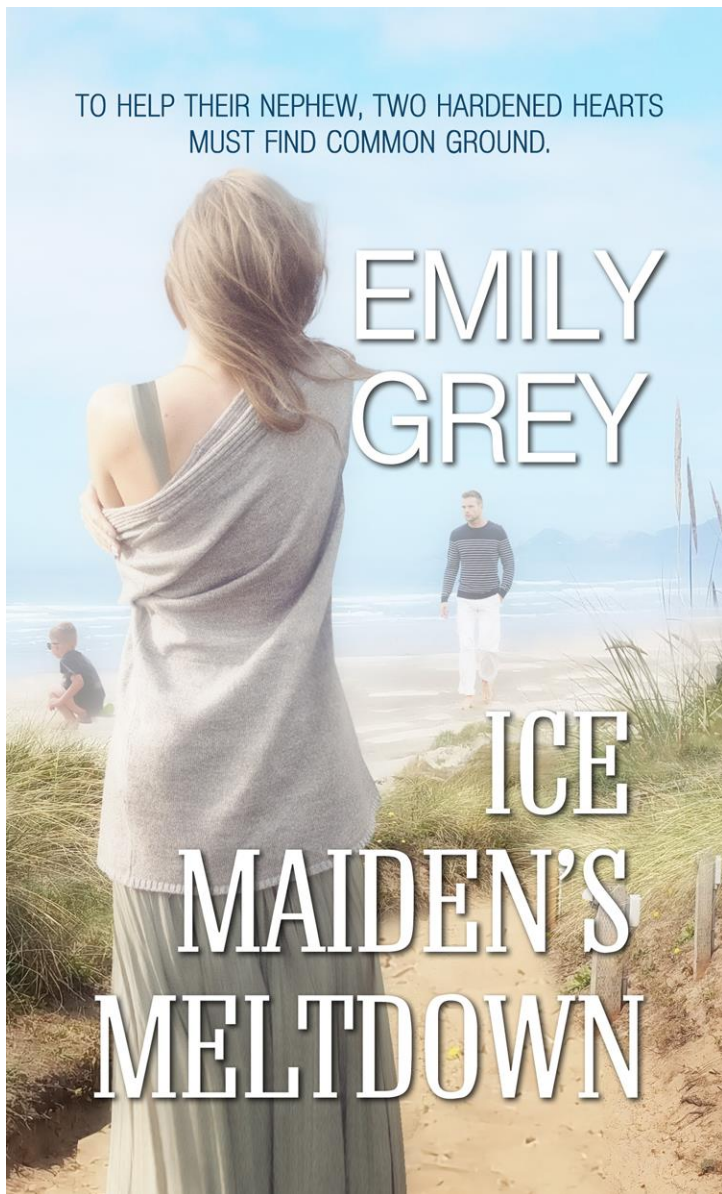


TO HELP THEIR NEPHEW, TWO HARDENED HEARTS  
MUST FIND COMMON GROUND.

EMILY  
GREY

ICE  
MAIDEN'S  
MELTDOWN



# Ice Maiden's Meltdown

Emily Grey

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## *Dedication*

To my supportive family, friends, and writing partners. I love you.

To my friend, Elizabeth Noyes, who has the wit and wisdom to comfort or scold. Bless you.





# 1

Chills rippled down Suzanne's spine as she stepped from the taxi and tossed a soft, woolen scarf over her shoulder, a buffer against the raw February wind blowing in from the roiling Pacific Ocean. Her slumping shoulders exposed a state of weariness that threatened her sanity.

Spiky four-inch heels sank into the damp cemetery turf, much as reality plowed into her psyche. On tiptoe, she made her way along the right side of the crowd of mourners. Just then, twin bronze caskets appeared out of the drifting fog. She stifled a gasp, her need for comfort and a warm embrace so startling, she wrapped her arms around her body to stop the trembling.

Blankets of red and white carnations draped her sister and brother-in-law's coffins. The colors signified life and death. Could any of this be real?

*Sue, I need you,* whispered through the towering Douglas firs, sending a frigid, eerie sensation through her.

