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Beginnings: Babe in the Woods

Lorelei James

Dedication

Thanks to editor extraordinaire Angela James for choosing this story for the first Samhain Anthology. I'm thrilled to be in such good company.

Chapter One

Lacy Buchanan fantasized about leaving a size ten boot print on his ass. A very fine ass that'd commanded far too much of her attention already.

The tight male butt stopped. The equally fine masculine body faced her. Brown eyes snapped with barely restrained hostility.

"Would you hurry up?" The guide waited impatiently by a decaying log, wiping away the sweat beaded on his forehead with a dirty red bandana. The compass on a chain around his neck glinted in the harsh sunlight. "We'll never make camp before nightfall at this rate. God, what are you? Part tortoise?"

"Better that than part caveman," she retorted, throwing her Day-Glo orange backpack to the rocky ground. It kicked up clouds of dust. She coughed and flopped down beside it. Something inside it made a horrible crunching sound.

Lacy could care less what survival item she destroyed because her feet were killing her—not that she'd ever mention it to the sullen hiking guide she'd dubbed Ranger Rick. Except after marching the last two hours in near-desert heat, she'd secretly added a silent "P" to his name. Not even her secret attempt at humor lessened her irritation with the man whose facial expressions registered exactly two emotions—anger and frustration.

"Just go on. I'll catch up."

His left eyebrow winged up. "You'd rather I left you out here to wander the woods alone?"

"Yep. I've got water and an excellent moisturizer. Just give me your compass and I'll be set."

A new expression lit his eyes. Disbelief. "Where is your compass?"

She was so hoping *not* to have to confess that little mishap to this rugged outdoorsman with the instincts of a wolf and the disposition of a bear. "Umm." She absentmindedly fingered her charm bracelet. Damn thing was supposed to bring her good luck, not bad. "It's kind of funny actually."

His gaze narrowed. He didn't look the least bit amused.

"Okay. It fell out of my pocket and sank to the bottom of the creek when we filled our canteens."

"And you're telling me *now*? What makes you think you'd survive out here?" He expelled a harsh bark of laughter. "Cupcake, you'd last about ten seconds before screaming your head off for me to come back and rescue you."

Cupcake? Lacy ground her teeth. So she wasn't Campfire Girl material, but she wasn't helpless either. For godssake, she worked in the jungle of Manhattan. She'd spent years honing her survival instincts.

"Rescue me? I wouldn't call for you with my last breath."

The first hint of a smile played at the corners of his sinful mouth. "Careful, that can be arranged."

Ooh, his testosterone-laden behavior rankled.

"But, if we don't get going," he continued, "we may be forced to rely on survival techniques that'll offend your delicate sensibilities."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know." He scratched the sexy stubble on his chin. "Eating squirrel or grub worms." His gaze locked on hers. "Conserving our strength tonight by sharing body heat."

Lacy knew he was bluffing, yet something warm and liquid pooled low in her belly. "In your dreams, Grizzly Adams. Not if you were the last man on earth."

"Back at you. But at this pace, the human race might be extinct by the time we reach base camp."

She tossed her head, reaching in the pocket of her cargo shorts for a tube of cherry Chapstick. "Please. Could we hurry back so I can choke down another meal of the prepackaged cardboard you psychos are passing off as food?"

His avid gaze remained glued to her mouth as she spread the waxy substance over her cracked skin.

She puckered and compressed her lips before releasing them with a loud smack. "This is not what I expected."

He inhaled deeply and muttered, "Don't ask. You don't even want to know."

"Want to know what?"

"What exactly were you expecting?"

"A nightly campfire with cowboy sing-alongs. Horseback riding through flower-filled meadows. A grumpy old man everyone affectionately called 'Cookie' scrounging up a kettle of baked beans. The only ones eating well on this trip are the mosquitoes."

"Spare me the drama. This is backwoods hiking."

"Well, I didn't know that."

"It was spelled out on the damn brochure. How did a woman like you end up here anyway?" A beat passed. His slow, knowing grin was worse

than his disdain. "Aha. I get it now. Was this adventure your boyfriend's idea?"

"Ex-boyfriend," she spit out.

His gaze lingered on her white silk tank top permanently discolored gray by sweat stains. "You seem better suited for a bed and breakfast in wine country."

"Instead, I'll spend another night sleeping on pinecones and deer poop with a man whose idea of conversation is grunting."

When his eyes flashed, she backtracked. "When are we going to get back to civilization?"

"If we hurry, we can catch the group before they start the trail ride in the morning. If not. Who knows?" He uncapped his canteen, never breaking eye contact as he took a small sip. "None of this would've happened had you not drifted off from the main group. How did you get so lost in such a short period of time?"

She shrugged.

"What were you doing?"

"I was looking for—" Her mouth snapped shut. No way was she confessing that humiliating tidbit, even if it was a normal bodily function. Even if bears regularly did it in the woods.

"For what? A Starbucks?" His disgusted gaze zeroed in on her red leather ankle boots. "Or perhaps a Saks? No wonder your feet hurt."

Lacy thought she'd been limping pretty discreetly. "For your information, Captain Caveman, I ordered these boots from Eddie Bauer. The premier outfitter of all outdoor enthusiasts." Not that you'd know, she added a mental raspberry. He probably fashioned his attire from the skins of animals he'd trapped. And killed. With his bare hands.

"Figures you'd have blisters, ordering from that useless yuppie store. And for the last time, my name isn't Ranger Prick or any of the other creative monikers you've been muttering behind my back. It's Becker."

"Whatever."

He unhooked the compass and studied it. "It says we're going the right direction..." He squinted at the sun, the woods behind them and the sandstone cliffs rising on both sides of the canyon. He gave her a once over. "So why does it feel like every time I look at you that I've stumbled into a secret passageway to hell?"

"Back at you, Pecker."

His mouth tightened. "Look, Lacy. Break is over. We need to get moving before the sun drops behind those cliffs."

"Your compass tells you that? Let me see it."

"Be careful. Not sure I can find the way out of here without it." Becker reluctantly handed the compass over.

Lacy studied the gadget for several minutes, as if it contained a map. "What does it mean when—"

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Put down your hand. Slowly."

"What now?" He wasn't having a cow about her simply touching his precious compass, was he?

"Don't move."

"Move. Don't move. Make up your mind. I am so sick of being bossed around. First, I got conned about this lousy trip, and now I'm stuck with you, Mr. He-man-woman-hater—"

"Shut-up," Becker hissed. He inched sideways from the log, his movements deliberate and steady as he reached into his backpack to ease out a small shovel. "You can boss me all you want in a minute. Right now, don't talk. Stay still."

"What is it?" She slid her butt lower toward her blistered heels.

"I said. Do. Not. Move."

Lacy froze at his serious tone and the concentration on his face. For once he wasn't pretending to ignore her. That scared her far more than she cared to admit.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because there is a rattlesnake coiled about a foot from your backpack."

Sure enough, through the sudden silence, she heard an agitated rattling.

Lacy screamed, launching herself off the log like a long-jumper on steroids. She stumbled and face planted in the dirt. For a half-a-second she stayed completely motionless—until something dry slithered over her bare calf, followed by a sharp sting.

She leapt up, frantically beating her clothes, hopping from foot to foot drawing her knees to her chest. Her high-pitched shrieks blocked out the sounds of blood pounding in her ears, but didn't hide the taste of fear lodged in her throat.

A large hand clamped over her mouth. She was pulled against a solid, warm body. "Quiet."

Her heart slammed in her chest, but she stopped struggling.

"Calm down." His breath fanned her ear. "It's dead."

A shudder moved through her. She slumped in Becker's arms.

He released his hand. "Did it bite you?"

"I—I don't know. I felt something touch my leg."

"Okay. I'm going to pick you up and carry you to that log. If it did bite you, and you continue to act like a Rockette on acid, then the poison will move through your bloodstream twice as fast, understand?"

She nodded.

Strong arms hooked under her knees. Her head rested under his chin as they shuffled to the log.

Becker sat, keeping Lacy on his lap. "Which leg?"

She burst into tears. "I don't know."

"Ssh. Calm down. Deep breaths, Lacy. We'll figure it out." He shifted, running his hand down her right leg to her knee. "Lift up. Let me see."

Lacy concentrated on the gentle way his callused fingers slid over her skin and not the idea of poison flowing just below the surface.

He turned her foot, fingers circling her ankle. "Nothing. Good. Next leg."

She remained immobile through the same procedure on the other calf, although his hands caressing her body made her skin tingle. Finally, he eased her from his lap.

"You were lucky. Doesn't appear to be a bite mark. You feel okay?"

Relief soared through her. "If it had sunk its nasty fangs into me?"

He tenderly brushed a strand of hair from her tear-stained cheek. "I carry a snakebite kit in my pack, just in case."

"Bet you were an awesome Boy Scout."

Becker actually flashed a half-smile. "I've never been a Boy Scout."

Whoo-ee. That could be taken the wrong way. Smiling, gentle Becker was far more dangerous than surly Becker.

Maybe the rest of the hike wouldn't be so bad now that they'd come to a truce.

