

**MELT**

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Make a wish and blow,” her mother had said, hovering above her with a face beaming maternal pride, full of encouragement and expectation, waiting for her little darling to blow out four candles on a rabbit-shaped cake crouched on a white platter and coated in shredded coconut. Her mother had looked so happy she almost didn’t want to look away, but there was the CAKE right in front of her, a whole plate of sweet yumminess with her name on it. Literally. It was written in white frosting on a fondant carrot resting across the rabbit’s front paws: K-E-L-L-Y.

She had looked the bunny in the face—licorice whiskers, red gum drop nose and Junior Mint eyes—and blew!

*What did I wish for?* Kelly asked herself, trying to think back twenty-six years.

If she had known anything about how life would unfold, she would have wished for her mother to still be able to smile like that fifteen years later.

She walked swiftly over lichen-covered rock, her footfalls the only sound to reach her ears. There was a soft scuffing from the rubber-soled hiking boots, hardly a sound at all. Anywhere else, she wouldn’t have heard even that, but the silence here was so complete that if she had been standing still, she might have heard her heartbeat.

The sun was high in the sky and a delicate breeze wafted in from the bay. *Everything is fine*, she reminded herself. There was no way to get lost, though miles of ubiquitous gray gneiss stretched behind and before her with nothing to mark her progress. No trees. No houses. No

telephone poles. No sign of life at all. Not even a bird. In the bay, stretching away from the rocky shore, the same. No boats. Just that exquisitely beautiful expanse of still, shimmering water studded with slabs of ice, all sizes, shapes and textures, sparkling like enormous sugar cubes in the sunlight.

Further out, massive icebergs lined up along the horizon like the buildings of a city skyline, stark and silent, a parade of sculpted statues in a fascinating and infinite variety of profiles. They stood like majestic sentinels, seemingly motionless. But the forms changed day to day as new ones calved off the enormous Jakobshavn Glacier and floated indiscernibly slowly toward the open ocean.

People said that Ilulissat, meaning “icebergs” in Greenlandic, was the most beautiful place in all of Greenland. That was no small claim in a land this big...and this beautiful.

On any other day, she would have had her camera out, trying to catch the way the afternoon sun gave the purest white opacity to the ice. But not today. Her camera was in her backpack and would not be coming out. She couldn't afford the time.

As she hopped a narrow rivulet, her left foot slipped off the side of a rock into a spongy crevice, sinking through the mat of emerald groundcover into mud. She stumbled but avoided a fall.

*Watch where you're going!* she admonished herself sharply. *If you fall and break your leg, what will happen to Pippa?*

She sucked in a bracing breath, then opened her water bottle. The water was cool and welcome in her dry throat. She had stuffed her jacket into her pack and was comfortable in a short-sleeved T-shirt, walking fast enough to generate her own heat. It was a clear, mild summer day. Despite the warm sunshine and inspiring view, she could barely keep the sense of dread

from overwhelming her. But there was no reason to panic as long as she kept moving and kept Disko Bay to her right. That meant she was heading south, and as long as she was heading south, she would reach Ilulissat, her home for the last two weeks. There she would get help for Pippa.

*Wherever she was. Whatever had happened to her.*

Kelly felt a lump of emotion rising in her throat. She swallowed it down and screwed the cap on her water bottle. There was no point thinking about that. Any ideas she had about what had happened to Pippa were total guesses. It was as if she had simply vanished from the face of the earth.

After their snack break, Kelly had set up her tripod and gotten caught up in her photography. It had been no more than a half hour until she was ready to move on. That's when she had looked for Pippa. Her backpack lay on the ground nearby, but there was no other sign of her. Kelly had waited a half hour for her return, getting more and more worried. She had then gone searching for her, certain that with the clear air and long distance views she would easily spot that red jacket, even if for some reason Pippa was unable to answer her calls.

But there had been nothing. Just the indifferent rock and the eerie silence of this Arctic landscape. After two weeks in Greenland, the absence of sound still caught her off guard. It reminded her of the complete darkness every cave guide subjects you to. The lights go out and you see nothing but a solid field of black. It's a shock because you realize something that wasn't apparent before, that in the above ground world there's always some light, even in the middle of a cloudy night. It's never completely dark. Just as there is always some light, she had now learned, there is also always some noise. The hum of traffic in the distance, the rustling of leaves, insects chirping. But here there was no sound at all, even with the wind blowing. There was nothing for it to rustle. The only plants growing here were tucked into crevices between the

rocks, most of them no more than an inch tall. One exception was the Arctic cottongrass, the delightful “flowers” Kelly had become so taken with. They grew a few inches off the ground on thin bare stems, soft white puff balls the size of a marshmallow. They bent and bobbed in the wind, but their fluffy heads made no sound.

Even in town the silence was almost complete. The other day, she had mentioned the remarkable silence to Pippa, who hadn’t understood. She’d never been outside of Greenland. She had been born in Ilulissat and her experience of the rest of the world came from books, television and movies.

“What do you mean there are no sounds?” she’d asked. “I just now heard a dog barking.”

