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Fire on the Mountain

TOP SHELF

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Dedication

For the MU, Isabel, Meg, and Dee, who shared the struggle; Jared, for the vision; and above all, for Jo, who *believed*.

Chapter One

“Damn it! I didn’t think the tree was going to burn!” Kurt looked up from his shoveling to examine the lodgepole pine at the edge of the woods. It had been smoking, but now flames danced on the dead branches low on the trunk.

“Stand back, I’ll get it.” I took hard swings at the tree’s trunk with my long-handled axe, hacking away at the side farthest from the small blaze we’d spent the last few hours putting out. The chips flew with each bite of my blade -- Kurt kept a careful eye on my progress as he threw more dirt on the smoldering remains of the fire. “Better back off. I think it’s ready to come down.” I wasn’t bothering to take the tree down neatly. Time was the bigger concern.

“Push!”

Kurt and I braced our heavy gloves against the bark, cracking the unchopped part of the trunk, toppling the thirty-foot high pine to the ground, away from the other trees. It would not take its companions with it to a fiery end.

The tree fell onto ground already scorched and disturbed. We’d shoveled dirt onto burning mountain mahogany and grasses for the last couple of hours, trying to contain the fire before it went from heat and smoke to an open blaze. Between digging a fire break and trying to deal with the burning material, it had been a busy few hours. The tree was the last thing still on fire -- putting it out would mean the end of the hardest of the labor. A few minutes of brisk whacking took the crown of the tree off, letting us pull unburned wood away from the danger zone.

“So, rookie, what would you rather put out: a lightning fire or a human-caused fire?” Kurt retreated to the shade of the remaining pines to catch his breath.

“Whichever smolders more and burns less.” I pulled off my helmet to wipe my forehead. The canteen at my side flapped loosely -- I unscrewed the stopper and tipped it to my mouth anyway for the last few drops of water. There was more drinking water back in the truck, but I’d have to hike for it. Kurt took a long swig from his canteen and offered me the rest. The warm, tinny water was delicious.

We had left the medium-duty tanker on the one-lane service road that was the only sort of road through most of the Uncomphagre National Forest, because we couldn’t get it through the trees to the burn area. Half the forest was miles from roads and had to be patrolled from horseback. The truck got left behind a lot anyway. We had to take what we needed from the equipment bins on the sides and do without the water if we had to hike too far back.

“Yeah, lucky you, that’s lightning fires usually, and they outnumber human fires by a wide margin around here.” Kurt waved me to follow him to some branches that were emitting puffs of smoke. “What do you think the score is?”

“Don’t know.” I threw shovelfuls of dirt at the felled tree alongside him. “The other five teams all had one or two fires each when we went into town last, and we haven’t been called to respond to one of their blazes.” I stomped a smoking branch with the heavy sole of my boot.

“And we haven’t had to call anyone in for one of ours. Might be a tie, or we might be winning with three.” He stepped back from the burn and unfastened his jacket. “The wind is down. Let’s squirt a hundred gallons at it -- it’s out and it can damn well stay out.” We gathered up the shovels and axes and dragged them back to the tanker. More often than not, we’d starve a fire into submission rather than extinguishing it with water in the dry, windy Rocky Mountains.

We’d caught this fire early, still in the “thinking about being a forest fire” stage. It was far enough from the road that trying to put it out with just the water we carried with us in the tank on the back of the truck was hopeless -- until the wind dropped, we couldn’t have shot it without losing three quarters of the spray. The loss wouldn’t have mattered that much if we’d been close enough to a pond or stream to stick the intake nozzle in. Then we could have sucked the stream up and put it to good use without using up water we might need later that day. But no, the fire was far enough from the road and through the trees that we were lucky to have seen it at all, so we fought it the old fashioned way: with dirt, muscle, and cuss words.

Today we won. Losing a battle with fire out here could mean a hundred acres burned, or a thousand, and if it went really bad, it would be a disaster, like the Storm King fire. Firefighters had died fighting that one, men and women like us who loved the wilderness and worked to protect it. I hadn’t known any of them personally, but our boss and some of our co-workers had, and they still grieved. The mistakes that happened at Storm King got pounded into us, to make us better rangers, to make us more effective firefighters. All this was new enough to me that the responsibility for the land weighed like a stone in my gut. I was glad not to be alone in the mountains, for that and a lot of other reasons -- Kurt and I made a good team.

Together we dragged the hose out to its full hundred fifty feet through the trees into a little clearing. Kurt jogged back to hit the pump, and I braced myself for the hose going stiff and ornery. The nozzle bucked in my hands as I struggled to aim the stream of water toward the fire -- the water surging through the tube made it hard to control. I had to point it up and over the few trees between me and the burn site, making me glad we’d waited to do it until the wind was down. Kurt returned and steadied the hose from behind me. Four hands could accurately drop the water on the fire site, turning it from a potential disaster into soggy ash.

Together we pumped the water at the forest, and knowing my partner was behind me, helping me, made me feel just a little better. Fire was a scary thing, damned near alive, but dangerous, mindless, and able to whup a lone man. The two of us, well, that was another matter, today.

“Think that’s about a hundred gallons, Kurt?” I’d been trying to estimate the flow just by time passing.

“Just about, Jake. Point it up,” he suggested from behind me, “and hang on tight, I’m letting go.”

Warned, I was ready for the jolt in the hose when he let go. I wasn’t ready for him to go sprinting out into the private rainstorm I was making, but he’d left his heavy, fire-resistant clothing and helmet back at the truck when he’d gone to start the pump. Now he was standing in jeans and boots and nothing else, face up to the spray. The water came down on his upturned face, tilted to

catch the arcing wetness, his mouth open and eyes closed, arms wide.

The droplets came down on him as he laughed and enjoyed the impromptu shower. The day was warm and the work had been hot, and now he turned from side to side to cool himself. Little rivers ran down his tightly muscled chest and arms and soaked his short, blond hair but couldn't make it lie down. Instead, the drops caught the sun, flashing the light back at me, and it was suddenly hard to breathe.

The fire in the woods was out. But now there was a fire in me, and it was already out of control.

Chapter Two

“You want a turn?” he asked, and I shook my head. Hell, yes, I wanted a turn to pull this heavy coat off, shed the heavy pants, and wash off some of the sweat, but if I did that here and now, Kurt would know what was going through my mind. My body would show him, and I wasn’t going to let that happen.

We had to work together for another five months. We’d have to spend time alone in the truck as we patrolled the forest, and we had a tiny cabin that we shared. A team like ours had to be together a lot, to trust each other a lot, and how the hell was Kurt going to trust me if he knew how much I wanted him?

“I’ll dunk in the lake when we get back,” I said, and handed the nozzle to him. Trudging back to the truck let me clear a little of the lust and surprise out of my head, and think about what had just happened while I cut the pump and started to haul the hose back in.

I did get out of the heavy protective gear first, throwing the jacket and pants into the cargo bin and retrieving my bush hat to keep the sun off my head as I worked. The labor of coiling the hose might push down the hunger I was feeling, or at least let this throbbing erection calm down. Doing something about it wasn’t going to happen, and I had to get back under control.

Squishing the water out of the hose made the rigid thing go soft and limp, which was more than was happening for me. I couldn’t stop thinking of how Kurt looked in the sun, wet, glistening, and happy, just totally at ease to be standing half naked on a Colorado mountaintop.

I’d noticed that he was a good-looking guy when we’d met -- it was hard not to. It just hadn’t hit me like a ton of bricks that he was lean and buff, tanned and fit from working outdoors. And I’d managed to go three weeks without really, really looking at him, because I was afraid that just this thing would happen. Watching him stand in the water falling out of the sky made it impossible to ignore, and the rivulets running over his face and down his chest only outlined the handsome features and the hard body until I couldn’t not look at him any more.

Think about heaving the hose, think about anything besides your partner with no T-shirt on laughing in the spray. I yanked savagely on the hose as I coiled it and tried to ignore Kurt moving around the truck, stowing equipment and radioing in the details to headquarters. It would be at least a half hour ride back to the cabin and the little lake next to it. I’d have to jump in the lake when we got there -- it would be more effective than a cold shower, which I needed, badly.

At least I could shift my hard on to the least conspicuous position before going around to the side of the truck. The loose utility pants were my only friend today, and even they wouldn’t be enough help. My hard on was never inconspicuous, I was just too big for that, but I couldn’t let Kurt know that I was hard. I thought about fires and dentists and how much it had hurt when the damned camp cot pinched my hand this morning, but it wasn’t until I got to the thought of eating my own cooking that I finally calmed down enough to risk getting in the truck with Kurt.

He nearly undid it all, though, as he mopped his face with his shirt before shrugging back into it. The dusty forest green T-shirt that was our working uniform at least covered up his chest. I caught the sight out of the corner of my eye as I tried to look at something on the other side of the valley instead.

“You okay, Jake?” he asked, and I grunted something back about “yeah, sure, fine.” Telling the truth here was out of the question, for sure. I’d come to Colorado to work outdoors, but I was still stuck in the closet. I hadn’t planned to come out to anyone here, and I sure hadn’t planned on having to spend six months with the walking temptation named Kurt Carlson.

I tried to keep up my end of the conversation on the way back to the cabin, because tired or not, Kurt wanted to talk. He was feeling jazzed from the fire and went on and on about it, and how he’d put out similar fires in the last two years. Then he wanted to quiz me. “Did we follow the Ten Standard Fire Orders?”

“I think so, as much as we could maintain organizational control with just the two of us. It’s not like we could post lookouts, exactly.” I’d learned the standard orders in orientation. “We had escape routes, we knew the weather conditions, knew what the fire was doing and what it could be expected to do under current conditions, we thought clearly, acted decisively, and fought aggressively.”

“You missed a couple,” he prompted.

“Some of your instructions weren’t too clear.”

“What was unclear about ‘Push’?” he wanted to know.

I thumped his arm -- maybe he’d stop.

“Okay, did we have any Watch Out situations? You’ve got eighteen choices.”

“No, unless you felt like taking a nap near the fire line and didn’t mention it. Aren’t you taking this mentor role a little too seriously?” I was really ready for him to stop: I couldn’t think clearly enough to play Twenty Questions about fires just now.