"So you killed the varmint, huh? With your bare hands?"

"Nah. Chopped it in half with a shovel. Want to see?"

"Sure."

Lacy stood frozen in place, horrified by what lay next to her dirty backpack. Her stomach roiled, but not at the sight of a potential snakeskin purse in its rawest form.

No. She was sickened by the chunks of metal and broken glass that used to be a compass—a compass she'd accidentally pulverized during her impromptu snake dance.

Damn.

Her stunned gaze caught his.

She decided a snakebite might've been preferable to the venomous gleam in Becker's eye.

Chapter Two

Sam Becker stared at the broken compass.

I could kill her. Wrap my hands around her lovely sunburned neck and squeeze until her cynical blue eyes popped out of her beautiful head.

No one would find her body. Hell, since they were for all intents and purposes lost in the Bighorn Mountains, there was a good chance they'd never find his body either.

He shoved aside his murderous impulse and jerked the chain holding the powdered compass. Spun on his boot heel and stalked to the other side of the log to consider their options. Although he felt her questioning gaze burning his neck like a laser beam, she managed to keep her smart mouth shut for a change.

The sun beat down. The air was calm and hot without a breath of wind. Even the absence of buzzing insects seemed to mock their predicament.

No way around it. They were seriously screwed.

On a gut level he knew his cousin, Dave Hawk, wouldn't wait for them at base camp beyond a few hours, but he wouldn't immediately send out a search party. Their fledgling business had too much riding on the hike to spook other clients. Besides, Dave had told everyone Becker was a partner in Back to Nature Guided Tours.

Problem was, Dave was the experienced backwoods guide, not Becker. Becker was merely the moneyman. He'd taken the summer off from his financial firm in New York City to reevaluate his life and help Dave build databases. He never dreamed he'd have to fill in as an actual employee.

Without a compass, and mired in one mountain pass that looked like every other, they'd be hard-pressed to find their way back to base camp before tomorrow. He'd be damn lucky to find a way out *at all*.

So there he was, lost in the woods with a babe who was pure temptation; silky blond hair, blue eyes clear as the summer sky, long legs attached to a perfectly pear-shaped ass...and a tongue sharper than his bowie knife. He'd known Lacy Buchanan was a wild card before she opened her lush pink lips.

Becker had to buck up. Like it or not, she was now his responsibility—even if it was her fault they were up the proverbial creek.

He might be a novice trail guide, but *she* didn't know that. Somehow he'd get them back, even if they had to march all night. He grinned. She ought to just love that, especially wearing those stupid red boots.

"Can you fix it?" she asked anxiously.

"No."

"So what are we gonna do?"

Becker pointed at the watch on her right wrist. "Don't suppose that has a compass?"

"Nope." She peered at the neon blue face. "But it is waterproof to three hundred feet."

"Like that'll do us any good in the middle of Wyoming."

Pink tinged her cheekbones. "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to stomp on it. I sort of panicked."

"Sort of?"

She blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm sure that never happens to you."

Becker cocked his head, studying her coolly. "I take it you don't like snakes?"

She shuddered. "No."

"Well, get over it, cupcake, 'cause it's what we're having for supper."

"You can't be serious!"

"I am. Unless you've got a couple of rib-eye steaks hidden in your backpack?"

Lacy shook her head.

He smirked. "Didn't think so."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not eating rattlesnake. Because I-I—" Come on, think of something or you'll be picking scales out of your teeth. "Because I'm a vegetarian!"

"Since when?"

Since about five seconds ago, but he wouldn't know that.

When she stayed quiet, he threw back his head and laughed. A deep, rich, warm sound in direct conflict with his brusque demeanor. A sexy timbre that made her stomach swoop.

"Nice try. But I saw you eating jerky on the trail yesterday. I know they don't make the stuff out of tofu."

Why had he been watching her wolf down a package of dried buffalo meat instead of watching the trail markers?

No wonder they'd gotten lost.

"I'll bet if some fancy restaurant offered you snake as the evening special you'd order it without hesitation."

"That's different."

"How so?"

"Because I don't eat something that tries to bite me first!"

Becker shrugged. "Suit yourself. If you don't eat it, I don't want to hear you whining that you're hungry later on."

Of course, her stomach chose that exact second to growl.

He picked up the shovel, muttering, "Chicken" under his breath, but loud enough she heard him.

Lacy demanded, "What did you say?"

"It'll probably taste just like chicken." His cool brown eyes dared her to contradict him.

An enormous black buzzard landed on the log, cawing loudly. Beady eyes zeroed in on the snake carcass.

"Go find your own dinner, scavenger," Becker said, chasing the bird away. He tossed a smug look over his broad shoulder. "You too, cupcake."

Right then Lacy knew she'd *have* to eat the snake. Even if it gagged her. Even if it killed her. Better to embrace the idea now, rather than having to...well, eat *crow* later and admit he'd been right.

Before she lost her nerve, she picked up the tail end of the snake. Eww. It was still warm. "How are you going to cook it?"

Did Becker suddenly look a little green?

"Can't sauté it in a white wine and cream sauce, now, can I?" He chopped off the head, picking up the leftover chunk. "We'll roast it like a hot dog. Let's go. Gotta log a few more miles before dark."

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Carry it. The rattle might scare off other snakes."

"Other snakes?"

Becker smiled before he shouldered his pack and started down the trail.

Insufferable jerk. She had no choice but to play follow-the-leader. Every once in awhile she rattled the snake tail, just to be safe.

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Hours later, Lacy's feet were sore, blistered and probably bleeding. Her back ached and she still clutched a dead reptile.

She groaned. "I can't move another step."

Becker stopped and stretched. "Fine. We'll take a break."

"You can take a break. I'm done for today."

She lifted her face to the breeze, listening to the birdsong and the faint sound of water trickling nearby. With the mountains rising all around them, this remote area was one of the most magnificent places she'd ever seen. "This is breathtaking."

"I'll say."

Becker wasn't looking at the scenery, but at her.

Oh man. He flustered her with one look. What would happen if he actually touched her? She'd probably erupt like Old Faithful.

She refocused on their surroundings.

They'd left the jagged cliffs behind and hiked into a deep canyon. Pine trees grew on a steep incline towering to reach the periwinkle sky. To the right, a small clearing packed with tall, pale green grass eventually sloped up into another craggy hill. It wasn't the flower-filled meadow she'd expected, but it was stunning.

"We'll make camp here. It's almost dusk anyway. You'd better gather some stuff to burn for the fire tonight before you get too comfy."

"What are you going to be doing?"

"Skinning the snake. Of course, if you'd rather do it, I've got no problem trading jobs."

Lacy shuddered. "No thanks." She handed him the limp remains and trudged toward the trees, cursing her swollen feet.

"Don't go far," he called. "I don't want to spend the rest of the night wondering if you've become a mountain lion snack."

"Bite me, Pecker."

His soft laughter echoed around her. Seemed the acoustics in the canyon were better than a microphone. Or Mr. Nature had the hearing of a bat.

Or Becker was more focused on her than she realized.

A shiver ran through her, not one of revulsion.

Half an hour later Lacy proudly eyed the pile of pinecones, twigs and decayed logs she'd gathered. In the flattest spot, Becker had lined rocks in a circle and dug a shallow fire pit.

Home sweet home.

But Becker was nowhere to be seen.

She wiped the sweat and dirt from her forehead with the back of her hand. Ick. Snake germs. She crossed the meadow toward the tinkling sound of water. She stumbled over a tree root and her tongue when she saw a shirtless Becker standing in the stream.

Lacy quickly ducked behind a clump of bushes and gawked.

His wide, muscled shoulders were tanned golden brown. Rivulets of water trailed his nicely defined pecs and followed the lines of his sixpack, disappearing into the waistband of the wet cargo shorts that hung dangerously low on his lean hips.

He was a glorious, gorgeous male animal.

A punch of lust knocked the breath from her lungs. She'd never wanted a man on such an elemental level. No talking. No foreplay. Just an animalistic mating. Hard, fast, sweaty, dirty raw sex. Him pounding into her until she screamed her pleasure, shattering the woodland silence.

Oblivious, Becker bent down and splashed water on his face. Raked his hands through his hair. Droplets of water clung to his dark stubble and glistened on his eyelashes. His nipples were tight.

Lacy ached to feel those rigid points with her tongue. Longed to trace the water's path down his river-cooled body with her hot mouth.

He stiffened. Seemed to look right at her. Then went on cleaning himself. Thoroughly.

Did Becker realize he was tormenting her as his wet bandana wiped every inch of his amazing body?

Probably.

Still, she leered until he returned to camp.

The narrow stream tumbled over a rock-lined bed. In several spots along the grassy edge, water pooled deep. Lacy plunged her hands into the icy coldness, scrubbing with a small stone until her fingers turned pink.

Satisfied all traces of snake oil were gone, she whipped off her tank top and rinsed it. Felt strangely freeing to flaunt her naked breasts and cup the cool, clear liquid, letting it flow down her body like an invisible lover's caress.

Was Becker lurking? Feeling that same inexplicable desire she'd experienced watching him?

