

# Watch for Ice

Book Two in the Kaitlyn Willis Road Signs Mystery Series

By  
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Wind lashed against my white Ford, pushing the truck toward the center line. Over-correcting, I drove through an enormous puddle floating on the side of the road. This sent a tsunami of water over the curb, drenching a woman huddled under a glass bus shelter. She shook her fist at me (there may have been a certain finger raised). Great publicity, since I drove a vehicle with *City of Cedar Grove Loves Its Residents* plastered on the side.

A few more blocks and I turned left into a part of town that we Code Enforcement Officers feared and avoided, but it was part of the job. It was definitely “the other side of the tracks” in Cedar Grove, Washington. Low-income, high-density; people packed into houses and apartments like 12<sup>th</sup> Man fans in the third deck at a Seahawks game, which made for a lot of code violations. I was headed to visit a repeat offender.

Wally, the humongous stray white cat that recently adopted me, was curled up on the passenger seat looking like a fluffy ‘70s-era throw pillow. He’d taken a liking to riding in the car and seemed to prefer it to hanging out in his box on my porch. I probably shouldn’t have allowed a cat in a City vehicle, but what the hell, I liked the company.

“Nice weather we’re having,” I said gripping the wheel so hard my hands ached and highlighted my unpolished nails. Wally didn’t stir.

Winter in the Northwest was about as much fun as a root canal. The temperature was 45 degrees but with the wind chill it felt about 30. It had been pouring rain for over a week. Drains and gutters overflowed all around the city. Even with the defogger cranked high, the truck smelled musty and damp. Still white-knuckled, I pulled off the main drag onto 208<sup>th</sup>, a residential street.

Small cinder-block houses lined the street. Some had make-shift additions or carports, but they all had the same forlorn, run-down look: peeling paint, hanging gutters, tilted fences, old cars, no landscaping. Dirty plastic toys littered some yards; here and there a rusted bicycle was

propped against a fence. That thought made my head hurt. Were the children living here as neglected as the houses?

I turned left on Spruce Street and slowed. Even though most of the houses on this block violated at least one city code, I was heading to a house that had the distinction of having received multiple warnings and four citations. No children lived there. Only Nicholas Buske, whom we called Old Nick.

I pulled up to the shoulder and parked. No sidewalk, only a strip of dirt that blended into the brown mud that was the yard. Old muscle cars Camaros and El Caminos, plus several newer tricked-out Beemers and tinted-windowed SUV's lined the streets and the driveways.

As I parked, the downpour slowed to a drizzle, but the churning clouds overhead promised more heavy rain to come. With effort, I snugged my rain jacket closed over my pain-in-the-neck (and other regions) triple-D boobs. I struggled with the zipper and finally got it zipped. It billowed around my waist and hips as I got out.

I don't mind my body but being "blessed" with breasts the size of small watermelons comes with a steep price. Backaches, never being able to find shirts or coats that close in the front, or if they do, they reach my calves. Rashes in the summer and the on-going search for a supportive bra that doesn't look like it should be on my grandmother. Hassle from men and, to be fair, some women. Guys just can't not stare or comment. Jokes about racks, jugs, hoo-hahs... I've heard them all. Usually, women are threatened, as if having big boobs means I must be after their men. Some women are envious. I want to scream, "Do you want to be squished into a straitjacket all day? It ain't that great!"

I lifted up my hood but kept it loose to avoid losing all my peripheral vision. I glanced up and down the street but saw no one out in the rain. The weather hindered the business of drug dealers who frequented this neighborhood. The area was notorious for its concentration of low-life gang members. One reason I chose a hood instead of a baseball cap. You could never be sure what color might set off a riot.

It rankled me there were gangs in my city. Seemed like something that should be far away, somewhere else. But this was reality. Gripping my hood with one hand, I jogged up a cracked concrete path toward a house even shabbier than the rest of the neighborhood. Old Nick rented the place, but no sign of a concerned landlord who kept up the place (and didn't respond to city notices). The front yard was barren, not even weeds grew in the muddy ground.

A tiny wooden overhang, tilting slightly off-center, covered the porch. I huddled beneath it and pushed back my hood. The front door, once red, was now faded and peeling. The knock sounded hollow. I had to knock a second time before Nick finally answered.

“Yeah, yeah. Whad’ya want?”

Old Nick had stringy gray-white hair that hung limply over his ears. His forehead and crown were bald and spotted with age.

Heat poured from the house and the sudden temperature change made me shiver. “Hi, Nick. Guess who?” I stayed on the porch; the drizzle had become showers again pelting across my back.

“I seen ya pull up.” A discolored white t-shirt didn’t hide a flabby potbelly. He wore jeans, dirty and full of holes. His feet were bare; his toes gnarled, the nails yellow and cracked.

