**Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn**

**http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/words-and-their-stories-mystery-at-the-ice-castle-inn/3637837.html**

Now, the VOA Learning English program Words and Their Stories.

On this program we explain how to use common words and expressions in American English. Today, we are going to celebrate the coming of winter with expressions related to cold and ice. And we will do that with a story … a mystery story.

This is part one of a three-part series.

Our story begins on a distant mountain-top. It is the **dead of winter**. Outside the wind is **howling**.

Snow mixed with freezing rain has made the roads unsafe for travel. Even walking outside is dangerous. So, the four characters of our story are stuck indoors at The Ice Castle Inn. Like the name suggests, the inn is an old castle. But now it is a vacation spot for bird-watchers.

These four people are strangers. The only thing they have in common is a shared interest in snow birds. But for now, they all have **put** their bird watching plans **on ice**. That is to say, they must postpone their plans until the winter storm passes.

What they don’t know is the violent storm outside is just the [**tip of the iceberg**](http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/2688209.html). In other words, more danger exists, but they cannot see it.

**Let’s meet the characters**

But now, let’s get in out of the cold. As we enter the Ice Castle Inn we meet our group of travelers. They are all having a hot drink as they gather by the fireplace.

**The Teacher**

First there is the teacher, Madeline. She is in her late 20s and teaches skiing and cold weather survival skills at a private school for girls.

Her neat, dark hair frames her round, healthy face. Her appearance is plain but she is in great physical shape. She is a quiet woman. When she speaks, her voice is low and **uncertain**.

You may think she is shy. But think again.

Underneath her shy exterior, she is **calm, cool and collected.** If she stares at you with her clear green eyes, you can sense her powerful, extreme calm. Her ability to control her reactions makes people feel afraid: it **sends** **shivers down their spines**.

**The Athlete**

Then there is the athlete, Vincent. He is in his early 30s. Handsome and active, he talks to anyone and everyone. He has an easy manner and people like him instantly. He’s the type of man who could **sell ice to an Eskimo**, meaning he could talk you into anything.

At first, he seems to be a very **cool**, easy-going sportsman. But talk to him more and you realize that something is missing: namely, feelings. Those who know him best say he has **ice water running through his veins.** Nothing seems to upset or emotionally move him.

**The Actress**

Next is the actress, Sylvia. She is in her mid-40s and is extremely attractive. With her **ice-blue** eyes, pale white skin and fine clothing, she doesn’t seem like the outdoorsy, bird-watching type.

Her personality **runs hot and cold** -- friendly one minute, unfriendly the next. You never know what to expect. The one thing that is **constant** about her is the gold locket she wears around her long, thin neck. She never takes it off and often holds it tightly to her chest.

**The Major**

Finally, there is Major Jack, an ex-military man. His age is hard to guess -- perhaps 50-something? He has a strong jaw and thick black hair. The lines on his face make him look older but even more handsome. Some men are just lucky that way.

He seems like most military men; strong and silent. William Shakespeare might even call him a **cold fish** -- unfeeling and unfriendly. But at the same time every day, as the sun goes down, he stares out the window into the storm with great sadness in his eyes. It is at these times, he seems like a man **left out in the cold**, ignored and alone.

That is our small group of traveling bird-watchers. As the days pass, the snow only falls harder on The Ice Castle Inn. The land line phones no longer work. Neither do cell phones. No rescue vehicles have come to clear the roads.

They are truly **snowed in**.

With each passing day, they each become more and more suspicious of each other. They all wonder the same thing – why are the others really here?

Answers will have to wait.

I’m Anna Matteo.

<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/mystery-at-the-ice-castle-inn-part-2-words-and-their-stories/3648351.html>

Welcome to Words and Their Stories, a VOA Learning English program.

This week we continue learning about cold weather expressions with the story “Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn.”

In the first part of our story, we met the characters: Madeline, the teacher; Vincent, the athlete; Sylvia, the actress; and Major Jack, the ex-military man.

They have all traveled to The Ice Castle Inn. This mountain inn is a popular vacation spot for birdwatchers.

