

Excerpted from

“ICE IN HIS VEINS”

By

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PROLOGUE

HE LOOKED COLD, STRETCHED out on his back in the snow. A few blown flakes settled on his exposed chest and stomach, but there was no reason to worry about his physical comfort. He was dead.

He was lying not far from the door, away from the graffiti-covered walls. Cobblestone and pavement peeked through the snow and ice beneath him. It was as if he'd wandered into the wrong play. From the looks of it, his robe had fallen open when he'd fallen backward. Other than the robe, he wore only his *Midsummer* costume and his shoes. It wasn't the absurdity of his body dressed for summer but lying in the sub-freezing winter weather that grabbed our attention. Nor was it the large amount of bright red blood turning dull red as it formed a circular pool in the snow around him. It was the icicle. It was lying propped up on his neck, its tip pointing to a puncture wound in his skin. Somewhere along the way, the tip had been inside him and had melted, allowing the ice to drop out. Someone had stabbed him with that icicle.

We were doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in January because we thought it would

lighten our winter. As it turned out, discontent had other plans.

Not even twenty-four hours earlier everything was on track for a typical small theater production, at least of the kind I seem to get involved in. We had Shakespeare, an unhappy drag queen, nasty hangovers, late-night phone calls, semi-senile neighbors, and the resurrection of failed romance. If I'd only known, I could have anticipated all the fun that was yet to come: color voodoo, overwrought local newscasters, scary art, and way too much Lycra.

I stepped back into the theater, where the rest of the company waited to hear what was happening. All they knew was that something in the alley had sent two members running back onto the stage where they'd passed out, the victim's name hanging in air.

"Listen up everyone," I said. "He's dead. We're going to have to call the police and —"

I never finished the sentence. My announcement caused an outbreak of hysterical grief on the part of the actor playing Titania. At least, I thought it was grief, until I realized that he was shouting for the costume designer. He didn't feel he was dressed to his best advantage for a police interview.

ACT I

SATURDAY EVENING

“THE NEIGHBOR, MARIA CEPEDES, also saw...”

“...the face of...”

“...John the Baptist...”

“...in the recently purchased chunk of...”

“...chunk of bleu cheese.”

“Give the words space,” the director coached his actors.

The first actor, the one who’d begun the exercise, stretched his neck from side to side and then raised and lowered his shoulders. The other looked at his watch.

“...chunk of bleu cheese.”

“Mrs. Hagida is a member of...”

“...Mary, Queen of the...”

“Attitude,” the director urged them on.

“...Universe Catholic Church in ...”

“...Kew Gardens, Queens.”

“My cheese is very ...”

“...ordinary ...”

“See the cheese, guys. Share the cheese.”

“...said Mrs. Cepedes.”

“It makes me...”

“... sad. I never see...”

“...saints.”

“Give and take,” the director said.

“Church officials would not...”

“...comment...”

“...on the sighting other than to say...”

“Color the words.” The director’s voice was hushed, swallowed by the empty theater.

The vocals were muffled in part by the thick black curtains hanging along the back and side walls of the claustrophobic stage. These absorbed not only the sound, but also the flickering light from the fluorescents hanging over as work lights over the stage, leaving the three people center in a dingy brownish-yellow glow. They sat at a folding table scattered with newspaper clippings. I served as the lone audience member. The house lights were at half strength. In the dim light, the red leatherette seat cushions appeared to be the same dull brown color that washed the stage. The only really noticeable noise in the entire space was the whirring of the overhead ventilation fans.

“...that...”

“...they were studying the event.”

“Share.”

Alex Isola, the actor with the stiff neck, tapped his foot rapidly on the stage floor. He picked up the thread of the news article.

“Mrs. Hagida charges one dollar per viewing...”

“You know, she could have got a lot more if she’d been smart enough to see Christ himself,” his partner interrupted, speaking to the theater house as if it were filled with an opening night audience.

“Stick to the words, Herb,” the director patiently urged.

“Of course.” Herb Wilcox sighed. “The text. The holy, holy text.”