She stayed bare-chested until her shirt dried, just in case.

Lacy sat on a bed of moss, hypnotized by the transformation of day into night. Twilight turned the sky a majestic purple. Stars twinkled. A soft breeze wafted by, stirring the hair stuck to her nape. She couldn't remember the last time she'd existed in such peace. No agenda. No people criticizing her. The scent of pine and the underlying earthy aroma of the forest filled her lungs.

When a rank smell replaced the sweetness of the night air, Lacy immediately scrambled to her feet.

Was there a dead animal close by? Or just a stinky, hungry creature hunting for a meal? She started to run, but stopped when she remembered the Discovery Channel warning that predators *liked* prey to run. In the near dark she staggered through the meadow, the stench increasing with every step.

She stopped. A fire lit the darkness surrounding the campsite and smoke drifted toward her.

It appeared that awful smell was dinner.

Chapter Three

It looked worse than it smelled.

Becker eyed the crispy chunk of meat on the end of the stick. Screw this. He didn't have to demonstrate his stubborn streak to her. He'd rather starve than eat barbequed snake.

Lacy limped into view, smile pasted on her freshly-scrubbed face. "What's that delicious odor?"

Odor. Not aroma. Not exactly a ringing endorsement for his culinary skills. He scowled at the red-hot coals. Time to call a halt to this juvenile, I'll-eat-it-if-you-will game.

When she stopped—downwind from the campfire smoke—he glanced up.

The dancing firelight bathed her in an ethereal glow. She looked halfangel, half-temptress. Which one was the real Lacy? How could he find out firsthand?

He was tired of baiting her. Since they were stuck with each other for the rest of the hike, they might as well make the most of it.

Becker mustered his most charming smile. "That stench is dinner. And you're more than welcome to eat my share because I sure as hell am not touching it."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Really?"

"Scouts honor. I'd rather chomp on pine needles."

She plopped beside him on the log. "Thank God. Honestly, I didn't know if I could—Hey! Wait a minute!" She whapped him on the arm.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"For making me carry that stupid snake. If we weren't gonna eat it, we could've left it for the buzzards."

Hopefully she'd credit the fire for the red flush on his cheeks, not guilt. "Sorry. Don't know what came over me. I'm usually not such a jerk."

Lacy looked dubious at his declaration. "I know what came over you. Being out in the wilderness does strange things to men."

"Define strange."

"A temporary reversion to caveman ways. You know..." She grunted. "You man, me woman. Me make fire, you make dinner."

"Error in your logic. I've made the fire and dinner."

Lacy blushed a delicate rosy-pink, captivating him completely.

"You missed the point."

"Which is?"

"The need for men to prove they're 'real men'."

He lifted his brows, waiting for what promised to be an entertaining explanation. "Like?"

She kicked a pinecone into the flames. "Like Ross didn't have a clue what 'GPS' meant, but put him in Central Park and suddenly he's an expert? Please. He can't find his way out of the men's room."

This guy had soured her on more than the great outdoors. Becker didn't find it as amusing as he'd imagined. "Ross sounds like an asshole."

She blinked. "Whoa. Sorry about the 'men suck' tangent."

"Why didn't you back out of this hike?" He stirred the coals. "Since it was your ex-boyfriend's idea?"

Lacy propped her elbows on her knees and gazed into the fire. "Because I'm sick of being called a marshmallow. A creampuff." She slanted him a sideways glance. "A cupcake. I wanted to prove I'm an adventurous woman."

Oh yeah, he definitely had one way in particular she could prove that. And it sure as hell didn't involve GPS.

Their gazes clashed. By the way Lacy fidgeted, Becker figured his lustful intentions were clearly written in his eyes.

She glanced away quickly. "So, since we're not having snake filets, how about if I cook?" She rummaged in her backpack, unearthing two protein bars, tossing one to him. "Guaranteed edible."

"Thanks." He bent forward to chuck another branch on the fire.

Lacy was frowning at him when he sat up.

"What?"

"You're bleeding."

He craned his neck but couldn't see. "Where?"

"From a scratch on your back. I can't believe you didn't feel it. Then again, I suppose a tough outdoorsman like you is used to getting hurt." She dug in her backpack and waved a big Band-Aid. "Voila."

"You carry Band-Aids?"

"A necessity for wearing stylish shoes. Hold still." Soft fingertips gently danced over his skin.

Goose bumps broke out across his body. He hissed, but not from pain.

"Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No." He smiled slyly. "Thanks for tendin' my wound, little lady."

Lacy batted her lashes. "Careful, mountain man. I might think you like me."

"Maybe I do."

The air between them turned sultry, heavy with promise, though neither voiced the obvious. Silence stretched for a time as they listened to sounds of the night.

Becker heard a jingle. He'd noticed she constantly fiddled with the silver bracelet circling her right wrist.

"Where'd you get that?"

"A gift from my friend, Cat."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure." She scooted closer, offering her arm.

"Pretty. What is this?" He pointed to a twisted, dangling blob.

"A Sita knot."

"Which is?"

"A Celtic symbol denoting the four phases of the moon, the four stages of life and the four seasons."

"Did Cat give this to you because you've been friends for-ever?"

Lacy groaned at his pun. "No. She gave it to me before I left as a symbol of new beginnings." She smiled wistfully. "But crazy Cat kinda runs on her own kooky calendar."

"How so?"

"Well, the traditional Celtic season for new beginnings, Samhain, doesn't happen for a few months."

"I know," he murmured, stroking his thumb over her silky skin beneath the bracelet.

"You do? How?"

He'd never admitted to anyone outside his family that his crazy mother had christened him "Sam" after he'd arrived on Samhain Eve. Since childhood Becker had discounted his mother's warnings about the power of fate and karma, as much as her belief in crystals and superstitions. Nonsense in his opinion. Hard work, not fate, ruled his life. "My mother is into all that New Age crap."

"It's not crap." She attempted to yank her arm away.

Becker held fast. "Wrong word choice."

"Then what did you mean?"

He flicked the charm. "Do you believe this bracelet can somehow change your life?"

"Yes. Not by itself, but I see it as a reminder I *can* choose my own path. I'm not doomed to keep repeating the same mistakes."

"Such as?"

"Bad jobs. Bad relationships. Bad decisions."

"Has your luck changed since you put it on?"

"Into bad luck, maybe. First I got lost, now I'm stuck with you—"

He dropped her arm like a hot coal.

Lacy leaned until their shoulders touched. "Wrong word choice."

"Touché," he said.

"I seem to be bad luck. I'd hoped it'd change on this trip."

Becker couldn't help himself. He reached for her, smoothing fine wisps of hair from her velvety-soft cheek. "Maybe it has." His touch lingered when her eyes sparked with desire. With the back of his hand he leisurely traced the outline of her face from temple to chin, sweeping his thumb over her plump bottom lip. "Firelight looks good on you, Lacy."

"Becker-"

"Sam."

"Sam-"

"Ssh. You talk too much."

Her breath caught as he brushed his lips across hers. Once. Twice. As he was about to dive into her succulent mouth for a real kiss, an animal screeched.

Lacy jumped. "W-what was that?"

Bad timing. Shit. Or good timing. What had he been thinking? His responsibilities for her didn't include kissing and exchanging life goals.

He scanned the sky. "Probably an owl." Better to put some distance between them. "I'm whipped. Let's douse the fire and hit the hay. We've got an early start tomorrow."

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Surly Becker had returned. Big surprise. No skin off her nose he'd changed his mind. He hadn't asked for her help as he trekked to the stream for water to put out the fire.

Did the cold water have any effect on the heat she'd seen in his eyes? She hadn't imagined his interest or the eroticism in that simple kiss.

As the last embers smoked, Lacy unrolled her sleeping bag.

"Got everything you need out of your backpack?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because I need to loop it over a tree branch in case bears come sniffing around."

Bears. Her stomach lurched. How could she sleep knowing wild animals roamed nearby? Last night there'd been safety in numbers. But tonight...just the two of them? She watched him tie the flaps together and drape the backpacks over a high tree branch with a long stick.

Becker spread out on the other side of the fire pit.

She tamped down the urge to ask if it'd be safer if they slept closer. Like in the same sleeping bag.

No. Dammit. She'd show him she wasn't scared. Or a cupcake.

"Lacy?"

"Yes?"

"If you need..."

To rip my clothes off and revisit that body-heat-sharing idea... She shook her head to clear it. "What?"

"To...see, ah...man about a horse, wake me up."

"Afraid I'll wander off?"

"Yes."

"Fine. But you'd better not be grouchy as a damn bear when I do. Good night."

Lacy crawled inside her sleeping bag fully clothed. She zipped up, scooting down until no part of her body stuck out.

Eyes squeezed shut, she repeated, *There's no place like home. There's no place like home.* Which really didn't calm her because it brought to mind the other famous phrase from *The Wizard of Oz, Lions-and-tigers-and-bears-oh-my.*

Counting sheep wouldn't help either; it'd remind her of hungry wolves. With red eyes and big gnashing teeth.