However, a **cold snap** has blown through the mountains, **snowing** them **in**. This is an extreme and unexpected drop in temperature, so no one is prepared. They have been trapped inside the castle for several days.

When people are stuck inside together with nothing to do, they naturally begin talking about themselves.

Very quickly, small facts about a person **snowball** into a bigger picture of them. What this means is that these little facts collect more little facts -- like a snowball collecting more snow as it rolls downhill. Soon, it becomes a big ball of facts, rolling quickly down the hill, threatening to destroy everything in its path!

But I am getting ahead of myself.

One of these small facts is this: no one here is actually interested in birds.

Our four travelers gather inside by the fireplace. The inn’s housekeeper puts a log into the fire. The group does not notice her as she pours more hot cocoa into their empty mugs. You see, they are the kind of people who never really notice the servants.

No one is talking. The four guests have avoided each other for several days. But now they are forced together by the warmth of the only working fireplace and the promise of hot cocoa.

After all, the inn is quite cold and uncomfortable. Only candles light the rooms. The rugs are so thin that the stone floor underneath shows. Some of the windows are cracked, letting the winter storm blow right through.

The castle looks the same way it did a hundred years ago. It is a place **frozen in time**.

Finally, Sylvia, the actress, **breaks the ice** by talking about the winter storm **raging** outside. Talking about the weather is a common **ice-breaker** that can bring strangers together. It gives them something to talk about.

“This **cold snap** is lasting a long time! When will we be able to leave?”

Sylvia says this to no one in particular. But the teacher, Madeline, responds. “Yes, when can we leave? I am tired of sitting around in this cold, **drafty** castle.”

“I have an idea,” Vincent, the handsome athlete, says to the young teacher. “Why don’t you join me for a walk in the castle.”

Madeline stares at him with her cold, green eyes and says, “That will happen **when hell freezes over**.”

At that, the actress, Sylvia, laughs out loud. “Well, that is a much better way of saying ‘absolutely not!'”

Vincent realizes that he is now **on thin ice** with both women. He is not really in danger. Rather, he is now on very uncertain terms with them. The room suddenly drops a couple more degrees -- and not from the weather.

Major Jack feels sorry for Vincent after the women **freeze him out**, or make him feel unwelcome. So, the military man offers him a cigarette. Vincent shakes his head no. He says he quit **cold turkey** last year. The major says he admires the athlete’s **accomplishment**. He adds that he has never been able to quit smoking all at once.

“Well, perhaps you don’t have the mental strength that I do,” Vincent says.

Major Jack regrets trying to help such a **cold hearted** man.

He turns his attention to Sylvia. He tells her he likes her voice very much. Most women would melt at his words. But for Sylvia they **cut no ice**. His words have no effect. Her once-friendly voice turns to iceas she says, “What shall I do next, sing for you?”

He **shudders** not from the temperature of the room but from her **icy stare**. He thinks to himself that the attractive actress can certainly be an **ice queen** when she wants to be.

At this point, it is fair to say that the conversations among the group are not going well. Outside, the temperature is dropping. Everything is **frozen solid**. Inside, the entire inn is in a different kind of **deep freeze**. Everyone sits in silence.

They stare at the fire as it makes **crackling** noises in the fireplace. Next to it, only a few logs of wood remain.

**The treasure hunt**

This is when the very quiet housekeeper breaks the **stone cold** silence. She straightens her back, takes off her apron and pushes her gray hair back into place.

“If I may have your attention,” she says to the group. Her voice cuts through the coldness that hangs in the air.

“The owner of the inn has planned an interesting game for you, our special guests, to play.”

Vincent **throws cold water** on the idea. He laughs and says **coldly,** “I’m not a child. I don’t play games.”

“You may want to change your mind, young man. This game is a kind of treasure hunt,” the housekeeper says.

She is standing in front of the group and no longer seems like “just” a servant. She now has control of the room. When they hear the word “treasure,” they pay close attention to the housekeeper for the first time since their arrival.

She places a large wooden box on the table. It is labeled “Treasure Hunt.”

She explains: “In this box are four envelopes marked with each person’s name. In the envelope are clues. If you follow the clues correctly, you will find your treasure!”