“It’s your life and mine, Jake.” He launched into a discussion of why we’d done what we’d done, and I just listened to him, because when he got to the technical bits about crown fires and burnovers, responses weren’t really required.

Besides, I might learn something, and I even managed to ask a good question or two.

“You know, Jake, they teach us all about this stuff, so when the worst happens, we’re prepared. But they can’t possibly teach us what we really need for this job,” Kurt mused, as we turned down the fire road that led to our cabin.

“What’s that?”

“It’s how to be at ease in our own heads so we can do the patrolling without going nuts.”

Please don't mention nuts, I thought. Mine were going to be aching. "Yeah," I managed to answer. "We might go days just patrolling, which would be good, but yeah, it's a lot of peace and quiet between the active parts." It was very peaceful in the mountains. The only people we'd seen all day were each other and a guy on a Harley Fat Boy with a sleeping bag and some other gear on the back, zipping down one of the roads and scaring the wildlife with the noise.

Kurt pulled up next to the cabin and turned to me. "You don't seem too at ease right now. The fire bothering you?"

He'd noticed. It was too much to hope that a guy who made his living by noticing things would not notice that I wasn't my usual self.

Except, I was. I was stuffing down everything like I always did. I'd stuffed down my desire for men all my life, and I was going to stuff down the desire I'd felt for Kurt. We had to get along for a long time, and I was not going to screw that up by telling him that he aroused me like no one else in the world. It was just harder to stuff it all down with him turned in the seat of the truck to look at me with serious blue eyes.

"No, it isn't." That much was the truth. Then I had an inspiration. "I'm trying to figure out what I can make for dinner without poisoning you."

"Oh, no. It is your night to cook," he groaned.

I am not actually a bad cook, and his remarks irritated me. It's just that I learned to cook with civilized things like stoves, refrigerators, and running water. The little amenities. Spices, even. I've been feeding myself for years and doing just fine. The only things I'd cooked over flames were steaks. But when all the supplies have to be kept in a bear box, running water means running over to the well head (drinking the lake water is a bad idea, giardia is no fun) and the nearest refrigerator is in someone else's house miles away, it changes things. Okay, I had a propane stove to work with, two pots, and a can opener. The propane stove was really responsive, but I'd taken my attention off it at the wrong moment and I was still getting grief about the burnt beans.

The can opener got a lot of workout. Kurt kept gloating over having gotten a new one this year, with a nice sharp wheel and a crank that turned without a struggle. We needed to go into town to restock, so the can opener was going to be busy tonight. "I was thinking Spam in a brown sugar sauce and some of those canned peas."

"Oh, no. No, no, no." He looked faintly queasy. "If those peas were that good, the guys would have eaten them last year and not left them for us."

"Okay, the peas suck, but there isn't anything else green in the bear box. Wish there was a salad in there. Or a watermelon." My teeth suddenly ached for something cold and crisp. "But you made that last week and it was okay."

"We had butter last week, and it wasn't peas." Kurt looked thoughtful now, and then he smiled broadly. Funny, I hadn't noticed the dimple near the right corner of his mouth before. "I have a better idea. I'll take your turn to cook, and you take the truck down to the lake and refill the tank."

I could get my chilly dip, top off the tank, and maybe clear my head at the same time. At the very least I'd be more than two feet away from Kurt, not close enough to reach over and touch that dimple. I wanted to touch that dimple in the worst way. "It's a deal."

Chapter Three

When Kurt jumped out of the truck, I watched him go into the cabin before I slid over and threw the truck back into gear. I wasn't too sure who'd gotten the better end of the deal, because he really hated taking the truck down to the water. There was a road through the trees, but it was narrow and there wasn't a good place to turn around, so getting the intake hose into the lake meant going down that road backward. He could do it, but he did it by the Braille system, which was why the truck was so scratched up. I'd nearly busted a gut laughing, and he'd gotten irritated and snarled at me to try it. He had abandoned the task to me when it was clear that I could slither the big truck down that road backward without a problem.

The road had been heavily shored up with rocks where the truck was supposed to back up to the water, to prevent erosion and tire tracks, but the rest of the lakeside was untouched. The trees came all the way to the water in a few places. One was tall and sturdy enough to hang a Tarzan rope on. There was a rim of long grass around most of it, but no real beach, unless the rocky section leading into the water by the truck ramp counted. The lake was only about sixty yards across, and deep, a beautiful blue jewel set into the mountains. A little stream fed the lake with snowmelt -- deer liked to come down to the water there. I'd spent evenings here with a fishing rod, watching the stars come out. The stars don't look like that in the city, where there are too many competing lights. In the wilderness, it's like it must have been thousands of years ago, when men started naming the constellations. I loved the lake; it was one of the great joys of being out here.

Now I could drop the intake hose into the water, start the pump, and take my clothes off. There was no line of sight between the little shore and the cabin, the trees were too thick, so I had some privacy to get wet. I needed it, because I'd made the mistake of remembering the way Kurt looked with the streams of water running over his bare chest and shoulders, the glistening droplets in his hair, and the way he smiled with his lips parted and his eyes closed as the cool water fell on his upturned face. I wondered if he looked like that in bed, then I was hard again.

I was hard and naked and I had two choices. I could throw myself into a snow-fed lake and cool my lust by force, or I could take matters in hand and enjoy myself first, and then throw myself in the lake to get clean. Guess which one I chose.

It was enough to imagine running my tongue over his collarbone and licking up the water there, and then kissing my way over his neck to suck up more. The thought of putting my mouth to his skin made me put my hand on my cock, and I imagined some more while I stroked. His brown nipples would need kissing and licking, too, making me wonder how hard I'd need to suck to pull one into my mouth. Inexperience sucked, but imagination made up for it, and at least I knew what I was doing with myself. I wouldn't last long, not the way I was thinking of pulling Kurt close and pressing my own bare chest against his wet body. When I thought of him putting that smiling mouth onto my skin, I came, and it nearly buckled my knees.

When I could move again, I checked the gauge on the truck. It needed to point to five hundred gallons, and it wasn't there yet. In a few more minutes I'd need to cut the pump, but I had time to

jump into the cold water. I needed to clear my head if I was going to go back to the cabin and not act guilty. Scrubbing myself with my hands, I tried to get as much smoke and sweat off as I could without soap.

The camp shower that we had set up by the cabin worked pretty well -- the cistern that we filled from the well let the water warm in the sun. Kurt might be taking a relatively warm -- as in twenty-five degrees warmer than the lake, but thirty degrees colder than a water heater -- shower even now. A truly hot shower was a luxury for when we stopped by headquarters, or on the occasions we swung by Rendezvous Lake Lodge, where we were welcomed as friends.

Warm water was for wusses and guys who weren't trying to clear a raging case of lust. I ducked completely below the surface again and came up shivering. The cold water made me gasp and tingle -- it felt like my balls were trying to crawl back up into my body before they froze off.

The sound of the pump changed from a steady chugging to a distressed clank. With a snort, I pulled the hose up and found the source of the problem. An idiot trout had gotten near enough to get pulled against the opening and was now thrashing in a fruitless effort to free itself. Big enough to block the hose, it had grown to a size uncommon in more heavily fished waters.

When I cut the pump, it fell to the ground, but I was fast enough to catch it and dispatch it. The big brush knife from one of the tool compartments was fine for cleaning it, and I smiled in satisfaction. Coated with oil and rolled in cornmeal, that trout would sizzle up in the pan and be a fine, fine addition to whatever Kurt was throwing together. We'd worked hard today, and we'd be hungry enough to finish the fish and everything else, too. Best of all, Kurt would have to eat his words about my cooking.

An hour or so later, Kurt and I were sitting down to plates of fried trout and canned green peas.

"That was fun," Kurt observed gloomily as he forked in green globs.

"Hey, we salvaged some stuff." The trout was really, really good. I took another crispy, flaky bite, and chewed blissfully.

"Joy. Half a loaf of bread, a box of crackers, half a dozen cans of things we don't really want to eat. The bastard got the new jar of peanut butter." He pushed the peas around on the plate. "I could swear I latched the bear box properly this morning."

"That was not your average bear, Boo Boo."

I had come up the hill with the trout and the truck, ready to park near the cabin, when my attention was arrested by Kurt, who was waving his arms, throwing rocks, and screaming loud enough to be heard, barely, over the rumble of the truck. He was halfway up the track to the bear box -- I'd seen him more than heard him. The object of his wrath was standing at the metal chest where we stored the food, ignoring the rocks that didn't come within yards of hitting.

A brown bear had something in his paws and was munching away, not very concerned by the commotion. There was a lot of debris around his feet -- he'd had enough time to clear out most of our stores, including the box of powdered eggs, judging from the yellow streaks over his face.

Bet he'd liked those better than I did -- powdered eggs had been one of my more memorable flops, but that didn't mean he could just march up and scarf the lot. I threw the truck in gear and headed for the bear box, though the track was pretty narrow. Hitting the horn with the heel of my hand, I came bounding up the track, hoping to scare the daylight out of the bear, but alarming Kurt just as much. He leaped to one side and then chased the truck to where I'd finally run out of track by the box.

Frightened at last, the intruder retreated, but not fast enough to suit Kurt, who yanked the hose off the rack and hit the pump. Still screaming, he aimed the nozzle at the furry bandit, knocking it to the ground with the force of the water. It picked itself up and ran much faster after that. I was still blasting the horn, as much from anger as for frightening the bear, though it should have been terrified at the things Kurt was yelling.

"Damn you all to hell gonna use your hide for a rug and pick my teeth with your bones furry rat bastard goddamn bear!" He finally wound down as the bear became a speck in the distance. "Don't come back." Glowering, he coiled the hose once more as I started picking up what remained of our stores. It wasn't much: some peas, peaches, Spam, and half a jar of jam. The bread had been partially chewed, and the box of crackers had a couple of punctures. None of the other odds and ends were unscathed -- most of the cornmeal was on the ground. I latched the box and rattled the handle. Kurt did the same, grumbling that he'd done it right earlier.

I had to back the truck to the cabin once again, because there was no good way to turn around. Kurt sat beside me, fuming, during the long trek backward. At least the box was far enough from the cabin for good camp hygiene. The bears didn't come down to peek in the windows if we didn't keep food there to attract them.