She'd actually fallen asleep only to be awakened by a bloodcurdling scream. Hers? Maybe she'd imagined it. She waited breathlessly. And heard the scream again. Louder. Was it closer? After the third one, she scrambled out of her sleeping bag and ran to where Becker slept.

Lacy threw herself on top of him. "Becker!"

"What the..." He squinted at her. "What's wrong?"

"I heard a scream and I-I—"

"Shit. You're shaking. Come here." He unzipped his bag and pulled her inside. It was a tight fit.

Lacy didn't care. She plastered herself to him.

Becker stroked her back, murmuring in her hair. When she calmed down, she looked up at him. He was so...

Yummy. Hot. Sweet. Like cinnamon candy. She could suck on him all night.

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"Better?"
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"Yeah. Thanks."

"Hang on." Cool air wafted in. He climbed out and dragged her sleeping bag over. "Hop out for a sec." He zipped the two bags together.

A shiver worked loose at the thought of lying beside him in close quarters. Without meeting his gaze, she dove inside their cozy nest.

He followed a beat later.

Despite the awkwardness of sleeping with a man she hardly knew, Lacy finally felt safe. She drifted off and was almost asleep when a chorus of howls shot her back to awareness.

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"What was that?"
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"Covotes."

"That wasn't what I heard earlier."

"Probably a mountain lion before," he mumbled.

"A mountain lion?" She inched closer.

"Yeah."

"But—"

"God!" Becker wrapped his arms around her, tucking her against his chest. "Happy now? They'll have to chew through me to get to you. Go to sleep."

She shut her eyes. Really tried to think of Becker as protection. Not a man with bulging muscles. Who smelled all woodsy. Who radiated such warmth. She rubbed her cheek over his left pec. Listened to his erratic heartbeat.

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"Stop wiggling."
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"I can't get comfortable."

"That makes two of us." He loosened his hold on her.

Lacy glanced up.

Their lips were a breath apart.

He growled and covered her mouth with his.

No gentle kiss this time. The second his tongue touched hers desire leveled her like a felled tree.

Becker's masterful kisses alternated teeth-grinding passion with slow, wet, teasing nibbles. His hands cradled her head to position her mouth however he wanted.

If the hardness pressing into her hip was any indication, he wanted her. Big time.

Lacy grabbed handfuls of his T-shirt until he impatiently yanked it off.

Oh. His skin was hot. Smooth. Perfect. Chest muscles rippled beneath her fingertips as she traced his hard contours.

Groaning, he shifted, wedging his muscular leg between her softer thighs and clamped his hands on her ass, grinding her pelvis against his.

She bowed beneath him, greedy to gorge on all the carnal delights his body promised.

Becker trailed openmouthed kisses down her throat, flicking his tongue in tandem with her racing pulse. Then he sank his mouth into the magic spot where her neck met shoulder and bit down.

Lacy let out a moan, lost in his intoxicating masculine scent, and the thrilling feel of his reckless lips branding her skin.

His hands slipped beneath her tank top. Rough fingertips tickled her bare belly as his thumbs lazily grazed the underside of her breasts. He stopped kissing her neck, pressing his damp lips to her ear. "Lift your arms."

Her shirt disappeared. Then his silky mouth closed over her right nipple.

He sucked softly. Forcefully. The teasing nip of his teeth was followed by wet swirls of his tongue. His hot breath beaded the tip into a painful point.

Her brain fogged with pleasure. "More."

The stubble on his chin raked the tender skin on her chest. He soothed the sting with petal-soft kisses and switched to the other breast. "You taste sweet, cupcake."

His hoarse whisper sent a rush of moisture south.

The flannel sleeping bag stroked her flesh as Lacy thrashed. She ached. Every scrape of his beard, every suctioning kiss and deliberate lick made her slick and ready. She turned her head...and saw a pair of beady red eyes staring back at her.

She screamed and tried to roll away—an impossible feat with two hundred pounds of amorous male crushing her to the ground.

Becker went still. "What's wrong?"

"There's a wild animal!"

"Where?"

"By the tree."

He sat up. Paused. "The squirrel? That's what scared you?"

Lacy peeked over Becker's shoulder. A fluffy tail swished up the trunk as it scampered away.

She'd freaked about a squirrel. How mortifying. She reached for her shirt, giving Becker her back.

"Lacy—"

"Save it. I'm an idiot. Go ahead and laugh." She pressed herself into the zippered side of the joined bags, leaving a big gap between them.

"I'm not going to laugh at you," he said quietly.

"You'd be the first."

The last thing Lacy heard Becker say was, "I'm not like him. You'd best remember that."

Her heart turned over, but she didn't. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Chapter Four

Becker's snores woke Lacy up. She snuck off, snickering at his quaint phrasing about bodily functions. When she returned, Becker had already rolled up the sleeping bags and their backpacks rested against the log.

He gave her a crusty look. "Thought I told you to tell me when you needed—"

"I don't need you to hold my hand," she retorted sweetly.

"Could've fooled me last night."

Her face flamed. Damn Nordic genes. "Sorry. It won't happen again." She tied her sleeping bag to her pack, grabbed her toothbrush and uncapped her canteen. Empty. Without another word, she headed for the creek.

Scrubbing her face and teeth improved her mood. Until she noticed Becker leaning against a tree, glaring at her.

"What? Hoping to see me fall in and get washed downstream?"

Becker scowled. "You have a real high opinion of me." He sidestepped her and bent to fill his canteen.

"I assume you've got a plan for getting us back to civilization?" Why did his back stiffen?

"Yeah. I think we should walk east. Because if we keep going west, we'll get deeper into the mountains. There are houses and roads at the foothills."

She considered it. "Makes sense."

"You aren't going to question my plan?"

"No. I trust you."

Relief flitted through his eyes. "What's our food situation?"

"Don't you have anything in your pack?"

"No."

A guide with no supplies? Something about that didn't ring true. "I've got one protein bar left."

"Save it. Keep an eye out for berries or something edible."

"While I'm foraging what will you be doing?"

"Keepin' you safe from wild critters, darlin'."

"I don't—"

"Although, I liked it when you wanted my protection from them last night."

Incredulous, she said, "You did?"

He nodded.

"You aren't upset?"

"Only if I won't get another shot at protecting you tonight."

A sexy smile broke across his handsome face and made Lacy weak-kneed. How was she supposed to hike with him wreaking havoc on her system?

"Come on, cupcake. Let's get moving."

a d

"Tell me about your job in New York," Becker said to take their minds off the grueling uphill hike.

"It's not nearly as exciting as what you do. I'm in advertising. I try to sell people things they don't need."

Becker grinned. An apt—and surprisingly honest answer.

Lacy launched into an explanation about the rigors of her day-to-day life that sounded exactly like his. "But I'm ready for a change."

"Like?"

"Like working in a low-pressure job so I can savor life instead of making it a competition."

"Are you competitive in everything?"

"Yep." Lacy smiled saucily before taking off up the steep incline.

He chased her. She won. This time.

They stood atop the rise, wheezing, staring at the never-ending sea of greenish-black pine trees.

She sighed. Sipped from her canteen and handed it to him.

"What?"

"I'd hoped to find a Super 8 on the other side of this hill."

Was she sorry she'd listened to him? Especially when he was winging it about forging a way out of the mountains?

She trusts you. Don't let her down.

Becker wiped the water from his chin, passing back the canteen. "Let's keep walking. Never know what's over the next rise."

Once they'd returned to the shaded woods, she said, "Tell me about your mother. Is she still into that 'New Age' crap?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you are the way you are?"

He knew Lacy meant his persona as a mountain guide, but he answered honestly. "I'm the way I am in *spite* of my upbringing."

"She doesn't approve of your chosen field?"

"No." His mother was half-Irish/half-Lakota Sioux. She'd expected him to help run the family pub after college. Becker preferred to pursue other goals. Now that he'd exceeded his own expectations, he was ready for a new direction in his life. Taking the summer off to help his cousin launch a new venture was shaping up to be the best decision he'd made.

Despite the fact he and Lacy were lost.

"Does your family think you should abandon the ad biz?" He picked up a branch blocking their path.

"No. That's why Cat made me the bracelet. To remind me I'm in charge of my own destiny."

Before Becker could respond, Lacy wandered into a patch of sunshine. He watched her poking around in a cluster of low bushes. "What'd you find?"

"Raspberry canes." She held out her hand. Nestled in her palm were tiny red fruit.

"How does a Manhattanite recognize a raspberry bush?"

Lacy blushed. "My grandmother lived outside of Spearfish. We used to go raspberry picking in the Black Hills the summers I stayed with her."

"So you do have some wilderness skills."

"I thought I did until that time I got lost and my parents forbid me from visiting Grandma again."

Becker froze. "Lost?"

"Ah. Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I wandered off. Grandma thought I'd gone back to the house. She didn't realize I wasn't around until it was dark." She kicked the dirt. "Then it was too late to search so I spent the night in the woods alone scared out of my mind."

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

He grasped her by the upper arms. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because my parents accused me of getting lost on purpose just for the attention. I didn't want you to think the same."