“You know why I’m here,” I said. “Gotta check out the backyard.”

Nick’s shaggy gray beard was full of potato chip crumbs. “Well, ya know I haven’t worked too much on that.” He stroked the beard. “My knees, ya know. They been given’ me some trouble. This weather....”

I sighed. “Nick, we talked about this last time. You’ve got to clean up the trash.”

“I know, I know. Been meanin’ to, Kaitlyn, ah, Ms. Willis. I truly have. Hate to be out in this weather though; makes my joints ache.”

From previous visits and conversations I knew he rarely left his spot in front of the TV except to refill his beer. “Let’s go have a look, shall we?” I smiled.

He frowned and tried to glance at my boobs, but they were well hidden in the folds of my slicker. “All right,” he said. “Lemme get my coat,” He walked away.

“And maybe some shoes!” I called as the door swung closed.

I pulled the hood back up and walked around to the side of the house. There was no gate to the backyard, but, per regulations, I waited for him to shuffle out the back door and meet me. I could already see the piles of trash that snaked around the side of the house. Blue tarps fluttered in the wind and the putrid smell of something rotten floated on the damp air.

Nick appeared in a long dirt-colored wool coat with large rubber boots on his feet. Reluctantly, he waved to me.

“Looks about the same, Nick. You promised you’d work on it.”

The back yard held the honor of one of the worst I'd ever seen. And I 'd seen some things in my eight years in this job—more than a health hazard. A mound of discarded items, piled higher than my head, covered the back fence—and I'm five foot six. An old washing machine, a broken red Igloo cooler, several frayed lawn chairs, a brown plaid couch, a torn foam egg-crate pad, piles of rotting cardboard, and dozens of half-open black trash bags, their contents spewing over the ground. Some of the junk had been partially covered with tarps, but most of the tarps were now full of holes. The odor was awful, like a Port-a-Potty left too long in the sun. Only the rain made it possible to be this close without a face mask.

Wedged between a soiled mattress and a busted card table sat a giant dirty teddy bear, the kind no one ever really wins at the fair. It had once been a Panda. Stuffing poured out of one leg and rain dripped from its nose. Its small black button eyes stared at me.

"You can't leave all this crap here," I said. "I've told you that before. You'll get rats if they aren't here already. You ignored all our notices. Do you want me to mail a citation to the owner—again?"

Nick shuffled his feet and looked at the ground. "Don't do that. I need to live here. I can't get it all moved by myself. And I've told ya, I ain't got no cash for the dump."

He looked so old and tired standing there in the depressing gray backyard. I felt sorry for him, but I had a job to do too. "Listen, Nick. Why don't I ask around and see if there are some high school kids that will come and help you. You could pay them something, right?"

"I dunno..."

"You have to get it out of here or we'll have to ask your landlord to evict you."

"I ain't got nowhere to go, you know that."

"One more chance, Nick. That's it. Next time I'll send Sharon or John and they won't be as nice."

"Thank you, Ms. Willis."

*What a sucker I was.* I knew perfectly well that Nick wouldn't do anything. He'd go back to his TV and beer and wait for his next Social Security check to arrive. At least I assumed that's how he got food money. The 1983 Ford next to his driveway sure wasn't going anywhere. I'd have to include that on the citation too, since its tabs hadn't been renewed since 2004.

Back in my truck, I slipped off my raincoat and did my best not to spray water on Wally. I don't think I was successful since he opened one eye and glared at me. "Raeowww."

“Be thankful you didn’t have to go out there,” I said.

The engine turned over with a ping and a hum. I cranked up the heater, then pulled out my clip board and wondered how to write up this visit. A knock on my window scared me shitless. I jumped. Crap! I rolled down the window. Cold, wet wind blew straight into my face.

Nick grinned showing yellowed teeth. “Sorry there, Ms. Willis. I just wanted to thank ya again and make sure you weren’t gonna contact my landlord this time.” The crazy old coot wasn’t wearing a coat or hat.

Yeah, right. He was probably still trying to get a look at my boobs. God, that got old. Couldn’t men think about anything else? I crossed my arms over my chest, using the clipboard as a shield.

“Not this time, Nick,” I said. “But I’ll be back, and you have to clean it up.”

He shrugged a little and scratched at his arm pit. “Holy hell!” Nick startled and stepped backward.

I glanced in my rearview mirror thinking we were being joined by a group of gang members.

“There’s a polar bear in your car!” he exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes. “No, it’s a cat.”

He shook his head and backed away.

I rolled up the window and got the heck out of there. Later, I wished I had stayed longer and done more to help resolve Nick’s problems. Maybe if I had it would have changed what was to come.