"It's going to be a pretty lean dinner, Jake. Spam and canned peas are what we have left," Kurt said, and it was worth eating the peas to see his face when I produced the enormous trout.

Now, with plates of food before us, we totted up the damages. "We are going to have to figure out what to do until we get into town. That's the day after tomorrow." Kurt counted our calendar around a mouthful of fish.

The trout was disappearing into us at a remarkable rate. "Canned peas for breakfast?"

Kurt mashed some peas flat with his fork. "Great. We'll figure something out."

"We will. There's a couple of cans of other things." I had a wonderful thought. "Oh, and Kurt, I don't want to hear another word about burnt beans."

Chapter Four

The next day we were both pretty quiet. I didn't think Kurt had seen me -- in fact, I was certain of it, thanks to the bear -- but my guilty conscience whispered to me. He was a really nice guy, one of the easiest people to be with I'd ever met, and if I wasn't careful, I was going to mess with that. He might just have been fretting about the bear box: breakfast was pretty basic.

Usually, we could talk about anything and everything. We'd both traveled a bit, which gave us common ground, and we'd had some similar experiences in college, though he razed me about the granola life at the University of Colorado. He was three years older than my twenty-two, and he'd used the time to collect better stories, that was for sure. I didn't have anything that compared to spending two days in a bivvy bag, clinging to the side of El Capitan, because the storm raging through Yosemite had caught him and his climbing partner halfway up the mountain.

"I thought he was going to kill me," Kurt had joked about it, last week. "We were roped in pretty close, had to be, because it kept less of us exposed to the rain, and the ledge was narrow. I'd eaten some really pungent beef jerky, and he was a vegetarian. He bitched about my meat breath, which I couldn't fix any more than I could fix the rain. Kind of killed the friendship. We didn't go climbing together again."

He'd gone pensive after that, and I thought about that now as we patrolled the forest, up and down the dirt roads. I didn't want to kill what was between us -- I wanted to take things to a new level. But I didn't know how to do that, and I was scared to death that what I really wanted to do would kill off the friendship. Not every man wants to be touched by another man, and I didn't know what Kurt wanted. I felt like an idiot. I couldn't even ask, because even asking might do exactly what I didn't want. He might just ask to be reassigned.

We patrolled in silence, and I tried to pretend that driving the truck was absorbing my attention completely.

So the Boy Scout troop kind of took me by surprise.

Six or seven of them, ages roughly thirteen to seventeen, and a couple of adult leaders were standing by the side of the road, waving at us. Instead of waving back, we stopped, because it was always good to know who was loose in our woods, making campfires. Good public relations, too, but knowing where the trouble could start was a lot more important.

This sort of stop was kind of fun; this wasn't the first we'd done. We would chat with the guys, ask them what they were doing and where they were headed, how long they'd be out. One of the leaders nodded approvingly at me for checking with the boys instead of the adults.

"Want to see the rig?" Kurt asked, and they were all over the truck.

"You really wear these?" The littlest guy put Kurt's jacket and helmet on. His hands didn't show at

the end of the sleeves. "How can you work in this?"

Another Scout took the helmet and an axe, which he didn't swing at the imaginary tree until he was well away from the group. Still, the leader put a stop to that, making the other boys heft the blade without chopping.

"The weight of the axe helps take the trees down, but it's a good workout," I said as I retrieved the axe and handed out shovels. They dug and tossed the dirt at a gambel oak Kurt designated as the fire until everyone had had a turn and the "fire" was "out."

The older boys wanted to see what we stocked in the first aid kit, and one asked, "What good does a stretcher do if there's only two of you?"

"Good question -- we call other rangers for back up if it's a big blaze." I stepped back out of the way of the two boys who loaded a third on the stretcher and marched off with him. The rest clamored for rides, too, investigating the fire shelter as they waited. We'd opened one to let them crawl in and imagine what it would be like to huddle in what looked like an oversized, foil-covered sleeping bag while flames raged around.

"It keeps enough heat out and enough oxygen in that you have a pretty good chance of surviving a burnover," Kurt explained. "You want to be down low, where the temperatures are lowest and there's the least smoke. How long the fire takes to burn out around you depends on what kind of fuel it is -- if there's a lot of woody stuff, you could be in there a while."

"Can't you just stay in the truck?" one of the Scouts suggested after he popped the hatch and rolled out of the confined space. He gave the shelter a shuddery look and then hastened to fasten the hatch when one of the others got in, prompting a squawk.

Kurt flinched. "No. Bad idea. The windshield can break and let all the flames in there with you, and the fumes that come out of burning dashboards will chase you right out into the fire. If the fuel system catches fire, you're sitting on a large bomb." The boys looked at him with horror, and I could understand -- the truck had looked like a refuge to me until the Chief had explained. "We use the shelters."

"Ever put it to the test?" asked one of the Scout leaders as he squatted down to look inside.

"No, not yet," Kurt said.

"That's too much like a human campfire dinner for me," said the leader, rising.

I could have done without that image -- I might need to use that shelter one day, though I hoped we wouldn't need to. We did get the shelter refolded with only one muttered curse about government-issue equipment.

We showed them the water tank and explained how we filled it and when we'd use it. "Five hundred gallons won't stop much of a fire, but it can be useful, and it will buy us a little time to call in the other guys. If there's a water source near enough, we'll put the intake down and pump straight from the stream or lake and bypass the tank, conserving it for when we need it. We spend a lot of time just driving around, looking for the fires while they're still smoldering quietly and

making more smoke than trouble. We put one of those out yesterday,” Kurt told them, and they looked impressed.

One of the boys was worried. “That wasn’t started by a campfire, was it?”

“No, no sign of a camp fire. Most of these fires are started by lightning, not campers, though Smoky Bear has a point about prevention,” I explained, and then fixed them with a steely look. “You guys have been using good campfire techniques, haven’t you?”

They fell over themselves to assure us that they had been very careful, but I wasn’t taking anyone’s word for it. “Over there, dudes, work in teams of three. Show me how you do it.”

So the boys built fire rings with rocks and cleared the ground around of pine needles and anything else that would burn. They built tinder and kindling teepees, though I didn’t let them light up, and when they’d satisfied me, they covered the “coals” with dirt to douse them.

“All right, then,” Kurt said. “You guys want to try squirting the hose?” Loud cries of “Yeah!” greeted this suggestion. We pulled it out and showed them what to do.

“Point it here,” Kurt told the first in line, “and you hold on, too,” he told the second boy. “Hang on tight.” They still wouldn’t be adequately prepared for the jolt when I hit the pump. The kid blasted a hole in the ground at first, but then aimed it up, and when he switched off, the next one pointed the hose upward. The water came down with only gravity’s speed, reminding me of how Kurt and I had done this yesterday, and I think he was thinking of it, too, because he flashed a smile at me that damn near melted my boots.

The Scouts took their turns, then the leaders took the hose and let the boys dance in the falling water, whooping as they got soaked. We had to call a halt to the fun before they were ready, but before the tank went dry, and packed up and sent them on their way.

“I just topped off last night, you know,” I said, reading the gauges. The bear and the boys had gotten close to half a tank.

“It’s a good excuse to head out toward Rendezvous Lake,” he replied. “We can refill there and get lunch at the lodge.”

“Oh, yeah. Maybe Max has some ribs ready!” The proprietor of the Rendezvous Lake Lodge made some of the most mouthwatering ribs I’d ever tasted. Last week Kurt had ordered the last serving before informing me of just how good they really were. He’d eaten partway through the rack, making “mmm...” noises, before relenting and handing one over. The threat of burning his beans deliberately had parted him from just the one, and it was so good that I was sure only threats would have made him share.

“It will be worth shaking our kidneys loose on that dirt road if he does.” Kurt grinned. “Wonder if we can convince the county to grade it again.” Somehow the truck had pointed itself toward the Rendezvous Lake Lodge as we talked. “You were pretty good with the Scouts back there, turning into old Smoky Bear with your hands on your hips, grilling them about fire pits.”

“I just don’t want them making any stupid mistakes.” I steered around a rather large rock that was

coming up in the middle of the roadbed, where the softer soil was wearing away around it.

“No. Though maybe you looked more like a drill sergeant, with the tight green T-shirt tucked into the fatigue pants, and that hat.”

“Lay off the hat. I like this hat.” I tipped it down over one eye, aiming for the rakish effect.

“You need a marsupial on your shoulder with that hat -- isn’t that why the brim turns up on one side?” He batted up at the brim, tipping it back on my head. “Colorado is fresh out of koala bears, but we could get the Scouts to find you a possum.”

“I don’t need a possum!” I readjusted the brim to level.

“Sure you do, if you’re going to wear an Aussie bush hat.” Kurt was having way too much fun with this.

“It’ll just play dead and fall off, anyhow.” I hoped it would -- I didn’t want those fifty teeth near my ear or its naked prehensile tail wrapped around my neck.

“And you need to say ‘Crikey’ a lot.” The dimple mocked me as he laughed at his own joke. “Come on, say it. ‘Crikey!’”

“No, and I’m not going to say, ‘Isn’t she a beauty!’ either.” I gave him a sour, sideways glance, wondering why his smile softened.

He begged, “Just one ‘Crikey’?”

“No!” The joke was wearing thin for me. “What I will do is sing ‘Waltzing Matilda’ for you. I know the whole thing. ‘Once a jolly swagman...’”

He was begging for mercy before I got to the boiling billy. That’ll teach him.

Friendship and superior barbecue were enough to pull us down the road to the Rendezvous Lake Lodge, run by Kurt’s buddy Max, who knew what was going on over most of the area and didn’t mind sharing. We passed Deerhaven Lodge at what would have been lunchtime, but weren’t tempted to turn in.

We pulled into the main parking lot around one-thirty, empty except for a red RAV4 loaded with camping gear. A man was wrestling a cooler into the back seat, getting no help from a sulky girl in shorts and a hoodie who leaned against a front fender, taking deep drags on her cigarette. The tobacco smoke warred with the good smells from the kitchen. We wrinkled our noses against the odor, which didn’t dissipate fast enough when she threw the butt on the ground and stubbed it out with her foot. There were another half dozen butts scattered on the dirt parking lot near her.

“Hello, fellas.” Max came out onto the veranda to greet us. “Miss, pick those up.” His tone was firm but polite, yet it didn’t stir the girl into action. “Miss, now, please.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” She left one behind when she threw the butts into the sand-filled ashtray to the right of the lodge door.