Those same words, so often implored when her younger sister Pam asked for something, now clutched at Suzanne's heart. Her fingers curled into fists as the tears held back for so long threatened to spill.

Pain and anguish brought her feet to a halt. Grief

slammed into her and threatened to drop her knees in the mud. The call, the notification—it all seemed surreal, until now. *Oh, Lord, help me.*

Blurred vision made it difficult to find a familiar face in the crowd of mourners, but then she spotted them—Karla and Vic, two of Pam’s friends she’d met on a previous visit. Karla looked at her with a glare that made Suzanne’s breath hitch. Her husband’s lack of reaction confirmed their animosity.

A tall, thirtyish man with soft, dark curly hair and a face that could grace the cover of any magazine stood beside them. A fleeting thought of who he might be was interrupted by a loud harrumph as the pastor began the eulogy.

Half listening as he spoke with loving words about how much the couple meant to the townspeople of Emerald Point, Suzanne did her best to shut out the memory of the call about the accident.

A murmured prayer followed the tribute. People shook hands and hugged, seeking and giving comfort where they could. At last, the mourners departed and headed for their vehicles.

A trio of pelicans flew overhead, climbing and wheeling as a unit. Covering their heads, a few in the crowd picked up their pace.

She stood transfixed as the cemetery cleared. The funeral was supposed to bring closure, but it left her with open wounds far from ready to start the difficult healing process.

When only a few people remained, the tall stranger who’d stood beside Karla and Vic trudged to



the twin coffins and plucked one red and one white carnation from the spray. Unmoving for several moments, he finally twirled the blossoms through the air in imitation of the set of wheels that ended Tad and Pam's lives.

Suzanne trotted across the grass to her sister's casket, the sucking mud capturing her heels. A low-pitched groan left her lips. Would she ever again catch a breath to fill her lungs? Her gut clenched and she shook her head in disbelief—tightness in her chest, and the physical pain of grief engulfed her.

With a cursory glance at the man, she lowered her eyes.

"You're Suzanne."

She forced herself to look up. The sharp angles of his handsome face spoke of weariness and pain—from personal loss? "Yes," she whispered.

His penetrating gaze searched hers, giving the moment a sense of intimacy. And then he took her hand, its warmth triggering a flutter in her stomach. "I'm Chase Garwood."

Tad's brother...

She swallowed hard, gave him a quick shake and withdrew her hand. "We never quite managed to be in Oregon at the same time with you in Tokyo and me in New York."

"True." A tinge of sadness crept into his tone.

Her attempt at a smile fell well short of its mark. Pleasantries seemed inappropriate, somehow disrespectful. Besides, related by marriage or not, regardless of her sister's respect for him, Suzanne

didn't know the man.

Photographs were a no-no in her sister's home—an odd but lovable quirk. Pam wanted what she wanted.

"Both of our lives existed far from here. I visited when I could."

For lengthy moments, silence laden with memories swirled around them before Suzanne responded. "Me, too."

"Yeah, I know." His voice took on a rough, contemptuous edge he didn't try to hide. "I've heard a great deal about you."

Steel straightened her spine and lifted her chin, a spontaneous reaction she'd acquired when faced with hostility.

"Oh, I'm sure you have."

The uncomfortable silence stretched between them as she waited for his censure. Without asking, she already knew where his thoughts lay. Like so many others, he'd judged and found her guilty based on the lurid tabloid stories. Guilty until proven innocent was the rule of the news media today. Bitterness rose in her throat. Lies, all lies.

Beads of moisture dotted her brow, despite the bone-numbing cold. She dabbed at her forehead with a tissue, aware that he followed every movement. "You know, I've heard quite a lot about you, too."

He reached out to touch her face and when she didn't flinch, he drew his thumb down her cheek. "You look so innocent, hair like a cloud. Silken skin. I can see how a woman like you could lead a man to the very

edge of—”

The heat of his touch surprised her. She stepped back, breaking the contact. “You’re wrong, but then, it doesn’t really matter now.”

“Oh, it does, Suzanne.” The air between them shimmered like a blurred reflection of the ocean.

She blinked at the abrupt change in his tone—taken aback by how his voice caressed her name. “I, uh, don’t understand.”