They all agree to play. They are thinking that finding some **cold, hard cash** would be a really nice treasure.

They pick their envelopes and read the clues carefully. Then, each person travels through the empty hallways and rooms of the otherwise deserted castle.

Three hours later, the sun sinks behind the cold mountains. The four treasure-seekers return to the fireplace. The housekeeper is waiting. She motions with her hand for them to sit by the fire. And, one by one, she asks them to **reveal** their treasure.

**The "treasures"**

Madeline is first. “My treasure is a framed **termination** letter? I don’t understand. Am I being fired for something?” The calm in her eyes is gone and for the first time she is **nervous.**

Vincent is not confused or nervous. He is simply angry. “My treasure is a bride’s white wedding veil.” He throws the thin, white piece of fabric into the air.

Major Jack takes out what he found -- a military medal. He reads the writing on the front: “For brave service in battle.” He looks as if he has seen a ghost.

Sylvia’s “treasure” is a pink baby’s rattle. With a haunted look on her face, she shakes it slowly and sadly.

Confusion and tension fill the room. Finally Sylvia, who is standing by the fire as if she were on stage, says what everyone is thinking.

“Okay this is too much! And it isn’t funny! Why are we here? And who is **teasing** us with these **so-called** treasures?”

The housekeeper begins to speak, but suddenly she stops. A terrible sound -- part human, part animal, **howling** from a room above them -- **freezes their blood cold**.

And that is we will leave our story. Join us next week for the exciting conclusion of Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn on Words and Their Stories!

<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/mystery-at-the-ice-castle-inn-part-3-the-end/3657895.html>

And now the VOA Learning English program, Words and Their Stories.

This week we finish the three-part story “Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn.” You will learn not only the ending of the mystery but also more English expressions that deal with cold.

At the end of [part two](http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/people-in-america-na/3648351.html), our four travelers had gone on a treasure hunt. They followed clues and searched the castle. But as they gather by the fire to tell what they found, no one is happy. What they found are not treasures at all.

The actress, Sylvia, is deeply disturbed by a pink baby’s rattle. A framed termination letter unnerves teacher Madeline. A white wedding veil angers Vincent, the handsome athlete. Major Jack is saddened by a military medal.

As each person looks at their so-called treasure, they hear a terrifying sound from the room above.

They all **break out in a cold sweat**. They are so scared they cannot speak -- well, all but one. The housekeeper remains as **cool as a cucumber**. They wonder why she is able to stay so calm while they are scared to death.

The housekeeper tells them to not move. She will investigate.

As they listen to her footsteps traveling up the massive staircase, Sylvia asks, “Shouldn’t one of us go with her? What if it is a wild animal?”

Vincent says, “I am staying right here by the fire and drink my wine. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

The teacher suggests they use furniture to block the door in case the creature, whatever it is, is dangerous. Major Jack suggests they each find something to use as a weapon.

Time passes. Finally, Sylvia speaks. “Someone needs to check on the housekeeper,” she says. The actress goes the door. But when she tries the knob, it will not turn! She runs to a window and pulls up. But it does not move.

She cries out. “We are not only **snowed in** --- we are locked in!”

**Everyone stops cold.** They stop immediately.

“You can’t **snow** us, Sylvia,” yells Vincent. “And why would you try to fool us, anyway?”

He hurries to the door but finds it is, indeed, locked. The others run to the windows but none will open.

Major Jack finally **loses his cool** and yells at the group. “Why are we here?! What is going on?”

“Look, everyone just **chill out**,” Madeline says, using her poor classroom discipline skills to try to calm the group. Then, she explains why she is at The Ice Castle Inn.

“I was invited,” she says. “That’s why I'm here. The plane ticket, room, food -- everything was free!”

The others look at each other in shock. They all received **identical** invitations. Each guest comes to the same realization at once: they are victims of a trick.

“Getting us all together here in this castle – it is one big **snow job**,” says Major Jack.

Sylvia agrees, “Yes, but who is trying **to snow** us? Who invited us?”

Just then, the door to the room creaks open. The four guests stare as the housekeeper walks into the room. She has returned from investigating the upstairs.

“I invited you,” she says.