I was huddled in the first row, a stage manager waiting to set up rehearsal. As the tension gathered onstage, I deliberately looked away, doing my best impression of detached professionalism, neither encouraging nor condemning the actors. If we’d been in rehearsal, I would have glared back with disapproval. Keeping order was part of my job, but this was a director’s exercise, so I gazed meditatively at a shining red exit sign.

Alex pushed away from the folding table. “Why are we doing this?”

Marcus Bradshaw, the director, started to explain. “Well, the point of the exercise –”

“Thank you, I know the ‘point’ of the exercise.” Alex mimicked Marcus’ word choice and tone. “I was in class with you when you learned it. I want to know the ‘point’ of doing it with *him*?”

The *him* in question was Herb Wilcox, downtown drag queen diva, better known to

adoring fans in small East Village bars as “Anita Nutha.” Today, Herb was out of drag but not attitude. He stood six feet four inches, thin in a way that was either genetic or the result of a lettuce diet. Even seated, he looked down at Alex.

“Doing it with me? With me? As if I would do *it* with someone like you.” He left Alex and Marcus center, crossing downstage to ask me, “How did you do it Nicky? Princess, how did you manage day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade –”

“It was only four years, Herb,” I jumped in, before the millennia overwhelmed us.

“That’s pretty faint praise,” Marcus said. He sounded more offended than the smile on his face suggested.

“Yeah, Nicky,” Alex said. “Couldn’t you have said something more supportive? Like ‘It was really my pleasure?’”

Herb winked at me then spun around to confront Alex. “That’s all you think about, isn’t it, prep-boy? Your pleasure. Well, I’ve had enough of trying to please you.”

He stepped off the low rise of the stage into the front row of the house, an opening neither deep enough nor wide enough to be called an orchestra pit. “I’ll be in the lobby when you’re ready to rehearse.”

With a grand passion normally reserved for royal coronations, Herb processed up the length of the Tapestry Theater.

The theater was part of the Brewery Arts Center, a renovated microbrewery on West 53rd Street in Hell’s Kitchen in New York City. The Tapestry, a ninety-nine seater with a stage the size of a suburban living room, occupied the first floor, and had rehearsal space and dressing room on

the second. There was a light booth just behind and above the audience at the back of the theater house. Here stage managers and light and sound board operators would work during performances. From the public's perspective, the renovation was impressive. Audience seating was very comfy, with deep burgundy cushions surrounded by laminate wood. What they couldn't see was that the booth was only marginally outfitted with equipment already five years out of date when it arrived. What they wouldn't know was that the finely done detail work on the walls and molding was every designer's nightmare. In the words of Midsummer's eternally testy lighting designer, "Who the hell wants the walls to 'talk to you'?"

Herb was barely past those overdone walls and into the lobby, before Marcus started laughing.

"You only encourage him when you do that," Alex said.

"But he's funny."

"Don't be so earnest, Alex," I added.

"How come he stomps out of here and I am the one at whom fun is being poked?" Alex asked.

"Oh, Alex. Alex," Marcus said. "We promise. Even though you're obsessive about not dangling your prepositions and say things like 'at whom fun is being poked,' we'll always adore you and always take your side against evil drag queens. Promise. No matter how funny they are. Swear." Marcus wrapped Alex in one of his trademark all-embracing, heart-thumping hugs; the sort of hug known to make strong men weak and weak boys faint. Believe me, I knew from experience.

"Marcus, you cannot possibly be defending him," Alex said.

“Me? No. I’m not defending him. I’m just saying he’s funny.”

I was fairly certain that Alex had never kissed Marcus while we were at school. I couldn’t say whether or not he wanted to now. I can say that Alex didn’t pull away from Marcus’ embrace. For just a moment, I thought I caught a vibe that was a bit more than “former roommates and friends.”

Built to match, they were solid, lean men. Alex had the same black hair and blue eyes as Marcus. If you didn’t know them, you might momentarily confuse them if you saw one without the other. But if you had more than a casual familiarity with either, you would never make that mistake. Marcus retained the easy, open manner he’d had on the day I’d met him. Alex, though he’d shed much of his early shyness, was still more reserved, more cautious. In my mind, Marcus’ image appeared much larger than Alex’s, and not just because I knew that Marcus could screw like a bunny in springtime.