Another thought notched his guilt. "Did your ex-boyfriend know you'd gotten lost in the woods as a child?"

Lacy nodded.

"And yet he still booked you on this wilderness hiking trip?"

"Yes. He's probably at base camp laughing that I'm missing."

"He's there?"

"Yes. Waiting to go in the next group. Instead of canceling, I moved my trip up a week."

Becker's hands fell. He stared at the stubborn tilt to her elfin chin. He spun away to hide his mortification. Jesus. He'd acted the supermacho asshole, just like her ex. She'd been scared shitless last night and he'd used it as an excuse to get his hands and mouth all over her lush body.

Talk about caveman tendencies.

He heard Lacy's footsteps fading He needed a minute to wallow in his self-reproach before he offered her an apology.

When Becker regained control, he tracked her to a sun-washed clearing. She sat on a stump like a beautiful woodland fairy, eating raspberries.

He groaned. The fruit was the exact color of her nipples. His zipper grew snug as he remembered the sweet taste and those rosy tips hardening against his stroking tongue.

She offered her hand. "Berry for your thoughts?"

"Cupcake, you'd run if you knew what I was thinking."

"You don't scare me, mountain man. Besides. I beat you once."

"I let you win."

Lacy said, "You wish. But, I'd probably let you catch me anyway."
He gave her a wolfish smile. "Prove it."

a d

Lacy trudged after Becker, panting at his breakneck speed. Seemed he was anxious to make good on the lust-filled challenge she'd read in his eyes.

He stopped so suddenly she smacked into his backpack.

"Do you smell that?"

"What?"

"Water. Thank God. I'm out." He shot off, cutting through underbrush, skirting trees and disappearing down a slope.

She found him by a sharp bend in a wide stream.

"See? I told you."

"I never doubted your woodsman abilities, Becker."

He frowned.

Lacy untied her boots, peeled off her socks and waded in.

"What are you doing?"

"Cooling off."

"Be careful."

"I am." The icy water felt sublime. She aimed for a flat rock on the other side when the bottom literally fell from beneath her.

The cold shock of submersion caused an involuntary gasp and her mouth filled with frigid water. She couldn't breathe. She kicked, thrashing to reach the surface for air.

Her head hit a rock. Or was it the bottom? She flailed, dredging up silt and sank deeper into nothingness.

Oh God. She was drowning.

An eternity passed before powerfully built arms lifted her from the black hole.

Becker.

He dragged her to the clearing and wouldn't let her go. Even after she finished coughing up half the river.

Once she could breathe, she slumped against his heaving chest. "Thanks." Several minutes later when Becker hadn't responded, she peered at him warily. "Tired of rescuing me?"

"Stop."

Lacy swallowed hard at the fierceness in his dark eyes. "You were right. I—"

"Shut-up," he snarled, grabbing her shoulders. "Just shut the hell up." His mouth dropped over hers. He consumed her in a kiss so fiery she was amazed the forest didn't ignite from the heat.

Becker kissed her until she was dizzy from the onslaught, drunk on the taste of hot, demanding male.

Then he touched her while exploring the depths of her mouth, reassuring them both she was alive and well. Stroking her hair. Face. Throat. Breasts. Between her thighs. Thorough, reverent caresses spiked with passion until her blood heated and steam poured from every pore in her body.

He broke free from her lips to drag wet kisses down the arch of her neck.

She moaned.

He tugged her shirt. "Off."

Lacy's tank top sailed to the ground followed by Becker's T-shirt. Strong hands cupped her breasts. A rough thumb rasped over her nipples.

Her pelvis sought his. She dug her nails into his brawny shoulders, anchoring herself against the storm he'd unleashed between them.

"Lacy," he breathed against her skin, "you scared me."

"I'm sorry."

"I never should've let—"

"Ssh. You talk too much. Touch me."

Impatient fingers unzipped her shorts, slipping them and her underwear off. He cupped her bare ass, picked her up and walked backward until her spine hit a tree.

Once her feet touched the ground, she reached for his zipper.

"No. My way."

One possessive hand covered her breast. Becker fastened his lips to hers. Ran his palm down the center of her body, through the moist curls. He pushed a thick finger deep inside her damp heat, groaning at the creamy wetness he found. He added another finger and pumped in and out, feathering his thumb over her throbbing clit until it flowered beneath his persistent stroking. He ate at her mouth, then those voracious kisses veered south.

He dropped to his knees and licked her quivering belly.

"Sam-"

"Say my name again."

"Sam." Her swollen sex was weeping for his attention.

"Say it while my mouth is on you." He flattened his tongue and made long, calculated sweeps from her opening to her pubic bone, avoiding the hot spot aching for his notice.

"Please—"

"Say it," he growled, retreating to scatter love bites inside her sensitive thigh.

"Sam! Sam, please—" Lacy fisted her hands in his glossy hair, jerking him back to where she burned.

"Goddamn you taste sweet." His thumbs spread her wide. Teasing tongue flicks on her clit turned precise. He settled his wicked mouth on that engorged nub and sucked. The blood in her body gathered in a pulsating rhythm and burst against his darting tongue as she shattered.

The sheer force of her climax elicited a shriek, scattering birds from the treetops. She wilted against the tree, her legs trembling, bark scoring her naked back.

Through her ragged breathing she heard his shorts hit the dirt. Felt his gentle touch on her cheek.

Lacy's mouth went dry even as moisture flooded her core from the raw hunger on Sam's face.

He boosted her against the trunk. "Wrap your legs around my waist and hold on."

She reached for the low-hanging limbs. He leaned back, aligning the tip of his cock to her molten entrance.

Locking his gaze to hers, he slammed home.

Lacy moaned at the luscious feeling of all that male hardness filling her. Her lids fluttered shut in pure bliss.

"Don't close your eyes. Watch."

"Sam-"

"Do it."

In the back of her mind she knew the adrenaline rush from life or death situations created over-inflated primal responses. Becker's domination didn't scare her; it inflamed her.

Their impassioned gazes clashed.

He kneaded her ass and lifted her torso higher. "These are the berries I want." Sam's hot mouth latched onto her nipple. He suckled strongly. "Mmm. Mmm."

The tugs of his teeth along with his greedy sex ramming into her over and over coiled her desire until she nearly burst. "Please. Sam."

Abruptly he changed the angle of his hips, driving deeper until she felt his balls slapping her ass.

"Like that, do you?"

"Yes!"

He growled. "The harder I fuck you the shorter it'll last."

"Then harder." Lacy squeezed her internal muscles as he pulled out.

Sam hissed. "You are so tight and hot it's like shoving my dick into a live electrical socket."

Her body tingled in a line from where his busy mouth seared her skin to where her breasts jiggled from his powerful thrusts. Gradually contractions built deep within her cervix. Then wham! The strength of the spasms around his thick cock caused her to scream.

In the aftermath of another orgasm that blew her mind, her breath heaved. The pulses faded to soft throbs.

He'd stopped moving inside her. His fingers dug into her hips. Sweat dripped down his face and over his clenched jaw.

"Sam? What's wrong?"

"Watch me come, like I watched you." He began to thrust, shallow, then deep, keeping those dark eyes on hers. The deep-seated strokes became piston-fast. He whispered her name, arched his back and exploded inside her with a ferocity that sent another orgasm ripping through her still quaking body.

Exhausted, sated, stunned, they clung to each other.

She whispered, "Tiimmbbberr."

His laugh rumbled against her throat.

Then Sam gifted her with the sweetest kiss of her life. She breathed him in, wreathing her arms around his neck. Being lost in the woods wasn't nearly as scary as the way this man made her feel.

Chapter Five

Becker attempted to stay upright. His cock twitched inside Lacy's snug walls as air billowed from his lungs.

She licked his earlobe. Bit down. Chills racked his system. "You gonna drag me off to your cave now?"

How should he play this? Tough? Tender? Hell, he'd never been the kind to fuck a woman senseless against a pine tree. Never been that out-of-control, in his personal or professional life. "You *want* me to drag you off?"

"Mmm. If you promise to do that to me again."

Becker gazed at her slumberous eyes, cat-like smirk, flushed skin, lips plumped from avaricious kisses. His Neanderthal tactics hadn't bothered her.

He nibbled her jawline. "Next time you don't have to practically drown to get my undivided attention."

She went rigid. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know." Becker nuzzled her ear. "I'm surprised you aren't chewing my ass for being so rough."

He held his breath, waiting for her to voice regret.

"Me too. I've never let a man take me like that—" She shuddered, a little moan escaped. "I liked it, Sam. What does that mean?"

"My little cupcake has a submissive streak."

She tipped her head back. "Really?"

"Really. It's sexy as hell." He kissed her. "It also means we're camping here."

"Why?"

"So I can do all the other uncivilized things I've been fantasizing about doing to you before we find civilization."

"Oh." She moistened her lips. "Such as?"

"Bending you over that log by the stream and taking you from behind until you scream like a mountain lion in season."

Lacy's gaze darted toward the fallen tree before her eyes widened with interest.

Becker grinned. "Much as I'm dying to stay buried inside you..." He brushed his lips over her mouth, reconnecting their desire as he disconnected their bodies.