“You? You?! You’re just a housekeeper,” says Madeline.

She eyes them each, coldly.

“No, I’m not *just* the housekeeper. My name is Crystal Castle. The Ice Castle Inn is mine. And now, I’d like you to meet my daughter, my adopted daughter, Hope.”

A young woman enters. She is very thin and her straight, blond hair is messy. But her face – it’s like an angel’s. She wears a silky white nightgown and robe. They look costly. But her feet are bare. Her body **twitches** and her eyes move nervously around the room. She doesn’t speak.

Vincent drops his wine glass. He is suddenly **stone cold sober**, as he says, “Hope? Is that you?”

Madeline, is now standing next to Vincent.

“It can’t be. Hope? I haven’t seen you in years.”

“You haven’t seen her in exactly 5 years.” says Crystal.

Sylvia and Major Jack do not recognize Hope. They are only more confused.

“Was she the one who made that terrible noise? Is she … mad? I mean, is she crazy?” asks the major.

Crystal, no longer the housekeeper, yells at them, “Hope is as **pure as the driven snow**! She is good and kind. But yes, she is mad. And you four people in this room drove her to madness! That is why you are here!”

It is now the middle of the night. Crystal let’s everything out in the open. She explains how each person in that room contributed to her beloved girl’s **insanity**.

“I’ll start with you, Vincent. You and Hope were engaged. But on the wedding day, you broke your promise to marry her, leaving her stranded at the church!”

Vincent says nervously, “I got **cold feet**! I was nervous and changed my mind at the last minute.”

He picks up the white wedding veil from the floor and holds it tightly.

“If you must know, it was the worst mistake of my life. I’ve never been the same. I’ve never been happy. I was happy with Hope. But I was too young to marry.”

He sinks into the chair. He looks deep into the fire, his mind trapped in the mistake of years past.

“You may think you know me but you don’t know anything about me,” he says, his voice filled with **regret**.

“I know a lot about you, Vincent,” Crystal says.

She knows, for example, that Vincent’s wealth and status come entirely from his wife’s family. She also knows that he was married before and never got divorced.

“Which means,” she continues, “that you are not legally married to your rich wife. What will happen if I tell her and her family?”

“I would lose it all,” he says, “my wealth, home, social position. But, I don’t care. Tell them. I don’t care about anything. Life without Hope has been a cold and lonely place. I bet you didn’t know that.”

Outside the storm is easing. The wind blows lighter and the snow has stopped. And, Hope has changed ever so slightly. She puts on a pair of slippers and moves toward the fireplace. Standing over Vincent, she lays a hand on his head.

And then she speaks. “It is okay, Vincent. We were very young.”

They are Hope’s first words in many months.

The young man can’t bring himself to look at Hope. He simply holds tighter to her wedding veil.

Crystal moves to her daughter, hugs her tightly and puts a coat over her shoulders. Then, she redirects her **frigid** stare to Madeline. The teacher looks down at the framed letter in her hands.

“You don’t need to speak, Crystal. I can explain this myself,” Madeline says.

She says she and Hope worked at the same school. At first, they were best friends. Hope was very talented, beautiful and kind. Everyone liked her very much. Over time, Madeline became very jealous.

“I tried to **freeze her out** as much as possible. I gave Hope the **cold shoulder.** I tried my best to leave her out of things. But that didn’t work. So, I stole money from the school and made it look like Hope did it. She was fired immediately.”

Crystal answers with anger. “You destroyed her career and her reputation!”

“Crystal, you should check again,” Madeline says. “Several teachers investigated the theft knowing their beloved Hope would not steal. They suspected I was to blame for the situation. But, they couldn’t find any evidence against me so they couldn’t fire me.”

“But, my career has been in a **deep freeze** ever since,” Madeline continues. "My students hate me, the other teachers hate me and I hate my job. And I’ve never had another friend like Hope.” As she says this she throws the framed termination letter across the room.

Hope says in a calm, clear voice, “It will all be okay. Listen … outside … the storm has stopped.”

The actress, Sylvia, suddenly feels an unexpected and strong feeling for this strange, quiet young woman. Then she asks Crystal how she is connected to Hope.

