

## *A Cold, Cold World*

A Sheriff Bet Rivers Mystery by Elena Taylor

# ONE

Bet Rivers sat in the sheriff's station and watched the radar on her computer screen turn a darker and darker blue. Snow headed for the little town of Collier and keeping everyone safe was her responsibility. Bet's advancement to sheriff had taken place less than a year ago, but the name Rivers had followed 'Sheriff' all the way back to the founding of the town. None of the previous Sheriff Rivers, her father included, ever failed the community, and she didn't plan to be the first. With her father's death last fall, Collier residents were the closest thing she had to family.

The valley Bet protected sat high in the Cascade Mountain Range of Washington State. Winter storms often dropped a couple inches of snow at once, a situation Collier could handle, and winter had been relatively mild so far. February, however, was shaping up into something else.

This morning, nearby Lake Collier – a dark and dangerous body of water the locals respected from a safe distance – started freezing completely over for the first time in years.

Bet couldn't remember such a large storm ever bearing down on the valley. The weather was determined to test her in ways that patrolling the streets of Los Angeles and her short stint as sheriff had not yet done.

Clicking off the weather radar screen and opening another file, Bet read over her severe winter storm checklist. Snowplow – ready to go. Volunteers with tractors and trucks with snowplow attachments – set. The community center would be open twenty-four hours a day in case the town's power went out and people needed a warm place to go. Donna, the elementary

school nurse, was on hand for minor health emergencies. She would be staying at the center twenty-four seven until the storm passed.

Most residents owned generators and a lot of people used fireplaces for heat, but the community center provided a central location for anyone in trouble.

Nothing like living in an isolated mountain valley to make folks respect what Mother Nature hurled at them – and rely on each other, rather than the outside world. A lot of people would look to the sheriff as a leader. She couldn't let them down.

Bet turned her attention to the pile of pink 'while you were out' notes that Alma still loved to use rather than sending information to Bet digitally. Alma was much more than an office manager, but she also fought certain modern conveniences.

Most of the notes were mundane issues that Alma could handle, but the last in the pile was a call from Jamie Garcia, a local reporter trying to get back into Bet's good graces after an incident a few months ago had cost her Bet's trust.

*Wants to chat about the possibility of an increase in drug use in the area, the note read. Specifically – meth.*

That would definitely have to wait. It crossed Bet's mind that Jamie might exaggerate the situation just to have reason to touch base with her, but Bet taped it to the computer monitor to follow up on after the storm passed. Her valley didn't have the kind of drug problems as many other communities, and Bet wanted to see it stay that way. If Jamie had any information on a rise in illegal activity, that could be useful.

The rest of the notes she would return to Alma to deal with. Right now, weathering the tempest would take all of Bet's resources.

Bringing up the radar one more time, Bet's stomach clenched as she tracked the monster storm. What if she made a decision during this event that hurt her entire community? Confidence didn't make responsibility lighter to bear, and the hot, sunny streets of Los Angeles hadn't prepared her for one thousand residents slowly buried under several feet of snow. They were a long way from the plowed highways and larger cities with fully functional hospitals.

Bet was the first line of defense against disaster.

She was also likely the last line of defense. Once they were snowed in, she couldn't bring help in from the outside.

A year ago, she had been poised to take the detective's exam in Los Angeles. Her goal was a long and successful career in the nation's largest police force. But events outside her control got in the way, and now she was back in Collier, trying to fill her father's large, all-too-recently vacated shoes.

She faced a once-in-a-century storm with her lone deputy, a septuagenarian secretary, and one very big dog.

Her first instinct was to talk to her father, but his death prevented her from ever gaining new insight into his expertise. Her second instinct was to contact Sergeant Magdalena Carrera. Maggie had mentored Bet during her time at the LAPD.

'We *chicas* need to stick together,' she'd said to Bet early on in her career, back when Bet still called her sergeant.

But as good as Maggie was at her job, Bet doubted she'd have much advice about facing a blizzard.

'It's up to us, Schweitzer,' Bet said to the Anatolian shepherd sitting in her doorway. 'As long as no one has a heart attack after the storm hits, we'll be fine.' Schweitzer had a look on his

face like he knew what was coming. He always could read her mood, not to mention the weather, and he'd been edgy all morning.

She had learned to read his mood too, and right now it wasn't good.

'It's going to be all right, Schweitz.' It surprised her to realize she believed her own words. She could handle this.

Lakers – residents proudly took the nickname from their mysterious lake – could hunker down in their valley and survive on their own. Everyone in town knew that if snow blocked them in and a helicopter couldn't fly, they had no access to a hospital. But Donna was good at her job too. Plus, it would only be for a couple of days.

The phone on her desk rang, jarring her from her thoughts.

As long as the ring didn't herald an emergency, everything would be fine.

Bet rolled out in her black and white on the long teardrop of road that circled the valley. She didn't turn on her siren; there wasn't anyone on the loop to warn of her approach and the sound felt too loud, like a scream into the colorless void. The emergency lights on top of her SUV stained the white unmarked fields of snow on either side red, then blue, then red again, like blood streaking the ground. Her studded tires roared on the hard-packed snow, the surface easy to navigate – at least for now.

The drive to Jeb Pearson's place took less than twenty minutes, even with the worsening conditions. Pearson's Ranch sat at the end of the valley farthest from the lake and the town center. The ranch occupied an area the locals called the 'Train Yard', though that name didn't show up on any official maps.

