

*A Roux of Revenge*

Nate Edgerton, Snowflake's Chief of Police, reached over and flipped off the siren and flashing light. He pulled his cruiser to the side of the road, slowing and coming to a stop behind a bright blue sports car. Early morning sunlight reflected off the rear bumper of the car where two people, a young couple, sat huddled together. Nate could tell from their expressions there was no need to hurry.

He turned to his deputy. "Cancel the ambulance." Nate heaved a sigh and climbed out. He already knew what he'd find in the ditch – a mangled body or bodies trapped in an equally crushed vehicle. Not how he wanted his day to go. His spirits had been high when he'd left home that morning. He had impulsively hugged his wife and kissed her quickly on the cheek. It was a golden October day. Indian summer warmth lingered over the countryside and a brilliant glow of crimson and orange covered the trees, leaves unwilling to submit to the coming winter.

He turned back to the cruiser and leaned into the driver's window. "Get their plate number and run it. And get hold of somebody in Lincoln Falls for a coroner's van."

Bradley nodded, and following Nate's orders, began to make the calls. He really hoped he wouldn't have to see any blood today.

"And after you've done that, talk to those two." Nate indicated the young couple by the sports car. "Get their information and don't let 'em leave just yet." Nate straightened up slowly, holding a hand against his stiff back and approached the pair. "You the folks who called this in?"

The man nodded. His arm was slung protectively around the shoulder of the woman who sat next to him. Her face was pale and pinched.

"Did you both go down to have a look?" Nate asked.

"Yes, we . . . well, I got there first. I told my wife to go back, not to look."

“I see. Nate nodded. “My deputy will get your information and I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

Nate doubted the couple was mistaken but he needed to make sure. He walked to the edge of the road and gauged the distance to a white van tilted forward into the soft earth below him at a twenty-five degree angle. He grasped a sapling that clung to the side of the ditch, and doing his best not to slip or tumble, stepped sideways down the slope. He took note of the footprints in the soft earth, one set larger and deeper than the other. As careful as he was, he was barely able to keep from sliding the rest of the way down into the gully.

The windshield of the van had shattered from the impact. Probably from the victim’s head, he guessed. Nate peered through the open driver’s window. The body of a man dressed in casual work clothes was splayed over the steering wheel. His face, pressed into the shattered windshield, was striped with rivulets of blood. Sightless eyes were open, fixed at a place well beyond the ditch in which he lay.

Nate sighed and shook his head. Why don’t they ever wear their seat belts?

He wrenched the door open and stood back to let gravity do the hard work. The man’s left sleeve and shirt front were soaked in blood. Nate scanned the interior of the van searching for broken glass or a sharp object to explain the blood loss but found nothing. He pulled a pen from his pocket and using the tip of the pen, very carefully lifted the sleeve of the man’s shirt. Humming tunelessly to himself, he replaced his pen and climbed around the van. He studied the ground, noticing a deep footprint at the rear of the vehicle. Stepping carefully over the depression, he leaned close to the bumper for a better look.

“Bradley!” He bellowed.

Nate looked to the top of the rise. His deputy’s face appeared over the edge.

“Bring the camera down here.” Nate knew the technicians would take plenty of pictures but whenever possible he preferred to document the scene himself – too easy for a key piece of evidence to disappear or be overlooked.

Bradley appeared a few moments later, a camera bag slung over his shoulder. He slid down a lot more gracefully than the older man. When Bradley reached bottom, he passed the camera to Nate, carefully keeping his gaze averted from the front seat of the van.

“Come on over here,” Nate scrambled around to the driver’s door. “What do you see?”

Bradley followed his boss dutifully. He felt his stomach lurch. “Blood.”

“What else do you see?”

“Well, he didn’t have a seat belt on. Went straight into the windshield.”

“Anything else?”

Bradley shrugged his shoulders. “He bled all over himself.”

“Really? So, what do you think caused all the blood?” Nate asked.

Bradley, his face white, shrugged his shoulders.

“Look again.” Nate pointed to the dead man’s arm and shirt front and waited patiently for light to dawn in Bradley’s eyes.

“This wasn’t from the accident?”

Nate slid the pen from his pocket and once again lifted the material of the shirt away from the dead man’s arm. “Now what do you see?”

Bradley squinted. “A hole.” He turned to Nate, surprise on his face. “He was shot?”

“There’s more. Listen and learn.” Nate pointed to the rear of the van and led the way. “See this?” He pointed to a clear footprint.

Bradley stared. “Maybe the guy up there . . .” he said, indicating the man by the sports cars.

“Oh yeah?” What kinda shoes is he wearing?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know.”

“He’s wearing some kind of expensive running shoes. This looks like maybe a small man’s size, distinct heel, maybe leather soles – city shoes.” Nate indicated dents on the rear bumper. “Here.” He pointed to a second spot of damage. “And here? A lot of dings and rust spots, but there’s no rust on these. A little paint in there. Maybe they can match it.”

“You’re saying somebody made sure he went off the road?”

“Yup. Twice, it looks like. Stand over here and help me get this back door open. Whatever you do, don’t mess up that print.” Nate pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wrapped it around his hand. He pulled the door open while Bradley wedged his arm into the opening and pushed. The door creaked and swung open. Gravity did the rest.