“Yes, there are sounds, but in between those sounds, there’s nothing. It’s like a vacuum. There’s no white noise. It’s like if you had a fan running and it made a continuous hum. You wouldn’t hear it at all after a while. But if it suddenly went off, you’d notice. You’d hear the lack of it. That’s what I’m experiencing.”

“Like a fan running all the time?” Pippa had screwed up her face, mystified. “Is that what it’s like where you live? If I ever come to Colorado, I’ll be sure to pack earplugs.” She snorted at her joke.

Thinking about Pippa’s pretty young face and her carefree snorting laugh reminded Kelly of her current situation, and a wave of despair threatened to swamp her. This morning when they’d set out on their hike, Kelly hadn’t thought of it as dangerous at all. Just a little adventure. Lots of people did it. Pippa herself had done it several times. Walking over this same terrain this morning with Pippa leading the way, it hadn’t been the least bit scary.

But now she was alone. Intensely alone. In a place she’d never been before, not knowing how urgently Pippa was depending on her to bring help. The decision to continue on her own

had been tough. She had waited too long, hoping Pippa would return. She had wasted that hour, sixty minutes during which Pippa could have been bleeding to death for all she knew, and there she'd been, sitting on her butt doing nothing.

She shoved her water bottle into its elastic strap and continued walking, trying to get her mind off Pippa.

*What did I wish for?* she asked herself again, picturing the rabbit cake. She didn't know why she was thinking about that birthday. That was one of her earliest memories. Her fourth birthday and a bunny cake. It must have impressed her, since she remembered it in such vivid detail.

She decided she had probably wished for a bicycle like her older sister Jessica's, two wheels and almost too tall to get on the seat. She had tried to ride Jess's bike a couple of times, but Jess was fiercely possessive, especially after Kelly had taken a spill and bent the front fender. Their father had tried to bend it back into shape, but it always rubbed against the tire after that. And Jess never forgave her. Nope...that was an exaggeration. She did eventually forgive her when she got a new bike on her thirteenth birthday, a beautiful purple mountain bike. Kelly was so jealous of that bike she had fantasies for weeks about bending the fender on that one too. But she hadn't dared. Jess would have broken her arm.

Being the youngest of three girls, it seemed to that her sisters always had better stuff than she did. But there were advantages to being the youngest too. You could get away with things. Jess, who was six years her senior, wouldn't have dared break her arm no matter what she'd done. She would have never been forgiven for such a vicious attack on the baby. The youngest child remains "the baby" all her life to parents and siblings. No matter her age, in their minds,

she was the precious, adorable holy terror with the mad twinkle in her eyes, looking for the next opportunity to get away with some wickedness.

As recently as last month when she'd visited her sister Lee and offered to play Scrabble with her ten year old nephew, Lee had said, "Okay, but you have to use real words with him. You can't just make up words like you do."

"I don't do that anymore!" Kelly had protested. "I only did that when I was a kid because you and Jess always beat me. You let me do it because it was the only way I could ever win."

Lee had given her one of those indulgent looks and said, "Well, I'd rather Trevor learn it correctly."

It was no use trying to overcome the image of herself in the minds of her family members. It was like they carried around a twenty year old photo of her in their brains. She would forever be a mischievous girl with ratty hair and knobby knees who broke everything she touched and whose only talent was the ability to suck milk into her nose through a straw and spit it out her mouth. Nothing she'd done since then had made much of an impression. Both sisters had become much more interested in their own lives as they hit puberty, dating boys and getting married. Neither of them seemed to have noticed that Kelly was the one who held the place together after all of the rest of them had gone, after Dad left, when Mom, debilitated by grief and regret, spent her afternoons drinking and her evenings passed out. Kelly had to take care of everything after that—make sure the bills were paid and clothes washed and meals prepared. There was nobody else to do it. She became the mother of the house during her teens, and her mother became the petulant child.

When Kelly was twenty, her mother, whose health was deteriorating, decided to sell the house and move to Portland where Jess lived. They found a nice condo for her only a few blocks

away from their house. Jess came down to help her move and kept saying things like, “This is the best thing you could do, Mother. Now you’ll get the care you need. I’ll make sure you get to the doctor regularly and eat properly.”

Nobody acknowledged the effort Kelly had made in the intervening years to try to cheer her mother up, to run her errands, to coax her to eat, and to try, unsuccessfully, to persuade her to quit drinking. Nobody except Jordan Westgate, her professor at Boulder, who was a patient and indulgent confidante, sympathetic and encouraging.

“The important thing is,” Jordan had told her, “you did a remarkable job. You kept both you and your mother afloat through a rough time, and you can be proud of that. Your sister may grow to understand that once she has to deal with the same frustrations you’ve been facing.”

It was a prophetic observation. A year later, Jess called in a state of desperation. “I don’t know how you put up with this all those years!” By then, Kelly had been on her own for a year and was glad she no longer had the responsibility. Maybe if she’d been more of a complainer, Jess wouldn’t have been so eager to adopt their mother in the first place. But she’d had an out-of-date image of Mom too, stuck in her head, an image of a rational, responsible woman involved in the lives of her children and husband, competently and contentedly taking care of all of their needs. It was possible Jess had even thought she was getting a free babysitter by moving their mother to Portland, but as it turned out, she didn’t think it was safe to leave her kids alone with their grandmother.