“All of them,” Max prodded, arms crossed. With his salt and pepper hair, horn rim glasses, and air of authority, he looked like somebody’s father who damned well expected to be obeyed. She did get the last butt, throwing it into the receptacle with an exaggerated motion.

“Happy now?” She lit another cigarette, eyes slitted against the smoke.

“I’d be happier if I didn’t worry about you doing that where the stuff on the ground burns,” Max told her.

“Smoky Bear, only you, yadda yadda yadda. *I’d* be happier if I wasn’t going off to spend three days in the woods bonding with Pops, who thinks that I need electricity deprivation therapy.” She jerked her thumb savagely at the man, who backed out of the vehicle. He had the air of one who was reconsidering plans -- perhaps electricity therapy, applied with a Taser, would do more to adjust her attitude.

“Where in the woods?” Kurt asked her, turning on the charm, but she was having none of it.

“Who the hell knows? It’s all trees to me.” She jumped into the passenger seat and slammed the door hard enough to make the little SUV shake.

“Sorry about that, all the fresh air seems to be affecting her brain. We don’t really have a set destination.” Her father got into the driver’s seat and backed out, leaving us shaking our heads.

“They had a cabin for the week, but she kept stinking it up with her cigarettes, so I asked them to leave,” Max told us during the brief walk to the nearly empty dining room. “They didn’t rent a canoe, they didn’t want horses, and she kept demanding television, so they weren’t providing anywhere near enough revenue to put up with the reek. I told them when they booked that the electricity goes off at nine.”

“I thought the customer was always right,” I said, knowing that he’d explode.

“Not hardly, and they’re welcome to try getting a room elsewhere. It’s only seventeen miles down my rotten dirt road and then eight miles over to Deerhaven, and I can tell you they’re booked solid, so it will be woods or head home for them. Folks can behave or get out, and I don’t mind telling them that.” Max snorted. “So, do I even need to ask what you want this time, or should I just dish up the ribs?” He’d laughed at us last week as teasing turned to begging and begging turned to threats.

“Start dishing!” Kurt answered for both of us, and pretty soon plates of fragrant meat showed up in front of us. There’s just no way to eat ribs without diving in up to your elbows and we’d need every one of the huge stack of napkins Max brought us.

Oh, that meat was heavenly. Sauced just right, nearly falling off the bone, and better than anything we’d eaten since the platter last week -- including last night’s trout, good as it had been. We dove in, too hungry to talk, and it wasn’t until I was about halfway through the rack that I even looked up. I should have looked back down, but Kurt was enjoying his food so much that I had to shake myself not to stare. He sliced off a rib and put it to his mouth, closing his eyes and chewing. Then he had to get the shreds of meat off the bone, along with the last drops of sauce, using lips, teeth,

and tongue. He just flat out enjoyed that rib more than I have ever seen anyone enjoy food.

As he cleaned that bone, I had a sudden flash of what it might be like to have his mouth on something else long and hard, in some place that was a lot more private than a dining room. I gulped and tried to turn back to the cole slaw and the potato salad, but the image stayed with me.

All of a sudden I wasn't hungry any more. I excused myself and headed to the men's room. I had to remember to wash my hands when I went in, because otherwise I was going to have to explain why I had barbecue sauce all over my fly.

Chapter Five

The smell of good barbecue traveled around with us the rest of the day, which didn't have anything more in the way of adventures. I had to pack the rest of my lunch up to take along, and Max had fixed us a care package for dinner. We stopped to talk with some hikers, and that was about it for civilization. The view was pine trees, spruce trees, more pine trees, a clump of aspens here and there, and the occasional meadow. We couldn't really see the mountains for being in them, but the twist of the roads did let us see the higher peaks now and then. Still a lot of snow up top, though it was melting with the summer.

"Fire danger is still pretty low now," Kurt mused, "but everything dries out in the summer and it will increase." We passed a fire danger sign beside the road as we drove away from Rendezvous Lake. The semicircular dial still had the hand pointing to the blue of "low," but as the season advanced, we'd be the ones to change the reading. It could very well get to the yellow section of "very high" or even the red of "extreme," when a hot look could start a blaze, before the snows came again. "We're the lucky guys who get to inform the campers that they can't build a fire when that happens. Half of them don't bring propane stoves, and they get really cranky."

"I bet. Does Max stock propane stoves at the lodge gift shop?"

"Bet he does." Kurt laughed. "We could point people his way -- then their trips wouldn't get ruined."

I looked out the window at the woods, green shading to black in the shadows. "At least we don't have a lot of beetle-killed pines, like down toward Winter Park." Entire hillsides showed dead brown along the highway between Empire and Granby, hundreds of acres. Some were clear cut of dead trees, leaving stubble and branches, land that wouldn't recover for decades. I'd been horrified when I'd driven up from Boulder for orientation, thinking that I'd be patrolling more of the same, but the forest here had undergone no such devastation.

Kurt shook his head. "Now, there's a disaster waiting to happen. That stuff will go up like a torch."

"Why is it a problem down there and not up here?" I could see two dead, brown trees in a sea of green.

"Winters are still so cold up here that it keeps the beetles in check," Kurt said as he turned down the road to our cabin. "We'll lose a tree here and there, that's all."

Our one-room cabin sat in a little clearing, the trees cut back to a safe distance because of the fire danger. My battered old Toyota sat to one side, and the picnic table lay in the shadow of the building now, though it caught the morning sun. Kurt pulled the truck into its spot, and I grabbed the food. We'd eat outdoors.

“I’ll get some forks!” Kurt grinned as he went to the door.

I placed the take-out dishes on the table, glad to be home. This place felt like home because I was going to eat dinner with him. Kurt: my friend, my companion, but not my lover. I didn’t know how to reach out to him without destroying the friendship.

It was all wonderful, even cold (no electricity, no microwaves), and we were licking up the last drops of sauce when Kurt spoke again. “There’s a bit of light left, so I think I’ll head over to the archery range, shoot a couple of quivers with the compound. Want to join me?”

Hell, yes. “Might. Or I might go for a quick swim.” It would substitute for a cold shower.

“Suit yourself,” he said, crumpling up his tin foil plate and paper napkins. “You need the practice.”

I did. Kurt was a good shot with both the compound bow that he used for hunting and the recurve bow that Robin Hood would have liked. He’d been trying to teach me, but so far I hadn’t achieved any particular skill. Kurt, on the other hand, would be a fine addition to the Merry Men. He’d look good in the green tights, too, with a feathered cap set jauntily over one blue eye.

“I’ll bring the recurve bow if I come down.” I didn’t want to promise anything, and a bit of space would be a good thing. “But I think I’ll swim.”

The “archery range” was a couple of hay bales and a target set up against a hillside about a hundred yards away from the cabin. The hill caught the stray arrows (mine), and the aspens provided a dappled background for Kurt to hone his eye for bow hunting season.

I watched him leave with the compound bow and couldn’t decide what to do.

Sitting at the picnic table with my face in my hands, I debated following him down to the archery range. Was it my imagination, or had he looked hurt when I hadn’t opted to join him right off? We’d been together all day -- surely he didn’t want even more of my company. The cold swim seemed like a good idea since we’d be sleeping in the same cabin. It took a long time to make up my mind.

But when I went in to get a towel to take to the lake, I picked up the bow instead.

I followed the path we’d made down to the meadow and thought about how good he’d looked as he left; muscular shoulders with a bow slung over, and tight buttocks flexing inside the dusty green utility pants. That nearly made me turn around and head back to the lake, because I suddenly wanted to put my hands on those buttocks and squeeze.

If I hadn’t been so nearly there, I might have turned around, but instead, I looked over across the meadow to the target. I was still in the trees, so Kurt couldn’t see me, even if he were looking, but he wasn’t, he was intent on what he was doing.

I just didn’t expect he would be doing what he was doing.

Chapter Six

Kurt must have decided I wasn't coming after all, because he had pulled his T-shirt over his head so that it was stretched across his back. I could see him through the trees, but he couldn't see me -- he was facing to the right, leaning against an aspen tree, and now he was sliding his utilities down over his thighs.

I held my breath and froze as he revealed his body, his cock already hard. He had to think he was completely alone, since I'd taken so long. He'd had time to shoot the full quiver. A dozen arrows were sticking out of the hay bale target, and he must have gotten sidetracked when he went to retrieve them. His bare chest got one hand to stroke his skin; the other hand stroked back up his thigh toward his hard cock. The utility pants stayed around his knees as he touched himself in the dappled light. Little patches of shadows from the moving aspen leaves danced over his skin like caresses -- I absolutely had to look.

The sleeves, which were the only part of that shirt he was exactly wearing, stretched over sculpted biceps that rippled with his movements. The shadows flickered between the whipcords in his forearms and picked out the muscles in his otherwise flat belly. His was the body of a man who worked hard, having definition and purpose. Totally beautiful, totally male, totally desirable. His erection curved up, pointing toward his belly, bringing my own cock to stiffness as I looked.

I wanted to go. I wanted to go away and leave him to his solitary pleasure. And oh, how I wanted to go to him and touch him. Frozen in place, I could only watch Kurt grip his hard cock at the base and pinch one nipple. How hard did he like it? I couldn't tell from here, and I suddenly needed to know, because I wanted to do it for him.

I stayed where I was, while my own cock throbbed with need. I would stay over here, and I'd watch and mirror what he was doing, because I wanted to touch him so badly. Mirroring what he did to himself might be as close as I could ever get.

My own T-shirt went over my head and across my back; my pants went down around my knees. Eight inches of hard cock in my own hand and I had to lean against a tree just to stay upright. Wanting to believe that my hand was his wrapped around my erection, I matched his slow strokes. Imaging my erection was his, I thought about touching him, holding his length in my hand. My eyes were open just enough to see what Kurt did across the clearing, and I did the same, trying to be both of us, trying to feel both of us, as I touched myself the way he touched himself.

When he left off touching his nipple, so did I, and trailed my hand over my chest and stomach the way he did. When he picked up speed, pumping his full, thick cock, so did I, and wanted to memorize the pace because if this is what he liked, I wanted to give it to him. If it would only be in my memory, with my own hand on my own cock later, I wanted it to be the way he liked it. From our opposite sides of the clearing, I stroked him and tried to feel his hands on me.