Nate stared at the floor of the van. “There’s a track of dirt and leaves – fresh. Maybe somebody was having a look around before we got here. Grab your camera. I want you to get some good shots of this and our man inside, his shirt and these dings on the bumper. But don’t touch anything, all right?”

Bradley nodded and began to fidget with the settings on his camera.

Nate climbed into the empty interior of the van. Using his handkerchief, he pushed gently against the panels that lined the interior. One gave slightly, as though loosened. He climbed out, careful to avoid the deep footprint and jerked his thumb to the top of the rise. “I want to talk to those two up there before they decide to take off.”

Nate straightened his back. *Getting stiffer every day*, he thought. *Getting too damn old for this job*. He heaved another sigh and made an effort to climb back up to the road. Taking two steps up and sliding back one, he clung to the thin plantings and branches to give himself purchase.

The man at the car stood as Nate approached. The woman held her hands against her face, leaning over her knees. "Can we go now?" The man asked.

"About what time did you first pull over?"

"Maybe forty-five minutes ago, I think. We saw the top of the van down below. We stopped, thinking somebody might need help, but . . ." he trailed off.

"It was too late." Nate finished his sentence.

The man gulped and nodded.

"Where are you headed, by the way?" Nate made a circuit of the sports car, looking for signs of damage. The chrome bumper was unmarred.

"Over to Bournemouth to visit my wife's parents. We live in Lincoln Falls."

"Did you happen to see any other vehicles when you first noticed the van? Anybody pass by?"

"No. Not a soul. There wasn't any traffic. We came this way 'cause we wanted to take the scenic route." The man shook his head ruefully. "We sure as hell didn't bargain for this."

Nate nodded. "Sorry you had to be the ones. If you've given your names and home address to my deputy, you can be on your way."

Without a word the young woman stood, a look of relief on her face. They climbed into the sports car without a backward glance. The engine revved and the car pulled onto the road heading east.

Nate watched until the car navigated a turn and was out of sight. He heard the crunch of gravel behind him as another car pulled off the road.

Elias Scott, Snowflake's town doctor and the local coroner, climbed out, a heavy black bag in his hand. Nate shook his head negatively to let Elias know there was no hurry.

"You're sure?" Elias asked as he approached.

"Sorry to drag you out here. Not much you can do now."

“Well, since I’m here, why don’t I have a closer look?”

“Be my guest.”

Elias stepped carefully down the side of the ditch. When he reached the bottom, he slipped on a pair of latex gloves. Nate followed and watched as Elias looked in the open driver’s door. Elias whistled softly.

“What do you think?” Nate asked.

“Well, the accident caused this.” Elias pointed to a gash on the man’s head and facial cuts. “Might have caused a concussion too. But it doesn’t account for all this blood. Looks like it flowed from his left arm. See here.” He pointed a gloved finger and then carefully examined the material of the shirt.

“Yeah, I caught that. A gunshot wound.”

“He was alive when he went off the road. He could have been in shock from the wound, maybe that’s what caused the crash. Could have died from the trauma, the blood loss or even the head injury. Can’t be certain yet.”

“Have a look back here.” Elias followed the path that Nate had taken, careful not to slip on the damp vegetation. Bradley was returning the camera to its bag.

“Don’t walk over there. One good print I noticed.” Nate pointed to the area by the rear door.

“Somebody else was here?” Elias asked.

“That’s what I think. And then there are two areas of damage. Here and here.” Nate indicated the spots on the crushed bumper. “And these are new – no rust. This wasn’t caused by the accident. Somebody rearended this guy – a couple of times, I’d guess.”

“So you think he was shot first? Maybe whoever shot him managed to hit a vital artery.”

“And maybe he was able to get away – tried to get help. But somebody didn’t want him to.” Nate shook his head. “Nothing’s simple, is it? I’m gonna have to get the

body moved and this thing towed to Lincoln Falls where the techs can have a better look. Let's go back up to the road. I want to get some shots of the tire tracks before everybody messes them up."

The three men climbed back to the road, doing their best not to slip on the soft earth or wet autumn leaves. Nate reached out and took the camera from Bradley. Elias stepped away and watched as Nate shot several photos.

"What can you tell from those?"

"See these right here?" Nate said, pointing to wide tire tracks. "These are the marks from the van. They start right here. No sign of an attempt to brake. This guy just flew off the road. Maybe he was already unconscious. But I still think somebody helped him along."

Elias followed in Nate's wake. "And back here . . ." Nate pointed to another set of marks. "Somebody hit the brakes real hard. See these? And then it looks like he drove on to the soft shoulder."

He turned to his deputy. "Bradley, you stay here until everything's handled and then bring the cruiser back to the station. And make sure you don't touch anything and don't let anybody stop to gawk. And especially right here," Nate said pointing to a set of tire tracks. "Get some markers out of the trunk and make sure they get an impression of that tire and that one good footprint down there."

Bradley wasn't happy to be stuck on the road for what would be several hours of a mop up operation but there wasn't much he could say about it.

"I'll hitch a ride back to town with you, Elias. Bradley can handle the rest." Nate stood for a moment, silently surveying the scene. "Yup. I'd bet my last dollar. Somebody was after this guy. We've got a murder on our hands."