She seemed shy, turning away to get dressed.

Impulsively he snatched her clothes. "Huh-uh. Naked. All day. My rules."

"Caveman rules, you mean."

"Yep."

"Do the rules of the jungle apply to you?"

"Yep."

"Great." Her shyness vanished as she eyed his dick. "I have a few fantasies."

One smoldering look from her and his cock went from semi-aroused to hard-as-nails. "Such as?"

"Tarzan and Jane." Lacy smiled, circling her fingers around his girth.
"Can I lay on something soft this time? That bark raked my back."

Guilt beat at him. "Let me see."

"You will. When you bend me over, rutting on me like a stag, you can kiss it and make it all better."

Becker found a flat spot where cool breezes blew off the water and spread out the sleeping bags. He lowered Lacy to the soft flannel, using his mouth and hands to render her mindless. Sucking on her fingers. Her toes. Her nipples. Her juicy sex. He drove her to the brink with gentle kisses. Fleeting touches on every inch of her trembling flesh until she begged him to stop.

Then he'd begin again.

When he entered her, oh-so-slowly, she came on a long sigh that floated away on the pine-scented wind, but boomeranged to implant in his soul.

Not to be outdone, Lacy whispered dirty suggestions in his ear. The leisurely loving became frantic. Harsh kisses and harder thrusts. His sweat-slicked skin slapped hers. His balls pulled up, blanking his mind to anything but pure animal instinct.

He grunted, slamming into her wet channel. Taking them both higher, until Lacy milked him to an orgasm so ferocious he roared like a beast.

Afterward, Lacy's sweet breath tickled the back of his neck as she curled around him.

He'd fallen into that peaceful half-asleep/half-awake state, when she asked softly, "Why did you wait for me, Sam? No one else in the hiking group noticed I was missing."

Because you piqued my interest more than any woman ever has.

Another voice whispered, Because she's your fate.

Shut-up, Mom.

Becker kept his tone light. "You were my responsibility."

"That's it?"

Why did she sound disappointed by his answer? "No." He faced her and the truth in himself. "I'd been watching you." Becker caressed her

cheek. "Wanting you. Admiring your determination even when the unknown scared the hell out of you."

"You admire that? Why?"

"Because I've been thinking about making changes in my own life."

Lacy gestured to the great outdoors. "But your life is a new exciting adventure every day."

"You'd be surprised at the mundane aspects of my day-to-day existence."

"Does having uninhibited sex in the woods count as mundane?"

"No. This is a first."

She smiled sleepily. "I'm glad." Seeming content, she snuggled closer.

He traced lazy circles on her back. "Tell me something about yourself that no one else knows."

"Besides the submissive side you've uncovered?"

"Smart-ass." He pinched her butt.

Lacy giggled. "Hmm. How about...my dream of making love in a field of wildflowers?"

Becker rolled his eyes. "You and every woman on the planet. Not good enough. Try again."

She ducked her head, delving her fingers into his scant chest hair. "It's hokey."

"Tell me.

"I want to be like my Grandma Ingrid."

"Why?"

"She's always happy. Whether she's living in the woods or in a rest home. She's never afraid and embraces change. Whereas, I'm scared of change, even when I'm hoping for a fresh start."

A fresh start with him?

Surely she wasn't one of those women who altered their life on a whim after meeting a man? But Lacy *had* agreed to undertake the hike at the urging of her ex, even with her frightening past experience. "Like moving to Wyoming to live in a shack in the boonies?"

"With a real, live mountain man like you?" Her smile didn't sugarcoat the bitter tone. "That didn't sound like an invite, Becker."

"Lacy—"

"Don't worry. I'll be on a plane to LaGuardia in another week. It's on my mind because I visited Grandma last week. She told me change is good for the soul."

"Your soul doesn't need to change."

"That's sweet. But *I* need a change. So, I made a decision. I'm going to quit my job and take Cat's offer to manage her store. Then she can concentrate on creating more of these."

Lacy lifted her arm. Her smile died when she realized the charm bracelet was gone.

"Omigod!" She leapt up, blood pounding in her ears as she ran to the river. Why hadn't she noticed it was missing?

Because Sam-the-orgasm-man made it impossible to focus on anything else.

She frantically sifted through her socks and shoes. Nothing. She scoured the rocks and mud on the bank until her feet were submerged in silt.

A large hand circled her upper arm, angrily yanking her back.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Lacy shook him off. "Looking for my bracelet."

"The hell you are."

Seeing something shiny, she bent down.

And found herself airborne. The sinewy arms circling her waist were striking against her paler bare skin. She gasped. How had she forgotten she was naked?

"Becker! Let me down."

Water splashed.

She kicked, which increased his grip. She swore, which earned her a solid slap on the ass.

He tossed her on the sleeping bag. Imprisoned her flailing arms above her head, using his body on hers as dead weight.

"Let me go!"

"Not until you're acting reasonable."

"But my bracelet—"

"Is lost."

"So I need to find it!"

"Not at the expense of your safety. You don't even know when you lost it, do you?"

"No."

"I'm responsible for you and you aren't chancing another unexpected swim in the river for a trinket. Are we clear on that?"

Sam's eyes were clouded with concern, not anger.

Finally Lacy nodded. She hid her face. Frustrated tears leaked out. She knew Sam was right. But dammit, that bracelet wasn't a trinket. It'd meant something to her. Something he didn't understand.

Sam tenderly kissed the top of her head, folded her in his arms and let her bawl.

When the crying jag ended, he handed her a canteen.

She took a tiny sip.

"Drink more," he demanded.

"No. I'm hungry and confused, not thirsty. I'm—" Lacy started sobbing again.

"Ssh. You're just tired."

She felt like an idiot for many reasons, but mostly for needing Sam to stick around. "You'll—"

"Be right here."

"Okay." Before she drifted off, she whispered, "Since I lost the bracelet, that means I'm doomed to repeat past mistakes, doesn't it?"

Sam stroked her hair. "Don't worry. Just rest."

a d

While Lacy dozed, Becker dressed and dragged deadfall for the fire. Two days had passed. They were out of food. Hiking out tomorrow until they reached something resembling civilization was a must. Dave might've already sent out a search team.

He glanced at Lacy. Possession rolled through him like a hot wind. They'd created a connection deeper than phenomenal sex. Would their lives be simpler if he *could* cart her off into the woods and keep her to himself forever?

Nice fantasy. He couldn't even feed or protect her for the short-term. Speaking of...why hadn't Lacy demanded that he hunt or fish to fill their rumbling bellies?

Did Lacy suspect he wasn't an outdoorsman, but a suit-and-tie wearing workaholic? Since it appeared she'd given him her blind trust, how would she react when she found out he'd deceived her?

She'd be upset. He never wanted to see hurt in her big blue eyes.

He picked up her socks and shoes. Her shorts. He grabbed her shirt and tried to turn it right-side-out. Something was caught on the inside and he gently shook. Charms jingled as the missing bracelet fell from inside the shirt and hit the dirt.

Becker froze. Thank God. Now maybe she'd lose the forlorn look. Maybe she'd get inventive in the naughty ways she'd show her gratitude that he'd found it.

But what if...he didn't hand it over? What if finding her talisman was his sign that the changes he'd been searching for started with her? His mother claimed destiny and blind faith were intertwined. Alone the fragile threads could snap. Together they were a steel cable. He fingered the twisted silver chain.

Romantic nonsense? Or the leap of faith he'd been lacking?

Destiny aside, he needed a plan. How could he convince her these past days meant more than a random romp in the woods?

It hit him. Dave had Lacy's address on file. After she returned to Manhattan, Becker could show up at her place, bracelet in hand. Confess his true "city slicker" identity. They could start fresh. Go out for a latte or something.

Right. Like a civilized coffee date would cut it after screwing like wild animals in the forest.

What to do?

Wait, which he was lousy at. He shoved the bracelet in his backpack for the time-being and hoped he hadn't already screwed this up.

a d

Half a protein bar didn't slake Lacy's hunger. Sam hadn't complained about the lack of food. He hadn't said much either.

There were plenty more interesting things to do besides talk.

Did she have the guts to make the first move?

The fire crackled. Sam caught her leering as he swiped a damp bandana over his face. "What?"

Lacy swallowed the fear that surly Becker had returned and would rebuff her. "I watched you cleaning up in the stream yesterday."

"You did? Why?"

"Duh. Because you were half-naked."

He grinned.

"I wanted so bad to—"

"To what?"

"Touch you."

"Why didn't you?"

"You didn't like me much."

He lifted a brow. "What's stopping you now?"

She seized the dare and gave him a once-over. "Your clothes."

Sam stood. Shed his shorts and shirt in a flash.

The red glow from the fire threw shadows over his sculpted form, making him appear cast from bronze. Her mouth watered. Slinging the canteen over her shoulder, she eliminated the distance between them.

Lacy placed her hands on his chest. Smoothed her palms over his chiseled pecs. "Yum." She took his flat nipple in her mouth, sucking until it puckered on her tongue. Then she gradually slid her hands down his center. His flat belly quivered from her touch, giving her an incredible sense of power.