Hands by his sides again, determination seemed etched into his features. “He offered his arm, and she accepted. He led her past the tombstones.

Balancing on her toes to avoid burying her heels in the saturated grass, she attempted to match his stride. Impossible. He hurried her along as if she were a bad-tempered child.

His high-handedness flipped one of her psychological switches. She jerked her arm free and stopped in her tracks. “Where are we going?”

He halted, gray eyes darkening as they drifted over her. “To get out of the cold. You’re poorly dressed for this weather. We can talk in my car, or I thought we’d stop off at a diner someplace.”

Her lower lip twisted. “Why can’t we talk at the house?”

He swung around, a frown marring his perfect features. “I’d like to speak in private. Are you afraid to be alone with me?” ?”

She tsked and looked away, peering at the gravestones and statues. And well aware of how isolated they were in this morbid place. “Don’t be

silly.”

His deep-throated laughter jangled her nerves. “Fear is an emotion, Suzanne. I’d heard you’re indifferent to them.”

What? No emotions? Arrogant and domineering, this man brought out her emotions but fear was not one of them. Couldn’t he feel heat rising off her like a hundred-and-six-degree fever? “Wrong.”

“Not my judgment. It’s your reputation.”

“Don’t worry, you’re in good company. Most people set themselves up as judge, jury, and hangman.”

His intense gaze narrowed, forcing her to glance away. “Have you even shed a tear for Tad and Pam?”

The telltale pressure behind her eyes rose once more. She’d spent the entire flight across the country choking back tears. She wouldn’t cry now, not in front of him.

She turned away intent on walking the short distance to her sister’s home unburdened by the likes of this man. Rain threatened, but so what? She’d stuffed an umbrella in her tote. She’d get wet. “I’d like to be alone right now, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, I’d expect the Ice Maiden to prefer solitude.” He offered a sarcastic smile. “No. On second thought I don’t think I’ll give you that.”

She should have recoiled when he took her arm again and watched her like a cat toying with a mouse. Ice Maiden. The label ballyhooed by the media and now from the lips of this man hurt. Despite the walls she’d built to protect herself, it cut deep.

A horn blared in the distance, enough to jolt her back to the present. Except for the rhythms of the incoming tide, this place chilled her spirit.

Conscious of his undeniable charisma, instinct warned her that given the chance Chase Garwood could wreak havoc with her heart. She called on every ounce of frost she could muster. "Please, just go."

"You're sure you won't come along?"

Her fists clenched at his low challenging tone. "I'm sure." His assessing gaze seemed to reflect the so-called sins of her past She'd seen it before in other eyes that had condemned her when scandalous headlines shouted BROADWAY STAR ATTEMPTS SUICIDE OVER WOMAN.

Carried along by a current of air, misty fog whispered over them. Chase's lips turned up in a half smile, half challenge. "You're having difficulty walking in this muddy grass. I wonder if I carried you, Suzanne, would you come without a fuss."

## 2

“Why are you acting like this? You don’t know me.”

Chase did a double take at Suzanne’s response and the glare she sent his way. “acting like what? Looking out for you? Trying to get both of us out of this miserable weather before you face plant in those ridiculous heels? It was a suggestion, Suzanne, that’s all. An offer of help:”

“It sounded more like a hostile takeover to me. Do you always go caveman on women you’ve never met before? Threaten to toss them over your shoulder to make them comply?”

He grasped the fact that he’d been rude to her—someone he only knew through others’ point of view and tabloid headlines that revealed—what? Jumping to conclusions wasn’t his normal way of dealing with a situation. A salesperson listened to his client and then spoke. But pain seared his soul, and he needed an outlet for his frustration, and from the look of her, she could take his ire.

He lowered his voice in a gentler approach. There was no sense in making her hate him, and he didn’t want a spiteful woman dragging out the legalities. “Look. Tad and Pam’s estate and their three-year-old

son are at stake." At the mention of Jeff, all of his outrage disappeared. His shoulders slumped under the weight of the same terrible sadness she seemed to bear. "You're right." Her arms flapped once with a helpless motion. "There's so much to do and so little time to get it done."