Kelly had enthusiastically reported that phone call to Jordan, who had raised her hand high above her head and declared, “Vindication!”

She had met Jordan Westgate when, as a nineteen year old sophomore, she had reluctantly walked into Introduction to Geology hoping to get one of her required science credits

out of the way without too much agony. Science had never been Kelly's strong suit. She leaned toward the arts. For better or worse, it had been a fateful day. The brusque, wry, quick-witted woman at the front of the class had swept her off her feet, and the course of Kelly's life for the next two years had been established.

She wondered now if Jordan would be like her sisters, incapable of updating her mind's image of Kelly after nearly a decade. Would she still see her as a naive child, more worthy of pity than friendship? She desperately hoped not.

She stopped walking and scanned the horizon. Somewhere out there in the vast wilderness of Greenland, perhaps within mere miles, Jordan was at work, unaware that she and Kelly were about to meet again. *After nine years, will she recognize me? Will she even remember me?*

She climbed a small rise, getting a better view of her surroundings. A hundred yards ahead was a ravine. She walked up to it and peered into a rocky crevasse littered with pools of reflective water. It was too steep and too deep to cross, continuing inland for several hundred feet before meandering to the right and out of view. On the bay side, the ravine gradually widened until it met open water. There was no way around it in that direction.

She had lost the actual trail almost immediately after her solo journey began. The trail hadn't been visible even this morning when they were actually on it. Bare rock doesn't allow for that, but there were occasional cairns marking the way, piles of rocks placed at intervals to guide hikers along the official path. The official path, Pippa had explained, was simply the easiest one, the most direct, most level and driest, generally following the contours of the coastline. They had passed several of those cairns this morning, but she had seen none for hours. That made Kelly nervous. She had begun to question her decision to head south into the unknown instead of

turning back toward Rodebay, a route she had at least already experienced. At the time, it had seemed like a no-brainer. Mileage wise, they were closer to Ilulissat than Rodebay. But that was mileage according to her GPS receiver, and with the rugged nature of the ice-carved terrain, she was beginning to understand the fallibility of that logic. It was too late to second-guess herself now. She had already traveled too far.

She had to keep reminding herself she was doing okay. She knew how to navigate. Maybe she wasn't taking the most efficient route, but she was heading generally, steadily toward Ilulissat.

As she prepared to start off again, she heard a faint mechanical hum and turned to search the bay. She caught sight of a metallic glint far out on the water. Focusing on it, she saw a moving object and gradually recognized it as a small motorboat. There were two men in the boat. It disappeared for a couple of seconds behind an iceberg, then reappeared.

Thrilled, she jumped up and down and waved her arms, trying to get their attention. She let her pack drop off her shoulders and ran, stumbling over the uneven surface toward the shore. "Help! Help!" she yelled as loudly as she could, feeling the strain in her throat. But the boat continued unswervingly on its northerly course. She gradually gave up, recognizing they were too far away to hear her. The clarity of the view was deceptive. There had been no chance they would hear her, even though she had clearly heard their engine. Sound carried for long distances here, but she had been hollering against the wind. Watching the boat disappear from view, she let her arms fall slack at her sides in defeat.

She checked the GPS receiver to see how far she'd come. If she ever doubted the evidence of the bay and the position of the sun to tell her she was going in the right direction, this device would confirm it. The line showing her track was an irregular zigzag. She had gone

only two miles toward her goal, a disappointing distance. She wasn't sure how far she still had to go. The GPS unit could only calculate her destination in a straight line and that was obviously not happening, not with this canyon blocking her path. And obstacles yet unknown. At the rate she was going, it could take all day to get to Ilulissat. At least she didn't have to worry about darkness. The sun would hang low on the horizon all night, creating perpetual twilight.

Heading inland, she walked alongside the canyon blocking her path, hoping it wouldn't take too long to circumvent. The official trail was probably further inland, routed in such a way as to avoid impediments like this. On maps of the west coast of Greenland, she had seen how irregular it was, cut up into deep gorges, fjords, lakes and islands. Looking at the map, it was hard to even imagine there was a path you could walk between Rodebay and Ilulissat without a lot of swimming and rock climbing. There was nothing gentle about this place. It was ruggedly beautiful and brutally unforgiving.

She was just one woman in the midst of all of this uncompromising land. If an observer could zoom out, Kelly imagined she would immediately disappear and in her place would be a thin strip of mountainous land, dark and barren. On the west side would be the frigid, endless sea. On the east, the massive solid ice sheet of the interior. On the tenuous fringe of bare land framing the island lived all the life possible in this country—human, animal and plant.

She felt small and humbled in a way she had never felt before. Trudging through this strange territory, so far away from everything she knew, she was completely immaterial.

Except to Pippa, she reminded herself. If she were alive, she would be hinging all her hopes on Kelly. *I'll make it*, she reassured herself. Of course she would make it, but the real question was, how long did Pippa have? Or was it already too late?