What was he doing now? His shoulder was against the tree, and his head was thrown back beside

the trunk -- he looked the way he had the other day in the water. My own hand went faster, and I had to slow myself -- I didn't want to come before him. A hard grip at my base chased the orgasm back. This mustn't end too soon. He'd caressed his chest and belly as he stroked his hard length, now he drew that hand across his torso and down his flank. It went behind him, and I remembered how I'd wanted to grab his ass, so I grabbed my own and wished I could see what he was really doing. The muscles moved under my skin as I wondered.

I knew what I was doing -- I was thinking of how one buttock in each hand would feel. I wanted to hold his cheeks, spread them gently, and probe the little hole that nestled between them. I would put a finger there. Maybe two. I'd touch my hard cock there and press inwards, or would he rather be the one to do it to me? I'd never done either one, but I wanted to like never before -- I had to strangle the moans.

Suddenly, Kurt turned against his tree and put one arm around the white trunk, putting himself in profile. His hand still stroked his erection, and I wondered who he was imagining that tree to be, or if it was only support. I wanted to be that aspen. I wanted to be the one he'd clutch in the throes of passion. I wanted to hold him tightly and feel his breath come ragged with his approaching climax.

He pumped his cock harder and faster now. I could see him clearly, see how much hard flesh showed beyond his hand on each stroke, and I wanted to touch him there. All I could do was thrust into my own fist and know that I would come soon, but I wanted to hold off until Kurt came. He had to be close. It was so far across the clearing that I couldn't see his face clearly, but it had to be soon. How could he hold onto his come with all the wonderful things he was doing to himself, doing to me?

He froze. It had to be his orgasm, and mine was right there, too. The waves of pleasure rolled over me as I climaxed, my come spurting into the undergrowth. The tree I leaned against kept me on my feet. Kurt gripped the aspen as he threw his head back and leaned his cheek into the white bark.

He let go of his tree at last and pulled his clothing back into place. My own pants came up over my ass, and the T-shirt came over my head again. He was covered and so was I, but the way he had looked naked only moments before was burned into my memory.

Chapter Seven

Kurt went to pull the arrows out of the target, as if he hadn't given me the most amazing sexual experience of my life. My experiences didn't amount to much, it was true -- a few fumbblings, gropings, and a blow job that ended before it quite started were about all I'd ever had, because I just hadn't met anyone I wanted to risk so much with. Until now. I just wished I knew how big of a risk it would be to tell Kurt what I wanted.

One arrow at a time came out of the hay bales as Kurt plucked them from the tight cluster in the center of the target. I watched the way his muscles played under the T-shirt and wondered what to do. Could I go on and keep everything I was thinking, the memory of what I'd seen, off my face? I turned and probably would have made it back to the cabin undetected if I hadn't forgotten the length of the bow. Damned thing was about five and a half feet long, and I managed to whack it smartly into a tree, making a lot of noise.

Kurt was nearly back to his usual shooting spot; he lifted his head at the sound. I was frantically checking for damage when he spotted me. "Jake? What the hell are you doing to my bow?"

Nothing was busted, except me. "Nothing." I came out into the meadow, glad that enough time had passed that he wouldn't think I'd been spying on him, and glad that I had a reason to be embarrassed. When you borrow someone's prized equipment, you have to take care of it.

"Get your butt over here and shoot -- you're running out of light." He grinned as I joined him and strung the bow carefully, the way he'd taught me, with the tip braced against a foot and the belly of the bow against my arm. He set the quiver between us, selected an arrow, and turned to shoot without waiting to see what I'd do. His back was to me, his face to the target, and he released his arrow in a fluid motion.

I tried to do the same, but his *thocked* into the target and mine fell short, though it was on the right path. I picked up another arrow, trying to think what to adjust to get it into the target at all. I'd settle for the gray corners if it would just go in!

We both shot again, and while his arrow was in the gold center again, I had at last managed to get something in the hay bale! Not on the target, but still better than last time. I had done this before. I'd had to sneak up on the target, which had taken five arrows last time to just get on the hay. Second shot this time, must be getting better.

Kurt turned to watch me nock the third arrow, and under his eye, I wanted to do better than before -- I was going to master this. I let the arrow fly to the target, to imbed itself in the base of the hay to the left. Consistent, not great. I picked up another arrow.

"Get to shooting stance and stay there, okay?" Kurt examined me carefully as I held the position, my right hand near my cheek. "Straighten your wrist, then you're less likely to introduce torque on the release." He pushed a little against my wrist, which stuck out, so I straightened. "Get sighted

and release.” This time the arrow hit in the white ring, and if it was the outmost part of the target, it was on the target! Getting closer. “Do it again,” he told me.

This one went a little wilder -- it just clipped the left edge of the hay. “Come on, straight wrist, and don’t do anything with your fingers besides open them. No fancy twists.” I’d been doing a lot more than that with those fingers just a little bit ago, so had he, and those were the fingers that he was touching to mine. To show me what he meant, he took my wrist in one hand, curled my fingers up around an imaginary bowstring, and then straightened them out with his own. “Relax, Jake. Extra movements here and extra tension are going to affect the release.” He curled and straightened my hand a few more times as I tried to be relaxed and let my hand open and close without resistance. “Just open easily and naturally.”

Oh, that sounded good on a lot of levels, though most of them wouldn’t improve my archery skills.

“Try again.”

I narrowed my mind down to my right hand, releasing the arrow with the easiest movement I could. This time I clipped the border between the white and the black rings, putting the shot two inches closer to the center of the target.

“Better,” he commented. “You’re getting the hang of it. Most of your upper body is doing the right stuff, but you’re consistently shooting to the left.” Kurt moved behind me and repositioned my shoulders minutely. “Try this.” Yeah, right, after he’d just placed both hands on me, I was going to shoot better. The one time I didn’t want him to touch me, he touched me. This arrow went short and right, and would have missed completely had it gone far enough.

“You dropped your elbow that time, which makes a big difference. Think of your arm being an extension of the arrow, and it all has to point the same direction.” Kurt was adjusting my stance again, with a touch to my arm that felt like fire. I held the stance as he placed me because I dared not move at all. Now if I could just open my hand naturally, the way he’d been coaching me, it might do what I wanted.

The arrow smacked solidly into the blue, and if it was still several inches away from the center, it was a long way from missing. “All right! Do it again.”

He stepped away to watch me nock my arrow and sight, trying to place every part of me into the same position. Something was different, because I caught the left edge of the hay again, and he said nothing as I grimly set up the next shot. I would get this right. Into the white this time, and the next one was almost into the black. Almost. There were another half dozen arrows in the quiver -- I was bound and determined to get them all onto some part of the target. So, of course, I missed the next one completely and would have to scout in the grass for it.

“The point of this isn’t to get perfect, Jake.” I turned my head in surprise. Perfect wasn’t the point? He laughed. “The point is to get consistent. You have a range with a center. Right now your range is really wide, and your center is several inches off target center. The more you practice, the tighter your range gets, and then you can move your center over. You get a cluster, and your cluster gets smaller.”

“Your cluster is about the size of the bull’s-eye,” I answered, as I selected another arrow.

“Yeah, but it didn’t happen overnight, and I’m using equipment sized for me. Once you get your own bow it will be easier, because your draw should be a little longer than mine. Your arms are longer.”

I hadn’t thought about that -- I had about two inches of height on him.

“Also, if we had our choice of equipment, you’d be doing this part of the learning curve on something lighter, maybe a thirty pound bow. Instead, you’re using my short forty-five pound bow. So you’re doing better than you think.” He smiled at me. If a couple of arrows into the outer rings earned me smiles like that, what would I get for hitting the gold in the center?

Distracted, that’s what I would get. This arrow went into the hay, but not the paper. I dragged my mind back onto what I was doing.

“See? You’re pulling into a closer range. I’m going to go back up to the cabin and let you have the rest of the quiver, okay?” He patted me on the shoulder and left. I wouldn’t watch him go, because he could turn to see the longing on my face. A pat wasn’t enough -- it was just friendly, and I wanted more. If I thought about that, I’d never hit the damned target again. Another arrow nocked to the string, and I concentrated on my archery, because I was damned well going to master this.

I’d shot the last few arrows, retrieved them all, even the one that went really wide, and had shot about half of them again when I heard the motorcycle. The light was fading enough that I could barely distinguish the black ring from the blue ring, so it was an easy decision to retrieve the arrows and head back to the cabin. Anyone on a bike out here was either aiming for us or totally lost. We’d seen a biker yesterday; this might be the same guy. Maybe he just needed directions.

The motor cut before I was all the way back to the cabin, followed by voices. I could hear before I could see what was happening, and I didn’t like what I was hearing.

Chapter Eight

“You gotta have something! Hand it over and nobody gets hurt!” The stranger’s words came raggedly. Nope, not directions.

“I told you, we don’t have anything. No cash, nothing!” Kurt sounded confident, angry even.

I hurried through the trees. Kurt was equal to most anything, but two of us would be a lot more threatening to whoever was stupid enough to say stuff like that. We really didn’t have anything up here worth stealing, and we sure didn’t have any hoards of cash.

Kurt had lit the lantern already, and the pool of light showed me a scruffy, gray-haired man in leathers, who was shaking a fist at Kurt. His bike stood on the far side of him, an old Harley Fat Boy, though he’d taken off the camping gear that had festooned it yesterday, when he’d been a camper and not a threat.

“You gotta have something!” He’d backed Kurt up against the cabin wall; the dude was seriously big. Half a head taller than Kurt and fat, but under that was some muscle, which he used to throw Kurt against the wall and keep him pinned there. The guy reached for something at his side, and then he brandished a knife toward Kurt’s face.

Shit.

“Come on, fork it over, pretty boy, and you can stay pretty.” He held the tip of the knife just below Kurt’s eye. “You gotta have something, an iPod or anything! I need it!” Both pitch and volume rose as he shook Kurt, who tipped his head back away from the blade. “Now, damn it!”

Kurt’s eyes were wide as he looked at the knife so close to his cheek. “About the only thing is some binoculars!”

I could not believe this shithhead had pulled a weapon on Kurt! But if he was armed, so was I.