"There's another reason we should discuss a few items away from the house. We don't want to upset Jeff or the housekeeper."

She winced and grabbed her stomach as if pain had settled in her gut. "Speaking of Lara, I saw her when I dropped off my suitcase at the house. She said she was heartbroken enough without attending a memorial service that would only shatter her further. She's been a wonderful addition to the household and loves that boy with a fierce protective quality that's so admirable."

"She's been the backbone of the family. How do we deal with her now that a major part of the family is gone?"

She shook her head.

Raindrops pelted his face, sporadic but with a promise of much more. He nodded toward his car. "Come on. Let's go before we get drenched."

~\*~

With a sigh that splintered Suzanne's composure even more than it already had, she simply nodded.

Chase cupped her elbow as they headed toward an expensive black car, and she was grateful for the

support.

The shivering had long ago turned into full body spasms before getting in the vehicle, but she looked back for a last glance at the coffins. Pam and Tad were gone. A fresh wave of heartbreak seared her. "Oh, Lord, help me." she whispered. But did God hear her?

If only she'd accepted Jesus as Pam had, the faith that had helped her sister deal with life's struggles would be hers now. *With His help, I can survive this tragedy and its aftermath.*

Chase opened the passenger door to help her in. Bam! Supernovas filled her vision and the top of her head exploded in agony as she rammed into the top edge of the window frame. She staggered and reached for balance.

"I'm so sorry, Suzanne. Are you OK?" Strong hands gripped her shoulders to hold her steady..

The pain, acute and throbbing, hurt like ice picks piercing her skull while someone pounded away with a sledgehammer. Not that she would admit it. "I'm fine. Whose car is this anyway?"

"Vic loaned it to me while I'm here."

After striding around the front, he slid into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. The powerful, high-performance engine purred to life.

Beneath a furrowed brow, his compelling gray eyes took on an aura of deep concern. Though still in pain, she noticed how his smooth skin stretched over high cheekbones and the way the set of his shoulders exuded confidence. Why did his attributes tick her off? Suzanne stopped her hands from punching the air.



Aargh. She'd never met a man so bullheaded, annoying, or physically appealing.

"Will the tavern in the center of town be all right?"

"Yes." At least he asked.

He maneuvered the car along the cemetery road, hands gripping the wheel like the steel claws of a bird of prey.

Suzanne's gaze flickered over the weather-beaten beach houses and small mom-and-pop stores that lined Emerald Point's Main Street, recalling that the tourist season was a few months away. Only a few locals milled around the business district, while boats rode at anchor along the breakwaters and many floated in the marina.

Chase parked at the curb in front of the tavern and stuffed the keys into his coat pocket. But before he could round the side, she eased out of the car and shut the door. A blast of wind whipped her hair, prompting a grab for the scarf.

With her hair secured, he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led the way across the street where he opened the door to Annabelle's Tavern.

The stale odor of liquor and beer set her empty stomach churning. At a table, he eased off her coat and laid it across the back of one of the chairs. Before removing his own, he cocked his head and searched her face. "Suzanne, are you OK?"

Her face heated when she realized she'd been standing there, just staring at him. Why did she respond to him when he merely murmured her name? How did he reduce her to a silly teen in her first

encounter with a handsome guy? Was it the need for a strong shoulder to cry on? He certainly had those.

He settled into the opposite seat, loosened his plain dark tie, and unfastened the top shirt button.

An attractive, flame-haired waitress stopped at their booth, eyes flashing her appreciation, and her white teeth seemed ready to take a bite out of Chase. "Well, hello. My name is Tanya. What can I get for you, sir?"

Chase looked at Suzanne.

"Root beer." That was the first drink that popped into her head. Hot chocolate might do a better job of unsnarling the knot in her stomach, but no way would she change her order.

His eyes played over her face. "Root beer, huh?" When she nodded, he requested, "Give the lady a root beer and double bourbon on the rocks for me."

"You got it." The waitress scurried off.

