t found the track of anyone else, let’s go back to where I found the body and see if we can figure out the direction the bullet came from.”

“Oui”, Claude said.

They moved faster on the way back and once there stood pondering the marks in the snow which showed where the skier fell, violently to the side, and down the slope, turning several times before being stopped by the tree. The shot would have to have come from up the mountain and some way to the left of Del's original tracks.

A dozen skiers came swooping down the mountain, leaving Rambling Run at an angle to dodge the dark green pines of the area and Del and Claude.

"Hot Dogs," Claude said disgustedly.

"Who are they?"

"A European team training here."

"Shouldn't they stay on the run?" Del asked.

"Yes, but their head man, he was the one out front, seems to think this kind of skiing keeps them on their tips."

"Tips? Oh you mean toes."

"Exactly," Claude said. He smiled and adjusted his ski gloves.

Del sighed.

"That takes care of our finding the spot where the killer stood when he fired the shot," Claude said disappointedly.

"I agree. At least three of them came through the area I deduced likely."

"Perhaps that was on purpose," Claude said.

Del continued to look down the mountain watching the group dodging in and out of sight. Their matching green jackets blending into the trees so that as they popped into view it appeared the trees had exploded.

“Why do you say that?” Del asked.

“Mon Dieu, I do not like these men.”

“You no doubt have a good reason?” Del said.

Claude leaned heavily on his uphill ski pole.

“They are not French,” he said. His head raised, his nose pointed up, his patriotism in full view.

“Let’s get down the mountain and see if Carl has made contact with the police,” Del said.

Together they turned their skis and followed the tracks made by Carl and his toboggan down the mountain.

By the time Del and Claude returned to the Ski Patrol hut the coroner was leaving with his sad burden and old Tremmerton, a skinny, nervous man in his mid-fifty’s was pacing back and forth expounding the virtue of patience to Carl.

“I’ll run down to the photo shop and put a rush on your pictures,” Carl said. He grabbed his parka, the camera from Claude’s hands and hurried out the door. The door slammed, the rising wind the culprit.

“Who’re you?” Tremmerton asked.

“That’s Professor Del Channing,” Claude said.
“He found the body.”

“What can you tell me?”
Corporal Tremmerton asked.

“Not a great deal more than the pictures will. We tried to backtrack but lost the trail on Good Time Run. Then a group of European skiers came shushing through the area I felt the shot might have come from and destroyed any possible evidence of where the assailant must have stopped.”

“Why didn’t you stop them?”
the corporal asked.

“Carl closed off Rambling Run before we went to get the body. We didn’t expect anyone, and when they came they nearly mowed Claude and me down.”

Tremmerton’s fitted kaki uniform made his thin form look wispy. In contrast, his hands, feet, and head appeared unnaturally large, and his hat, with brim, gigantic. He removed his hat to scratch his gray head, then stroked his large, bushy, gray mustache.

“You intend to get in the way?” he asked Del.

“Mon Dieu, you would turn away the Professor when our government has lauded his talents for crime detection and given thanks for

his help?” Claude said indignantly

“What you talking about, Frenchie?” Corporal Tremmerton said.

“He,” Claude said, “single handedly, exposed a group of Irish terrorists in Toronto.”

“You expecting to find that up here?” the corporal said.

“I should hope not,” Del said.

Corporal Tremmerton growled with displeasure and slumped down in Claude’s chair.

Del unzipped his parka and shoved his gloves and hat into his pocket. He settled himself on the bench against the outer wall and eyed the flamboyant blue ski patrol flag on the back wall.

“Well, what do ya think?” Corporal Tremmerton said.

“About the crime, the day, or both?” Del said politely.

“Both,” Tremmerton said.

“Last night’s weather report said a large snowfall was anticipated. The day started out with light snow about six a.m. The killer wouldn’t know the fall would be so light, and I’m sure figured heavy snow would cover up both the tracks and the body.”

“Unless it was a spur of the moment crime -- ya know, an act of passion,” the corporal said.

“Sashay la feme, eh, Frenchie?”

Claude bristled and hurried to the door. “I’d better get back up to Rambling Run and see if the closure notice is still in place,” he said.

The door banged shut behind him gaining force from the rising wind.

“I have no idea the sex of the murderer, but I doubt it was spur of the moment,” Del said.

“Why so positive?” Tremmerton asked.

“How many skiers take a rifle along for their morning run?” Del said.

“Alright, then, who did it?” the corporal asked sarcastically.

“Perhaps if we concentrate on who the body is we can begin to trace his movements and his background,” Del said. “Did you find anything on the body?”

Tremmerton scratched his head again, his gnarled hands eloquent in a motion of nonchalance.

“He’s a guest. Key to 321. Name of Robert Taglore.”

“Occupation?”

“Retired.”

“From where?”

“Don’t know. The file’s classified.”

“Government work of some kind,” Del said.

“Not ours -- yours.”

“Is he traveling alone?”

“No, he’s got a wife along. At least that’s how they’re registered,” Tremmerton said. He gave a wicked laugh. “He’s over fifty, at least, but his wife’s much younger -- according to the concierge.”

Del rose and turned to look out the window. The sun had disappeared and large fluffy snowflakes, like goose feathers from a shaken down comforter, were drifting down from the cloud laden sky.

Del walked to the door. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask,” he said over his shoulder.

“Got an idea,” Corporal Tremmerton said. “If you’re offering, you can help by seeing his wife and telling her the old man’s been cut down.”

Del turned, his hand on the door, and waited.

“You found the body, you get to tell the bereaved.”

“But...” Del’s brow knit. “That’s an official action.”

“Not up here it isn’t.”

Del stood silent. He ran his hand through his hair. “Will you write down the wife’s name and room number -- please,” he said.

Corporal Tremmerton searched Claude’s desk for a piece of paper and pulling a pencil from his own shirt pocket he laboriously printed the information, handing it to Del.

“You look as hesitant as a new member of the polar bear club about to make his first icy plunge,” Tremmerton said. “One thing you learn when you’re around me -- don’t offer if you don’t mean it.”

Del shrugged, slipped the piece of paper into his parka pocket, put his beaked cap on his head, and walked out the door. The snow fall had increased, blowing across his vision and forcing him to hurriedly put on his ski gloves. He picked up his skis and ski poles in his left hand, and made his way along the path toward the lower level of the lodge. The snow crunched under his boots, and swirled around causing him to drop his head and turn his face away from the force of the wind.

Del heard the whooshing sound of skis growing louder and as he turned his head to the left, he set the bottom of his skis down onto the ground. He squinted into the biting snowflakes, saw a dark image rushing to him just before he felt the impact and the sensation of flying. He heard a strangled yell and wondered if it came from his own throat.