With an arrow nocked, I stepped out of the trees and in my deepest, most threatening voice, I snarled, “Let him go and get the hell out of here!” I aimed carefully. The range was shorter by about half than where we’d been practicing; my arrow would hit.

The biker turned to me, and I hoped he was really surprised by the way I appeared out of the forest with a bow and arrow. If I thought of myself as Robin Hood hard enough, he would, too. There was just enough light for him to see that I was armed. At least he’d taken the knife away from Kurt’s face, though he still had a fistful of his shirt.

Kurt’s eyes got really wide, which I could understand, because I tended to shoot to the left, and there he was, on the left side of my range. But he said nothing about that, only, “Yeah, go.”

“Brave little men. I ain’t going without some money or something I can hock!” He started to turn back to Kurt when I let the arrow fly -- it swished behind him and struck. I had another arrow on the bow string before the metallic clang stopped echoing. He swiveled around madly, trying to find where the arrow went.

“You fucker! You shot my hog!” He threw Kurt to one side and fisted his hands, bellowing. Kurt wisely scrambled toward me before the guy realized he’d both lost his hostage and had an arrow sticking out of his gas tank.

“You shot my fucking bike!” He swung around toward me again, as angry as a bee-stung bear. I aimed again. Kurt had ducked around behind me, but the tug on the quiver at my waist told me it was to get a weapon of his own without fouling my shot. Now he stood beside me with an arrow in each hand.

I laughed, intentionally making it evil. “Next one goes into you, shithead.” If he rushed us, I could get an arrow into that big belly at point blank range, no problem.

He paused at the promise and looked back at his bike. In the light of the lantern the end of the twenty-eight inch arrow with its white and green fletching was clearly visible. Kurt and I were well away from the pool of light; now we were an unknown threat in the near dark.

“Better leave while you still have some gas to do it with, dude,” Kurt remarked mildly. “We don’t have anything you want, and we have a lot you don’t want.”

We could have melted back into the woods, but that would have looked like running away and might have given this guy ideas about trashing our place to get even. Better to look and sound dangerous, I thought, holding the bow at the ready. Besides, I was almost itching to shoot again: how dare this asshole threaten my partner! “Get going. Now.”

It cost the guy something to get on his bike and fire up the engine, I could tell. Nobody would want to be run off an easy target by a guy with a medieval weapon. He looked at the bike, and he looked at us, and he must have decided that the pickings were too slim to be worth getting skewered over. His desperation might lead him to come back later for revenge, but we’d just have to see. It was one of the hazards of being alone in the woods, but we weren’t helpless, far from it.

Snarling obscenities, he jumped on the bike and fired it up without trying to pull out the arrow. He roared off, still screaming anger that featured the word “fuck” prominently as his sounds dwindled into the distance.

“At least Fat Boy is unlikely to sneak up on us,” Kurt observed at last. He stowed his two arrows back in the quiver -- the little raspy sliding sound they made seemed suddenly loud.

Slightly shaky now, I stood down and let the bow return to rest without releasing the arrow. “Yeah. He isn’t one for a long hike in the woods.” I stowed my arrow and looked at the bow, which I hadn’t unstrung when I decided to come investigate -- and a good thing, too. “Are you okay?” I was probably violating the guy code for even asking, but hell, Kurt had just had a knife pulled on him.

“Yeah, fine.” He patted my shoulder again and let his hand rest a fraction of a second before he

punched me gently. “Glad you showed up when you did, though. The paperwork on the binoculars would have been a bitch to fill out.” He spoke lightly.

He had to be hiding his relief just as I was hiding mine. I stuffed it down when what I wanted to do was hold him tightly, examine him all over for injuries, and kiss him for being all right. “Yeah, those triplicate forms just suck.” I smacked his arm lightly back. “You’d get writer’s cramp.”

I went to stow the now-unstrung bow on its hook in the cabin, but I did put the compound bow that was always at the ready near the door. Kurt went to the truck to radio the incident in to headquarters. There wasn’t much else we could do besides hope this guy wouldn’t stumble onto any of the innocents on the mountain tonight. The Scouts would be farther off the beaten path than the biker seemed likely to go, and who knew about the pair in the red RAV4. With luck, he’d have enough fuel to get to Meeker, where he’d either get picked up or keep going.

“The Chief promised to pass it on to the sheriff,” Kurt reported as he came back to the cabin. “I called Max, too. Fat Boy might think he could take on the folks at the lodge.”

“Whoa, that would be a bad idea.” Max was a mild-looking man, but he gave off a very practical kind of vibe.

“Yeah. Max would just shoot first, park the bike next to the diesel generator, and haul the body off into the woods on horseback.” He chuckled, the sound getting lost in the thud of his boots when he kicked them off to get ready for bed. We got up and went down with the sun, pretty much, and dawn was going to bring more work. I tried not to follow him with my eyes as he peeled down to skivvies and slipped into the sleeping bag, making the cot squeak under his weight. I did the same, getting into the bag on my own narrow camp cot. He doused the lantern and said goodnight. All was quiet except for the thousand lonely frogs and crickets.

We lay silently for a long time, and then I heard him turn over. “Jake?” he said softly.

“Yeah?” I allowed myself a second’s fantasy that he was going to ask to join me.

“Thanks.” He turned over in the cot again.

I would have said yes. “You’d have done the same for me.”

“I would, but still...” He’d probably have done it better, too.

There wasn’t anything to say other than, “It’s okay.”

We lay in silence again, and eventually Kurt’s breathing took on that soft, regular rhythm of sleep. I lay awake a while longer, listening to him, and listening for the roar of a Harley in the night.

Chapter Nine

“Whoo hoo! We’re going to town today!” Kurt was out of bed and yodeling as he bounced around getting dressed. We’d been good on the casual nudity that is just going to happen when two people share a sixteen by sixteen foot cabin, but that was before I’d become so damned aware of him. Now he was diving into a relatively clean shirt. I had to pull the sleeping bag up over my head.

“People who are too cheerful in the morning get hurt,” I warned from my cocoon.

“Come on, you aren’t excited by the thought of clean clothes and fresh food and a hot shower with real soap?” He rattled off the main delights of a trip to town. “Especially the food?”

“Well, of course, but not to the point of singing.” I poked my nose out of the sleeping bag -- a good glare required eye contact.

“I sincerely hope nothing excites you to the point of singing,” he said with a laugh, “since your voice would scare the ravens right out of the trees.”

“Thanks a lot,” I grumbled. “Maybe I should have given our visitor last night a few rousing verses of ‘Waltzing Matilda.’” I decided it was safe enough to get up and get dressed. Kurt was now shoving his last few T-shirts into the laundry bag.

“Nah, ‘Kumbayah’ would have been worse.” He shook his sleeping bag out to straighten it as he did every morning, though I never bothered. A used sock tumbled out. He squatted to pick it up and wrinkled his nose at its rancid mate that he pulled out from under the cot. “Phew.”

“Too bad you couldn’t have just waved that sock at him. It would have done the trick.” I nudged him off balance with my foot as I passed; he toppled onto one knee with a thud.

“Ow. For that you make breakfast.”

“Hah. Anything I make, you have to eat.” This was the way we’d gotten used to talking to each other over the last few weeks. It felt nice and normal. I still scrambled into my clothing, because he was turning around to look at me, and I didn’t think I could do normal to the point of not reacting.

“Even you couldn’t wreck peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and canned peaches.”

“That’s really all that’s left in the bear box?” There wasn’t even a lot of peanut butter. I threw my last clean clothes on the cot and finished stuffing the dirty ones into the bag. Tossing my laundry bag into the back seat of the Toyota on the way to the box, I tried to remember if the bear had left us anything else. There really had to be a better way to store food safely than leaving everything in a metal safe to bake in the sun.

Such were my thoughts as I fetched the last of the bread and the other things and slapped some sandwiches together. Kurt came back from throwing his laundry bag into the Toyota and started to open the peaches. Good old can opener. "Let's just slurp the peaches straight from the can," he suggested. "Speed the washing up?"

"Works for me!" It would get us on the road thirty seconds faster, and I watched Kurt from the corner of my eye as he tipped the can up to get his share of the fruit. A dribble of juice ran down the corner of his mouth. I was tempted to lick it away, but he swiped his arm across his face before I could do anything stupid.

We rattled up the dirt road toward town in my little, dirt-brown Toyota that was older than I was. We'd fill it up with supplies and folded clothes, but right now it was just us and the laundry. No air conditioning -- my student budget hadn't permitted it, so the windows were down and conversation at a stop until we got to pavement. Dust from the road flew in through the open windows to mix with the smell of sweaty laundry as we rattled down the washboard road, the sounds of the meadowlarks and ravens temporarily drowned out.

"You're really wearing that to town?" Kurt eyed my hat.

"I like this hat. It keeps the rain off my head." The vibrations made the brim bounce around, so I pulled it down more tightly on my head.

"We haven't had rain in weeks and we need some. It would make our job easier." Kurt looked upward, as if he could generate a storm for the wanting.

"So, first stop is headquarters or the laundromat?" I asked when we'd gotten close to town. Meeker, all twenty-two hundred people of it, boasted the finest washing machines in the county.

"Let's hit HQ first. Then we can shower and shave." His chin, like my own, sported a two-day growth of stubble. Another day or two and we'd look fashionable, but today we just looked unkempt. Kurt's whiskers were slightly darker blond than his hair, and mine, I knew from experience, were coffee-grounds brown.

"Crap, I forgot to grab my clean clothes and stuff!" I could have struck my own forehead with dismay, except for wanting both hands to drive. I'd laid them out on top of the sleeping bag and hadn't checked again after Kurt said he'd loaded the car.

"I did get them off the cot, and you can use my dopp kit," Kurt offered, and I could hear, if not see, the twinkle in his eye. "But that means I get first shower!"

"Sure," I said with relief as I pulled into the drive in front of HQ. This was a medium-sized house a few streets off the main drag, where the Chief and his wife lived. We entered what used to be the living room, the walls covered in maps, the big desk strewn with papers, and a radio base station taking up one corner of the table that was pushed against the long wall. A pressure gauge from some team's tanker lay in pieces on the table, tools nearby.

"Hi, boys!" called Mrs. Chief from the rear of the house. "Your timing is good. The brownies are just out of the oven." She came up the hallway from the kitchen in a draft of chocolate, which smelled even better than the banana bread she'd made last week, or the sugar cookies the week

before.