As she kissed a path to his neglected nipple, she urged his body against hers by grabbing his muscular ass. Sam's erection fit perfectly in the cradle of her hips. She ground into him.

His head fell back, but his heated gaze remained on hers.

She circled his impressive shaft and pumped from root to tip.

Sam hissed when she flicked her tongue over the hard nipple in time with her thumb sweeping across the weeping tip of his cock.

Lacy nibbled the column of his throat, swirling damp kisses up to his ear where she blew softly.

Sam moaned.

"You want my mouth on you?"

"God yes."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Stand still and close your eyes."

Her heart raced as he obeyed. She retreated, uncapped the canteen and dumped cold water on his straining cock.

He jumped. "Jesus—"

She dropped to her knees, sucking his water-cooled dick deep into her warm mouth.

"Christ!"

Lacy's teeth scraped the length as she slowly released the silky hardness. Mmm. He tasted clean. Musky. Her sex grew wet, her thighs sticky as she tightened her lips around the thick, purple head, licking the glans with her curled tongue.

Sam clutched her hair.

She made soft, passionate noises as he thrust in and out of her eager mouth.

"Say my name," she demanded before taking him deep again.

"Lacy."

She increased the rhythm, hollowing her cheeks, gripping him in her hand as she sucked his rod to the back of her throat.

"Say it again when you're as far in as you can go."

"Goddammit—"

"Say it!" Her hand pumped rapidly, the wetness from her mouth made the faster pace easy as she sucked.

"Lacy! Enough!" he bellowed.

Sam hauled her up and carried her to the sleeping bag.

"What? Didn't you like it?"

"Jesus? Are you kidding? I loved it."

"But I wanted to—"

"Another time, okay?" He crawled on her, a male animal on the prowl.

"I want you. I'm finding I want things with you I've never wanted."

Lacy's heart slipped.

Her clothes vanished. Sam stretched out and lifted her over his bronzed body so she straddled him. "Ride me."

Her silken hair tantalized his chest as she leaned forward and angled her hips. His shaft slipped in and they groaned simultaneously. Her hands clutched his shoulders; she moved in long, sensuous strokes.

Sam let her control the pace. His hungry mouth suckled her nipples as his fingers stroked her clit. She came immediately. Then he whispered sweet words across her passion-dampened flesh until she was lost to anything but the feel, the sound and the taste of him. Of Sam.

When neither could hold back, Lacy rocked her pelvis at the same time Sam fixed his lips to hers in a bone-melting kiss. Together they went spiraling into the abyss of pleasure.

Later, after the embers died, Lacy said, "What about the log?"

"There's still a few hours until sunrise." Sam tugged her closer and murmured, "We have to find our way out tomorrow."

"I know. I'd rather stay like this."

"Me too, cupcake. Sleep now. We'll talk later."

Chapter Six

Lacy yawned and poked Sam. "It's dawn."

He groaned. "I'm tired."

"Your fault, you fiend." Her insides liquefied as she remembered Sam waking her with ravenous kisses. Coaxing her to the log like some mythological god to ravish her in the moonlight. It'd been hedonistic, magical and perfect.

"Mmm. Was worth it. C'mere. I like waking up with you."

"You do?"

"Mmm-hmm."

She scooted away from him and the temptation to put faith in words he'd uttered when he was half-asleep. "Move it, Becker."

"Slave driver."

Once they'd packed up, Lacy stared at the swath of clear water disappearing around a steep curve.

"What?" Sam asked.

"I think we should follow the river today. There's bound to be fishermen or others close by."

"Okay."

Why didn't Sam argue and remind her he was in charge? Or discount her suggestion?

Because he's different from any man you've known and he trusts you.

"Anxious to get back?"

Sam crouched to fill his canteen. "Yes."

He appeared to be dealing with their upcoming separation much better than she.

They talked about everything and nothing on their journey through swampy spots and around boulders. As the hours passed her steps dragged and his pace increased.

"Sam, wait. I need to catch my breath." Lacy rested her backside on a rock.

"What's the first thing you'll do when we get back?"

"Throw these boots away. You?"

"Eat a steak the size of Wyoming." He stalked toward her with an unmistakable gleam in his eyes. "Will you have dinner with me?"

She studied his face. "Just as long as snake isn't on the menu. But we—"

"We'll talk later. Give me this mouth. God. I crave the taste of you."

These beautiful, sensual kisses chock-full of promise didn't happen every day. Her heart beat crazily. His familiar scent, the certainty of his mouth moving on hers, the heat of his body, inundated her and felt...right.

Just as her blood reached the boiling point, Sam ripped his mouth away. "Did you hear that?"

"Probably a deer."

"No. Listen."

Then she heard it. A sputtering motor.

"You were right to have us follow the river. Come on." Becker raced toward the sound.

Her energy level was rock-bottom. By the time she reached the source, a humble aluminum fishing boat nestled in the rushes along the shore. Sam and a wrinkle-faced fisherman were deep in conversation.

"Hey! There's your missus."

Sam didn't correct the old man. "Lacy, this is Jeb. He says we're only seven miles upstream from the lodge."

"The lodge we started out from five days ago?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? Anyway, Jeb's got cell service and I've left a message for my partner Dave to meet us there. We'll be docking within an hour. Isn't it great?"

"Yeah. Super."

His eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Just hungry. And tired." And heartsick at the thought of saying goodbye to you.

Sam stepped closer, shielding her from Jeb. "Everything will work out."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Fate."

"B-b-ut. You don't believe in that crap."

"Yes I do."

"Since when?"

"Since the moment I set eyes on you. I didn't want to believe it or admit what it means because it scares me. And proves my mother was right."

Lacy was stunned into silence.

The boat engine whined. Jeb shouted, "Let's get you folks back where you belong."

Sam helped her aboard the narrow boat. He sat in the rear seat, Lacy in the middle. Jeb steered the craft into the center of the river and offered Lacy a package of jerky. She ate it, but she might've been chewing bark her mouth was so dry.

Luckily the spectacular scenery kept her distracted from her tangled emotions. Sam didn't speak as they putted down the twisty river. He clasped her hand, absentmindedly stroking his thumb over her knuckles.

Black-tailed hawks dove into the silvery water, spearing fish with sharp beaks, then soaring off into the cloudless blue sky to enjoy their meal.

Seemed they'd been trolling for hours when Sam's breath tickled the back of her neck. "Lacy?"

"Hmm?"

"Before we get back, I have to admit I haven't been completely honest."

A fission of fear crawled up her spine. Followed by visions of a rustic cabin in the woods, a pregnant wife and little tykes running out to greet "Daddy".

Wrong image. She didn't know everything about Sam Becker, but her heart knew he wasn't the type of man who'd cheat. Or share. He'd be loyal and demand the same from his mate. Hadn't he shown her his protective and possessive streak ran as wide as this river? "What?"

"I'm not who you think I am. I—"

The engine revved loudly, cutting off his declaration. Jeb swerved around a floating log, nearly tossing them overboard. He yelled, "I'll be. Your party's already waitin' for ya!"

Lacy and Sam looked at each other then at the wooden dock in a sheltered cove.

Five horses and five men waited. Dave, the main guide, Clarence, the cook...and her ex-boyfriend Ross, plus Ross's two smarmy friends.

Great. Ross had tagged along. No. He'd probably insisted on going along hoping to witness her humiliation.

Sam clutched her hand. "What?"

She didn't want Sam's pity. Besides she was no longer Lacy Buchanan, city mouse—she was Lacy Buchanan, outdoor adventuress.

Dave shouted, "You all right?"

"We're fine," Sam said.

Jeb helped her off the boat. Sam stuck to her side like pinesap.

Ross, that self-important asshole, stepped in front of Dave before Dave spoke again.

"Should've figured you were the one who'd screwed this up, Lacy. I'm surprised you went through with the hike after I dumped you."

"Hah! I dumped you. I'm surprised *you're* here. Isn't this the time of month when you get your back hair waxed?"

His face turned cherry-red. "Still got a smart mouth. This poor schmuck got stuck with you?" He gave Sam a pitying look. "I would've left her there as wolf bait."

Lacy started to retort, but Sam draped his arm over her shoulder. "We were stuck together a couple of times, but it was completely consensual, right, cupcake?"

She froze.

"Or should I say sensual," he amended, nuzzling her crown with his cheek.

It was quiet enough to hear a pine needle drop.

"You...and s-she..." Ross sputtered and pointed to Dave. "H-he said you were lost without supplies."

"Technically, we were lost after an accident with the compass. We managed to entertain ourselves...food wasn't a big priority." The sexual heat in Sam's eyes made her thighs tingle. "But our delay getting back to base camp was my fault."

"Your fault?"

"Mm-hmm." Sam brushed kisses across her temple. "I wanted Lacy all to myself."

Her back snapped straight. He didn't have to lie for her. Pretend he felt more than he really did. "But Sam—"

"Who are you anyway?" Ross demanded.

"Sam Becker," Dave supplied. "He's my cousin and business partner."