His impeccably tailored, dark wool suit drew her gaze. Or was it the way the jacket fit snug across his broad shoulders, doing absolutely nothing to disguise his muscular physique? The tanned skin of his neck made a marked contrast to the flawless white shirt. Quality workmanship and expensive, he had excellent taste in clothing.

She worked her way to the strong line of his chin that projected a sense of power and his somewhat aquiline nose. Those nostrils had flared ever so slightly during their confrontation in the cemetery, a sure sign this man didn't bother to hide emotional distress.

After the waitress brought their order, Suzanne

took a sip of her drink. "Root beer's refreshing." Did she really care what he thought about her choice? Heavens, no.

He turned that smoky, seductive smile on her.

Whoa. She looked away, fixing her gaze on an older couple who entered the tavern. They held hands and smiled at each other, the communication of long-time lovers. A pang of envy thrummed inside her. Still, it was lovely to see people who cared for each other.

"On a cold, blustery day like this, what a man needs is a bottle of liquor and—" Chase stopped short and tipped the glass to his lips.

And a woman, she mused as she mentally finished his sentence. Her mouth curved up. "Isn't fulfilling half a need better than none?"

While he studied her, he plunked down the glass with a thud and rubbed his hands together.

Those gray eyes seemed to penetrate her façade and look right into her soul. A sense of impending doom descended, an inevitable destiny. "Y-you're so different from your brother." She forced out a conversational tone ". Tad was affectionate and caring."

Chase covered her hand, his touch warm and almost intimate. "And you're nothing like your sister—but not at all what I expected. Pam was carefree and full of life."

Touché. Startled by his gesture and the subtle turn of his words, she withdrew her hand and shifted in her seat. "What *did* you expect?"

He responded with another half-smile, but this

time it didn't reach his eyes. "Not this woman sitting across from me, that's for sure."

Her lips flattened into a smug line. "I was eighteen when we lost our parents. After that, I raised my fourteen-year-old sister alone. Responsibility like that modifies a person's behavior."

Chase's fingertips drummed in a staccato rhythm on the table. The look in his eyes said he'd gone somewhere else.

When he remained silent, she tapped her long fingernails against the glass. Whether it was the motion or the sound, she didn't know, but it drew his attention. "You said we should talk."

The front door opened, sending a brisk breeze through the room. Chase's potent scent of sandalwood filled her nostrils. Such a distraction. So not fair.

"How long do you plan to stay?" he asked. "Settling Tad and Pam's estate should be our top priority."

No. Jeff was more important, but that discussion could wait.

She folded her hands in her lap so he wouldn't see them tremble. What did he possess to rock her emotions this way? Crazy. If only he would stop looking at her as though she were blemished.

*Ice Maiden.* A date who'd expected more than she was willing to give had coined the name, one picked up by the tabloids. Why hadn't she flared up like a match in a pile of sawdust when Chase had said that earlier? No one got away with calling her that, no one. Yet, she'd given Chase a pass.

"I'm not sure." She pushed back in her seat to add more distance between them. "Mr. Pomeroy will take care of the necessary legal matters."

Chase nodded. "I suppose he might need input from us. I didn't see him at the funeral."

"His wife fell and injured her leg. He called Lara from the hospital."

"That's unfortunate. How is Lara holding up?" His voice held genuine concern for Tad and Pam's loyal housekeeper.

The abrupt change of subject left her mind abuzz.

She drew squiggly lines with her finger on the moist exterior of the glass. "I only saw her for a few minutes, but I think she's having a hard time accepting that Pam and Tad are gone." She shook her head, "Lara's a dream of a housekeeper, nurse, and friend, all rolled into one. They were so...blessed to have her." Pam's words filtered out of Suzanne's mouth. Whenever Pam talked about Lara, she'd gushed about how the woman was such a blessing.

He nodded, searching her eyes with a finesse that sent a chill down her back. "How come it took so long for you to get here from New York? Couldn't you drag yourself away from your business and the nightlife any sooner? After all, it's been four days since..."

Another abrupt change of subject. A dull steady throb had taken up residence in her skull making it difficult to keep pace with him.

She fingered the cool, silver handle of her black leather purse, but the smoothness of its surface didn't provide the soothing effect she sought. Why had