“You take such good care of us!” Kurt hugged the slightly graying, fifty-something woman, who laughed and hugged him back. “Will you be my mother?”

“No adoptions finalized until after the end of your third season, dear, and I’ll still make you do your own laundry,” she warned as she turned and took my hand.

“Third season?” I said mournfully, sniffing the wonderful aroma.

“Yes, it takes that long to housebreak rangers, though Rich and Abigail did scrub the bathroom yesterday. They’re coming along beautifully.” She smiled with satisfaction.

“Maybe you can teach him to pick up his socks,” I suggested, thinking back to the crusty thing he’d extracted from under the cot.

That got me a small kiss to the cheek, though she had to reach to get me. “Pick up your socks, Kurt,” she said, and he rolled his eyes. “Now, do you want milk or coffee with the brownies?”

What a choice to have to make. We hadn’t seen either fresh milk or decent coffee in a week. Iced tea at the lodge had been the liquid indulgence there.

“Both,” she went on -- she must have divined the dilemma. “Growing boys need their milk. Harold will be back in a moment.” I had to think who Harold was: no one was ever heard to refer to him as anything but Chief.

Grown boys who had no access to fresh baked things most of the week made the plate of brownies disappear in nearly record time, washed down with a big pot of coffee and big glasses of milk. I never appreciated such things when they were readily available, and now that they were a once a week treat, they were all the sweeter. I had just finished my third cup of coffee and we were both eyeing the last two brownies, which we really should save for the Chief, when he came in.

“Glad to see you, boys. In fact, the sheriff will be glad to see you, too.” We stared at him, before memory kicked in. “He wants to talk about your incident last night. That man didn’t steal anything or harm either of you, did he?”

“No, he didn’t, though if Jake hadn’t turned up when he did, I might have needed a lot of stitches.” Kurt’s eyes turned cloudy, and I imagined he was seeing that knife at close range in his mind. “He wanted hockable stuff or cash. Guess he was thinking of his next fix. Or his next drink.” Kurt visibly threw off his thoughts. “The most valuable thing in the cabin wouldn’t have done a thing for him, though.”

“What’s that?” asked Mrs. Chief, as she poured coffee into her husband’s cup and again into mine. I was thinking binoculars or the two-way radio.

“The can opener, of course,” Kurt said blandly, and snickered at us for snorting coffee.

Once the Chief stopped laughing, he was back to business. “Who’s going to give report?”

"I am," I said. Since I was the less experienced member of the team, I'd do it, and learn something doing it. Kurt must have thought I could handle it alone, because he announced that he'd hit the shower.

"I'll grab your stuff, too, Jake," he said, and soon he'd disappeared into the back of the house.

As I talked with the Chief, pushing pins into maps and discussing how conditions were changing, I became uncomfortably aware of pressure in my bladder. All that good coffee was making itself felt. Once I'd become aware of that, I realized that the background hum was really running water. Kurt was in the shower.

Running water, what a wrong thought for right now. Kurt naked in the running water, worse thought for right now. If I got hard, I at least wouldn't piss myself, but I would surely embarrass myself. Oh hell, I was doomed to embarrass myself one way or another.

Last week, I would have just strolled to the bathroom and taken care of the problem, whether or not Kurt was in the shower. We'd been easy with each other before I became so damned aware of him. Now, with him naked on the other side of a clear curtain, I couldn't just whip it out and whizz. The pressure inside grew as I agonized.

I tried to keep my mind on what the Chief was saying, but the internal signals were making me crazy. Kurt might look if I went in. Kurt might not look, he might ignore me; that would be worse. Kurt might look and be repulsed; that would be a lot worse. Kurt might look and like it. That would be way worse, because thinking about that was going to make me hard, and the Chief was sitting right there. I tried to focus on moisture content and rainfall reports.

I was trying to concentrate, but part of me was tuned to the sound of the shower. It was going to make me lose control in a minute, but I was praying that it would stop and that I could wait the few more minutes Kurt would need to get dressed and out of the bathroom.

The internal conflict must have been showing, because the Chief looked at me with concern, right about the time the water stopped. "Are you okay, son?"

"Yeah, it's nothing." I was counting seconds, trying to think how long it would take Kurt to dress. Praying that he'd already done everything in the sink that he needed to, because things were getting desperate. "We had a strike here, last week, but it just smoldered a little." I pointed to the map. "Moisture levels were good. It took us about twenty minutes to deal with it."

The Chief looked at me a little strangely, and I realized I'd already said that once. I looked at him a little sheepishly, and then, oh glory be, I heard the bathroom door open. "Excuse me, sir!" I bolted from the room and toward the bathroom. Kurt was just coming out, chased by a cloud of steam. I pushed past him and slammed the door behind me. I fumbled for my fly and was just barely in time before the flood started. Sweet relief, and he was on the other side of the door.

It didn't keep me from hearing him say, "You could have just come on in."

Chapter Ten

Yeah, right. I shut my eyes. He went on, "Everything's in there, you might as well stay put. I'll go finish with the Chief."

Maybe after that I could get back under control. The dopp kit sat open on the counter, next to a pile of fresh clothing. One last folded towel sat on the wire rack, so I had everything I needed. My pants were already open, a situation that seemed to be all too frequent these days. I hoped he'd left some hot water, because I wasn't going to try for the cold shower this time. Dirty clothing hit the floor, and I stepped into the spray.

A washcloth and a cold lake are pretty good for getting clean -- soap isn't the necessity Dr. Bonner would have you believe. A lot of scrubbing will do it without polluting the lake, but it isn't the same as a hot shower. Even the camp shower, which lets you wet yourself with sun-warmed water, doesn't come close. I rubbed shampoo into my short brown hair, wondering if I needed to get it cut just to keep it manageable for our conditions. Kurt still looked okay, so I could probably go another week or two. I scraped my chin after my whiskers had had a chance to soften in the moist air and shaving cream. I'd smell like him now -- I didn't normally use his brand.

That thought and my soapy hands hardened up my cock, and while I wasn't alone in the house, it was as private as I could have hoped for. I soaped my body, letting my mind run free. I imagined him washing me, and then I had to drop to my knees in the tub.

The water poured on my head as I grasped my hard shaft and stroked. The hot water would run out -- so would our hosts' patience. I didn't try to slow anything. This time I imagined every detail I could get, but it all came down to sweet touching on my cock, which stuck out so far from my body. I was big, and Kurt had looked sizeable; I imagined holding one of us in each hand and then went to imagining how he put his mouth over the head. He'd have to spread his lips to accommodate my shaft, because it expanded to a wider girth a short way below the head. I pumped, and then put the other hand, still soapy, under my balls and played them under the skin. I did everything I loved, everything I knew would make me come quickly, as I arched my back and caught the water in my face. I looked down over my chest and saw how my cock stood out clearly, reddish against the white tub, my thighs framing my busy hand, and saw Kurt's face again. I wanted to imagine him putting his mouth over my shaft once more, but the image had the punch to drive me over the edge, and I shot milky come toward the drain.

When I stood up and rinsed, knees still slightly shaky, the hot water was starting to run out. Playing with myself had been good, and now I could be calm enough to go face everyone. The last towel was mine. I would grab the rest out of the hamper to launder with our things. And now for some really clean clothes. Clean underwear, a shirt that hadn't already had a day out in the truck, and pants without dirt on the knees. Socks that didn't walk on their own. Kurt had brought my stuff in, and I hunted for the first layer.

Shit. I could have sworn I put underwear in the stack back in the cabin. It should have been under

the shirt and on top of the utility pants. With the socks. I held up the socks in disbelief, as if they might have eaten the underwear, but no, they concealed nothing, and shaking the pants out didn't make any welcome little cotton bundles fall to the floor. Putting the others back on was out of the question. Going commando was out of the question. Asking to borrow a pair from the Chief was *really* out of the question.

Commando it was. I slid gingerly into the green denim utilities, grateful for the loose fit. Great. I'd be walking around Meeker, flapping free in there. I took a really deep breath and wondered if my underwear was sitting on the floor in the hallway, ready to be found by Mrs. Chief.

I took the armful of towels and clothing out to the car, scanning the floor for escaped BVDs. The denim chafed. I should have stuffed the damned underwear into one of the many pockets on the pants. I should have seen to loading my own stuff. I was going to have to ignore the feeling of freedom where normally cotton supported my package. I couldn't even joke about it to Kurt, which I might have done before, to alleviate my discomfort. This could be a really long day.

Chapter Eleven

There were enough machines free in the laundromat that we could shove everything in at the same time. The underwear that flew into the washer might as well have been on Mars for all the good they did me, though it might be different in an hour or so. Kurt shook detergent on top of the clothing and handed the box to me.

“Do you know where the red sock is?” he asked innocently.

“What red sock?” I growled. This day had had enough little irritations already. “I don’t wear red socks.” Pink whites would really be the last straw.

“Neither do I. Just checking.” He hauled the box of detergent back out to the car. Great. Now I’d be wondering if someone had left a red sock behind from the last load before mine. That was why I completely didn’t see the girl with the overflowing basket of clothes come up behind me. I turned into her and knocked her sprawling, so I had to help pick everything up and apologize. I don’t know whose face was redder, hers or mine, but I managed to escape before she asked me anything like my name or which section I patrolled. Kurt was leaning against the front fender, grinning like an idiot when I came out and slammed into the driver’s seat.

“A script writer couldn’t have done a better ‘meet cute’ scene,” he suggested through the open window. I growled something about how “meet cute” sucked.

“Did she have lacy undies?” he pursued.

“This would be a nice time to shut up, Kurt.” Undies were a sore subject just now, and I had never cared for lace.

“Then let’s go to the library next -- I’ll have to be quiet there.” Kurt made no move to get in the car. I glared at him. “Or if you have something else to do, I’ll just walk over. It’s about two blocks.”

In downtown Meeker, very little was more than two blocks away. I got out of the car, feeling doubly foolish for assuming everything was driving distance. “Let’s go.”

Two blocks was enough for me to see that Kurt had been incorporated into the fabric of the town. People waved, and a few called him by name. He waved back and tipped his hat, a standard ranger cap that he’d decorated with feathers, to the women. A little boy raced past on a bike with training wheels, screaming “Hi, Kurt!”