Long ago, the roundhouse for the Colliers' private railway perched there at the end of the tracks. The roundhouse was a huge, wedge-shaped brick structure, like one third of a pie with the tips of the slices bitten off. It was built to house the big steam engines owned by the Colliers. The facility could hold five engines, each pulled inside through giant glass and iron doors. Engines could be parked and serviced inside the roundhouse, while an enormous turntable sat out front to spin the engines around, sending them down different tracks in order to pass each other in opposite directions.

It was unlikely the Colliers ever housed five engines up here all at once, but they owned other mines around the state and had used engines in other places. It must have been reassuring to know that if they ever needed to, they could bring their assets up here, protected in their high-elevation fiefdom.

Jeb used the property as a summer camp for boys who struggled with drug and alcohol addictions and guesthouses for snow adventure enthusiasts during the winter. Jeb lived there year-round, with a giant Newfoundland dog named Grizzly, a half a dozen horses, and one mini donkey named Dolly that helped him rehabilitate the boys.

Bet pulled up in front of the roundhouse. The cabins and other outbuildings stretched away from where she parked, with the barn the farthest from the road. The pastures were empty with the storm bearing down, the animals all safely tucked away in their stalls. Jeb stood out front with two bundled figures that must have been the father and son who were currently staying at his place. A third member of their party, the mother, was nowhere to be seen.

Bet got out of her vehicle and walked over to where two of Jeb's snowmobiles were parked, running and ready to go. Layers of winter clothing padded Jeb's wiry form, his face ruddy in the arctic wind.

‘What have we got, Jeb?’

‘Mark and Julia Crews and their son Jeremy came across what looks to be a solo wreck up on Iron Horse Ridge. They didn’t have any details about the driver’s condition, so I’m not sure what we’re looking at. The parents wanted to protect their son and got him out of there before he could see anything gruesome. These two came down to get me while Mrs Crews stayed with the injured rider.’

Bet nodded to the man standing a few feet away. Only part of his face was visible through the balaclava he wore. His eyes looked haunted.

‘You did the right thing,’ she said to him. ‘If the driver’s got a spinal injury, you could have done more damage than good trying to bring them down.’ She didn’t add that if the driver was dead there was nothing to be done except locate the next of kin.

‘Thanks, Sheriff,’ Mark Crews said, his voice shaky. ‘That was—’

Emotion cut off the man’s words. He reached for his son and pulled him close. The boy didn’t resist, but he also didn’t hug his father back. Bet considered checking the boy for shock, but guessed he was just a teen being a teen.

She gave Mark a nod and hoped the accident victim survived the wait – otherwise Mark Crews would always wonder if he should have made a different choice.

The father got his emotions under control and turned his attention back to Bet. ‘Please get my wife Julia down safely.’

Jeremy might be shocky, but the two people up on the ridge were her priority.

‘Always prioritize,’ Maggie said to Bet on a regular basis. ‘Don’t get caught up trying to fix everything at once. Fix the big things first.’

Her father would have agreed. His voice no longer took precedence in her mind, but his teachings never left her.

Bet promised to take care of Julia Crews and walked over to straddle the closest snowmobile. Pulling on the helmet she'd brought, she tucked her auburn curls out of the way before closing the face shield. Bet admired the Crews family for helping a stranger as the ominous storm bore down on the area. It must be terrifying to know Mrs Crews waited up on the ridge as the weather closed in. Bet was impressed the family put their own safety in jeopardy for someone they didn't know. Not everyone would do that. It would have been easy enough to pretend they never found the accident, leaving the driver alone in the snow.

Jeb hopped on the other snowmobile, which was already set up to tow the Snowbulance – a small, enclosed trailer with a stretcher mounted inside. Bet made eye contact with Jeb to confirm she was ready, and they took off with him in the lead. Search-and-rescue was Jeb's specialty, and he knew the terrain better than she did.

Her father Earle always said a good leader knew when to follow. Like most of her father's advice, Bet knew it was true even if her instinct was never to admit someone else was the right person for a job she could do. In her defense, her father never faced life in law enforcement as a woman.

Maggie always said, 'Never let a man think he's got control. If you hand control over, he'll never give it up.'

Bet wasn't her father, but she wasn't a patrol officer in LA, either. Sometimes neither Maggie's nor her father's advice was any help to her at all.

Not far from the ranch, Jeb turned off the main road and started up a forest service road that went west and north into the mountains. The turnoff wasn't obvious, so it was interesting that the Crews had found that particular trail.

Snowmobiling was a popular sport in Collier and a lot of people used these forest service roads for trails, even the ones that were officially closed to traffic because there were no funds for maintenance. Without anyone to police the extensive system, the locals used them as their own private playground.

The roads connected in a complex web throughout the area. The injured teen could have arrived at the ridge from any direction. The forest was riddled with paths that the forest service no longer had the money or workforce to keep up, but people and animals kept cleared. In a lot of ways, the community benefited from the interlopers who cleared the roads, because that provided fire access into their local forest, which would otherwise become impassable through neglect.

If the brunt of the storm held off long enough for them to locate the scene of the accident and get the injured teen down the mountain before the conditions worsened, everything should still be all right.

Bet kept her focus on Jeb's sled as they rode up the hill. The road turned dark as they got farther into the trees and the cloud cover grew almost black. She was glad for the headlight and someone she trusted to follow. At least in this moment, her father's advice was right.

If only the injured rider survived the wait.