Ross' jaw went slack. "Partner? I thought you said your partner was some big time stockbroker from New York City?"

"Yep. He is. They're one in the same."

Lacy's eyes went wide.

"Trust me. I'll explain everything later," Sam whispered to her, praying she didn't bolt before giving him a chance.

"So you're telling me this hiking outfit left two city dwellers alone in the woods? For three days?" Ross sneered. "When word of this gets out, you might as well close-up shop. Nobody will trust you. I sure don't."

"Wait a minute—"

Ignoring Dave, Ross directed his comments to Sam. "How did you find a way out without a GPS?"

"I didn't, Lacy did. She has great instincts. We'd still be wandering around in the trees if not for her."

Ross flashed his teeth. "Must be hard on your ego to realize a powder-puff like her is a better outdoorsman than you."

"No, but it'll be hard on your ego if I let Lacy kick your pansy ass in front of your buddies, like she wants to." Sam mock-whispered, "I saw what she did to a rattlesnake. It was ugly. I wouldn't stick around for a personal demonstration if I were you."

Ross looked torn—act macho or save face. He cleared his throat. "Well, I don't care. I want my money back."

"Fair enough." Becker motioned to the cook. "Clarence, take these guys back to the office. Dave will be along to write him a refund check. Good luck finding another outfitter, Ross."

Ross opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it. He and the two stooges scrambled on their horses and trailed behind Clarence into the forest.

"I'm glad they're gone," Dave said. "Okay. 'Fess up, cuz. What really happened out there?"

"Later. Right now Lacy and I need to clear up a few things."

Dave nodded and moved to tend the horses.

Lacy held up a hand, stopping his explanation. "Thank you for making me seem tough and capable in front of Ross."

"You are tough and capable."

"That means a lot coming from a fellow New Yorker. Bet you're having a big laugh about pulling one over on me."

"Stop thinking I'm secretly laughing at you."

"Then why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"Because you gave me your trust. You made me feel I could protect you. I wanted prove to you and to myself that your faith wasn't misplaced."

"So that's why you assured me 'everything would work out' and spouted that speech about fate?"

"Not entirely." Becker reached into the pocket of his backpack, pulling out her missing charm bracelet. "I believe in fate because of this."

Lacy gasped.

"When I found it, I realized not only had fate led me to it, fate had led me to you."

"But-"

"Let me finish. Yes, I'd planned on dropping by your apartment with the bracelet and then confessing the truth. I thought we could have a fresh start. But I don't want to start over with you, Lacy. I want to go forward on what we've already built together." He let his heart show in his eyes. "The last three days have been the most amazing and enlightening of my life. I don't want this to end."

"Really?"

"Really." He fastened the bracelet, tenderly kissing the inside of her wrist up to her elbow.

"Oh, Sam. I'd hoped you felt it. I was afraid you'd blame this strong connection because we had no choice but to rely on each other."

"True. The sex is pretty rocking too. But somewhere between the name-calling, the snake scare and sharing secrets by firelight, I fell hard for you."

Lacy blushed.

It charmed the hell out of him. If he had his way, she'd spend the next fifty years charming and exasperating him. "What do you say we get out of here?"

She nodded.

Dave waited in the clearing, probably making sure they didn't get lost again.

"You afraid of horses?" Becker asked after he mounted.

"I'm not afraid of anything when I'm with you."

God. He adored this woman.

Lacy grabbed his hand. He hauled her in front of him on the saddle, nuzzled the side of her neck, losing himself in her sweet scent and the sense of rightness of having her in his arms.

Becker yelled to Dave, "Call Clarence and have him send our things to the honeymoon suite in the Lodge."

"Honeymoon suite?" Dave repeated. "Something you wanna tell me, cuz?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

Lacy relaxed against his chest. "Riding off into the sunset with you is much more romantic than making love in a field of wildflowers."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"Probably snakes in the flowers anyway."

"True."

After awhile Sam asked, "Maybe on our next outdoor adventure we can find a bed of wildflowers?"

"Definitely next time."

"Although, I can't wait to make love to you in a real bed."

She sighed dreamily.

The horse meandered down the trail, content as his riders.

Finally Lacy spoke. "You really didn't mind being lost in the woods with me?"

"I was lost, Lacy, long before we entered the woods. It was you who found me."

"You sure talk romantic for a stockbroker."

"I liked it better when you thought I was a wild man."

She looked up at him and smiled. "Can't you make this horse go any faster, my wild mountain man?"

He grinned. "Hang on, cupcake."

About the Author

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Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

© 2006 Cassandra Kane

A race against time to save a planet—will the price be too heavy to pay?

Captain Tirana Albasta leads the last scouting mission to mystery planet Samhain, which has already swallowed two previous missions and a starship full of New Wiccan colonists, Lalith's People.

Determined to keep the planet from UA Special Forces' harsh military control, Tirana finds much more than she expected. For the descendants of Lalith's People have split into two separate societies—the anti-magic Priests and the magical True People—and she has just been caught in the crossfire.

Complicating matters is her attraction to Loren, the broodingly handsome True People witch who ignites passions she has never before experienced, and who just might make leaving Samhain impossible in more ways than one...

Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

© 2006 Mackenzie McKade

Legacy bonds them—betrayal will test them—but, love and a little bit of magic will keep them together.

Gifted with both Berserka and Wicce heritage, Sabine wonders which legacy will determine her fate. A path of freedom and independence? Or will the Berserka curse tie her to one man, not of her choosing?

After his father's death, Conall returns to Scotland to take his rightful place as chieftain. Fate steps in and unleashes his hot-blooded lust on one obstinate woman resolved on defying destiny.

A forced marriage binds them. Desire and their animalistic nature draw them together. But someone is threatening to destroy the fiery love growing between them. Salt in the water, poison in the wine has everyone looking askew at Sabine, including her husband.

When the clan demands Sabine's death, Conall must choose between family and the woman he loves.

Beginnings: Babe in Woods

© 2006 Lorelei James

Animal attraction takes on a whole new meaning...

Manhattanite Lacy Buchanan is out to prove she's a tough cookie by signing up for a survivalist hiking trip in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The last thing she expected was to get lost, forcing her to spend the rest of the hike alone with surly, too-sexy mountain man, Becker, who blames her entirely for their predicament. After Becker saves her from a rattlesnake, and gently calms her fears, Lacy feels lucky to be in his experienced hands.

But Sam Becker isn't really a hiking expert. He's strictly the moneyman in Back To Nature Guided Hiking Tours and a last minute, temporary fill-in guide. He can't believe his bad luck when his reluctant charge—a mouthy, but hot, blonde bombshell—pulverizes their only compass, destroying their chances of following the coordinates to base camp. Yet something about Lacy's trusting nature makes him want fulfill her idea he's her rugged hero.

As Sam and Lacy attempt to find a way out of the treacherous mountain passes, their natural instincts take them...farther away from civilized behavior and straight into the mating calls of the wild.

Beginnings: Night Music

© 2006 Charlene Teglia

When death marked her, he offered her rebirth...

Meghan Davies has been living a dream as the bass player for the allfemale hit rock band, The Sirens. But the dream becomes a nightmare with the discovery that cancer, undetected and now too far gone, heralds the end of everything.

Romney Kearns has been watching the sharp-tongued, flame haired woman from afar, wanting, but never approaching because he can offer her nothing but death.

When he discovers that death already has her marked, he sets out on All Hallow's Eve to seduce her, claim her, and make her willing to accept his dark offer. An alternative. Not life as she's known it, but a kind of rebirth. Eternity with him and immortality for her to make night music.

Beginnings: Ritual Love

© 2006 Kate Davies

A lost woman. A hunted man. On a night of forbidden rituals, the veil between past and present lifts—and their worlds will never be the same.

Scientist Moira Sinclair doesn't believe in magic. Or at least she hasn't since childhood. She's only come to Iona in remembrance of her long-deceased grandmother, the last person who encouraged her fanciful side. But now she's stumbled onto a secret druid ritual—and into another time.

Aedan Ap Crannog is furious to discover an outsider spying on their sacred, banned Samhain rites. With her strange garb and stranger mannerisms, Moira is unlike any woman he's ever known. But she could cause trouble for him and the people who follow him in the ancient ways. To prevent her from sounding the alarm, he takes her captive, hiding her in the labyrinth of caves along the far shore.

Despite their differences, sparks burn between them as brightly as the Samhain bonfire. Now captive and captor must find a way to bridge the centuries before the magic disappears with the dawn...

Beginnings: The Last Prophecy © 2006 Jennie Andrus

Hours before being murdered Maddy gives her last prophecy—her sister's death and salvation.

The MacElwain sisters had always been different. In search of a "normal" life, Lottie did her best to ignore her crazy sister, until Maddy predicts Lottie's death. Suddenly Maddy is dead and Lottie has a very short shelf life and, according to Maddy, she's going to need to find a moose if she wants to survive. Unfortunately, moose aren't too plentiful in downtown Toronto.

Not willing to trust her life to an animal, Lottie runs to the shores of Newfoundland, where danger, love and acceptance wait for her to fulfill the last prophecy of Mad Maddy MacElwain

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