Crystal says with an **icy tone** in her voice, “Why, Sylvia, Hope is your daughter.”

With that news, Sylvia **passes out cold.**

When she wakes up, the others learn why the actress so often holds her gold locket close to her heart. In the locket are pictures of a baby girl and a baby boy – babies she gave up for adoption.

“I was young and alone,” Sylvia explains. “I was poor and **snowed under** so many unpaid bills that I could barely breathe. I didn’t know what to do with two babies. But I have thought of them every day since. But how did you come to adopt them?”

Crystal says she was a young doctoral student assigned to the orphanage. She took care of the brother and sister. When a rich relative died, she **inherited** a **fortune** and The Ice Castle Inn. So, she adopted the two babies and raised them as her own.

As Crystal talks of raising two wonderful children, the actress holds the locket to her chest.

It was Crystal’s plan all along to expose Sylvia’s history. She thought that people would stop seeing her films if they knew she had given up her own children to further her career. But she now realizes that that is not true.

Crystal also realizes she was wrong and feels, quite unexpectedly, **ashamed**. She doesn’t feel any better when Sylvia looks down at her locket and asks, “Where is my son?”

“This is where the major comes into the story,” Crystal says **hesitantly**.

Major Jack says that he does not know this young woman.

Crystals agrees with him. “That’s right. You don’t,” she says. “But you did know her brother – her only brother. They were so close growing up. They were more like best friends than brother and sister. His name was Lieutenant Justice Castle.”

Major Jack’s **blood turns to ice**. Yes, he knows the name Justice Castle very well.

“Justice was a soldier under my command – one of the finest soldiers I have ever met. We were on a peace keeping mission and weren’t supposed to see any fighting. But I got my information wrong. I sent his squad into a dangerous area.”

The major has a difficult time continuing. His voice breaks as he speaks and his eyes fill with tears.

“Justice was killed in action because of my mistake. But I lied on official reports. I blamed him for misreading a map. This has **haunted** me ever since. Before coming on this trip, I told my superiors the truth about what happened that day. When I return, I will probably be **court-martialed**. And I deserve it.”

Crystal turns off a recording device. She had planned to say, “And now I have recorded your statement, Major.” She had planned to say, “Now, I have the proof I need to **ruin** you too.”

But her plans are not necessary now. He is already a ruined man.

Vincent is the next to speak. “Do you mean to tell us, that for the past several years you have been collecting information on us, planning this whole trip just to get even with us?”

Crystal stares at the empty faces of the group and says, “**Revenge is a dish best served cold**.”

“What does that mean, mother?” asks Hope as she moves to Crystal’s side.

“It means,” she explains, “that I have waited a long time to get my revenge. And that just makes my revenge feel even better.”

“But revenge won’t bring back Justice, will it.”

“No, it won’t, my dear.”

Crystal collapses into a chair, tired from the years of planning and hating. She has waited so long to get her revenge for her daughter but now it is **cold comfort**. The revenge has offered her none of the reward she thought it would.

“Oh, look! The sun is coming up!” Hope says happily. “And what’s that on the horizon?”

The group are shocked to hear the sounds of a helicopter approaching.

“Look mother!” says Hope. “A helicopter is landing on the big lawn! How beautiful the day is going to be.” She looks reborn, renewed.

“Yes, I think it will be,” says Crystal Castle. “Let’s get our bags and leave this cold place. How would you like to spend the rest of the winter on a **tropical** island?”

“That sounds lovely,” Hope says as the color returns to her cheeks. “But what about the others? I hope they will be alright. I hope.”

A helicopter is not the only sound they hear. A snow plow is slowly working its way up the long drive to The Ice Castle Inn. It won’t be long before Vincent, Madeline, Sylvia and Major Jack will be able to leave the inn and return to their normal lives.

Or will they? Will their lives ever be normal again? Will any of them ever be the same ever again?

And so ends “Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn.”

I’m Anna Matteo.

*Anna Matteo wrote “Mystery at The Ice Castle Inn.” Kelly Jean Kelly, Ashley Thompson and Caty Weaver edited the three parts.*