“Hi, Tiger!” he yelled back.

“You know everyone?” I waved, too, just to be friendly.

“Keep waving and you’ll know everybody, too. There aren’t that many people here. You can call

all the kids ‘Tiger’ and they’ll answer to it.” He pushed open the door to the library, a tiny building that housed one of the best aspects of civilization, books.

The librarian stood up at his wave and came to speak softly with us. “Do you need the computer again, Kurt?”

“Yes, please, Mrs. Wood.” He followed her behind the desk and sat to type. I followed, too, wondering what he planned.

“Just updating my blog, Jake. One of these days,” here he looked up at me with a twinkle, “it’s going to pay off. Right now the revenues are about thirty-five cents a month.” He typed in a password, and scenes of the Colorado mountains that we patrolled gave way to administrative screens. “Maybe a picture or two of you in there will boost revenues to forty cents.”

“Funny.” I watched what he was doing to put up a post.

“Just going to put in something about the fire. It’ll just take me a few minutes.” Kurt shooed me away. “Go find a book.”

I wandered the stacks, wondering what sort of book would have the answers in it that I really needed. Probably nothing the public library stocked -- I didn’t expect to find *How to Seduce the Straight Guy and Make Him Like It* on the shelves. I might be better off looking for *Saltpeter: Its Uses and Preparation*. What I ended up with was a history of the area, which looked interesting, and a collection of short stories that would probably not get opened, but it made Mrs. Wood happy. I began to see what Kurt meant about getting to know everyone.

“Done, Jake.” Kurt rose from the computer. “We can go find some groceries now.”

He headed toward the car when we came back to the main street, but I headed the other way, because what I wanted was on the next block. I let him figure it out and catch up to me. “Not ready for ‘meet cute’ phase two? Or do you just plan to wheel the groceries four blocks back to the laundry?”

“No and no. You’ll see.”

He followed me when I turned toward the hardware store. “We aren’t going to get much Spam here, or should I shut up again?”

Actually, this time I wanted to gloat. “I am not eating that again if at all possible. I am not eating powdered eggs. I am not drinking powdered milk. Even in coffee.” Pausing with my hand on the door, I reeled off what else I wanted. “I am going to eat vegetation every day of the week, and I am going to have a real fried egg six days from now. Fried in butter, I tell you.”

He looked at me in shock. “You’re quitting the Forest Service?”

I roared. I couldn’t help it: I threw my head back and howled with laughter. Every cranky thought fled, every irritation with missing underwear and someone else’s razor evaporated. Even the upcoming interview with the sheriff got lost in the hilarity of the conclusion he’d just jumped to. The more I laughed, the more he relaxed, and pretty soon he was smiling again, too, and even

chuckling.

“I take it that’s a ‘no.’”

“Kurt, your Uncle Jake is a genius. I am not quitting, I am not even moving to a desk job in town.” The flash of relief that passed over his face turned to open curiosity before I was quite sure I’d seen it. “I am going to take advantage of a natural feature to improve our quality of life. Come with me and marvel at my brilliance.” I wouldn’t say anything else, I just went into the hardware store, Kurt trailing behind, and selected the things I’d decided we needed.

Into the cart went a ninety-five quart plastic container, some long bungee cords, one hundred feet of nylon rope, a pulley, and a box of one gallon zip lock bags, which I could have probably bought at the grocery store, but I wanted to show a complete set up. “Behold, young Kurt, a wilderness refrigerator.” I waved theatrically at my selections.

“Uh, right.” He looked skeptical.

“Dear me, never show a fool a half job.” I made a tsk tsk noise. I might have been less dramatic but I was still smarting over the “red sock” and “meet cute” jokes. “We still need to install the cooling unit. Or rather, install our new fridge in the cooling unit.” Light began to dawn -- his face showed his understanding. “Kurt, that is one damned cold lake. We might as well use it.”

We laughed like loons all the way to the grocery store, making lists of things we wanted to get and could never reasonably take with us.

“Mayonnaise! Eggs!” I shouted.

“Hamburgers!” Kurt dreamed out loud. “Cheese!”

“Butter!” we breathed in unison.

“Milk,” Kurt practically moaned. “The cereal can live in the bear box.”

“Tuna fish!”

“You want something that comes in a can? I thought we were done with cans?” Kurt was puzzled.

“Not done with cans, just not dependent on cans like before. Tuna will taste a helluva lot better with mayonnaise.” I could hardly wait to taste it. “We can eat like normal people if we can keep some things cold.”

Kurt tweaked my Aussie hat down. “Vegemite?”

“I should buy some and make you eat it.”

We pushed the cart through the aisles at Watt’s Ranch Market, loading it with things we’d never bought in more than one-day quantities. The eggs made me smile; to hell with cholesterol, we were young and egg deprived, so a second dozen joined the first. Frozen hamburger patties landed near the buns, and tomatoes got placed carefully on top of the cereal boxes.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Jake, we still can’t bake on a propane stove.” Kurt followed me down an aisle of cake mixes and chocolate chips.

“I do know how to do it with a Dutch oven and a fire, but we aren’t home long enough to get it started and still eat before midnight. You’ve heard of pancakes, though?” I found a ten pound bag of flour that would go in the bear box, and another bag of brown sugar to replace what the bear had stolen.

“I can even make them, smartass.” Kurt put bottles of cooking oil and syrup in the cart.

“Good. You’re in charge of breakfast tomorrow. Don’t forget the baking soda.” I trundled away to the dairy section to examine the milk containers. Surely one sort wouldn’t need to be bagged or kept upright.

“Catch any crocodiles yet?” The checkout girl, short, blond, maybe nineteen, and marked “Hi, My Name Is Lindy,” wanted to know.

“Something of a crocodile shortage around these parts, ma’am.” I tipped my hat to her. “G’day.”

“Ask him to say ‘Crikey!’” Kurt suggested as he put groceries on the conveyor belt.

“Yeah! Say ‘Crikey!’” She giggled as she swiped the milk over the scanner and bagged it.

“I like my Aussie hat, and I am not saying ‘Crikey!’” I set the lettuce and tomatoes down for her to scan.

“You just did!” they chorused.

“Agh!” I yanked my hat off and smacked Kurt across the arm with it. “Keep that up and I’ll sing every last verse of ‘Waltzing Matilda’ on the way back to the cabin!” I parked it back on my head with a dashing tilt.

“No! No!” Kurt howled in mock horror. At least, I think it was mock horror.

“Gee, I think you should sing it at the Flat Tops Lounge. It’s karaoke night. Want to?” She scanned the butter, missed, and had to rescan, distracted by trying to entice me. She was persistent, I’ll give her that, but I’d said “no thanks” when she’d suggested seeing a movie last week, and Kurt had declined a similar invitation the week before.

“Want to see how fast they throw me out for being worst karaoke singer ever heard?” I wasn’t really kidding, and Kurt wasn’t helping by putting his hands over his ears and shaking his head with anticipated pain, mouthing, “No, no, no, no.”

“We could go bowling instead?” she offered. “Kurt, Tanya might be there, she was just talking about you. I could call her?” She tilted her head to look up through her lashes, and I was glad I didn’t have to evade her every day.

“We’ve got a technical problem -- we need to get the chow back home before anything spoils,”

Kurt told her as he put the eggs down tenderly.

She scanned them, disappointed. "I was wondering. This doesn't look like ranger rations."

"No, Genius here figured out how to keep stuff cold!" Kurt loaded the conveyor with the last perishables.

"All right!" The words got drowned out in the scanner's beeping, but the smile was wide enough to see from outer space. "So, which one of you is the chef?"

"He is!" we said together.

She laughed. "Maybe Tanya and I should come out and fix dinner for you."

"That's sweet of you, but we need to learn how to do it." Kurt counted out bills into her hand.

"Then we'll give you a week or two to practice and you can cook dinner for us!" Blue eyes batted behind her round glasses.

"Two weeks might not be enough to improve our bachelor cooking into edibility. Better not risk it." I had to admire how he turned "no" into something she could accept with a smile, even though I could feel her eyes on our backs as we hauled our prizes to the Toyota. I was relieved he'd turned her down. She'd brushed my hand with hers while loading the last bag into the cart -- Lindy in a less public place might be a lot harder to avoid.

Back at the laundromat, I looked wistfully at my sopping wet underwear, which was going from washer to dryer without landing on me. They could spin around and get wearable while we went to talk to the sheriff. I'd been ignoring my commando state as best I could, though I think Lindy had noticed. With luck, the sheriff wouldn't.

We'd been told to come by the office around noon, since the sheriff would be back by then. That made me a little queasy, because I didn't like thinking about last night and how close Kurt had come to getting hurt. There was something about the way the whole thing had gone down that I hadn't told Kurt, something I didn't really want to tell him. Maybe that aspect of it wouldn't come up.

"Hello, boys." I'd met the sheriff before, during orientation, and hadn't had reason to talk to him since. Tall and lanky, with a uniform so crisp that it probably saluted him every morning, he was the epitome of The Law. It was an elective office in this county, but Michael Dodd had a reputation for taking the job seriously. "Heard you had a spot of trouble last night."

"Nothing we couldn't handle, sir. No bloodshed." We told the story of the encounter again, taking turns adding details.

"Would you recognize the man if you saw him again?" the Sheriff asked. He led us to a door that had a hand lettered sign saying "Pokey," and opened it, revealing two cells. One was empty and the other made any question of recognition a moot point. Fat Boy looked up and snarled.

"Should have cut you fuckers up while I had the chance, you sonofabitch, cheapass bastards..."

He rattled the bars, making me grateful they were between him and us -- he looked smaller in the light, but angrier, more desperate, as he dragged himself to his feet, hand over hand. "Get over here, I'll fix you..."

The sheriff shut the door again. "That answers that. Old Desperado won't be around again. We caught him trying to break into the Gaston house in the early hours this morning. We could keep him on that, or on menacing you two, but I think we'll just let him be a guest of the county until someone comes up from Denver and collects him. They want him for just about everything you can think of down there."

"Glad someone wants him -- we sure don't." Kurt looked grimly satisfied at this news.

"Good job on scaring him off instead of hurting him, Jake. Keeps the paperwork down." Sheriff Dodd dismissed us with a handshake. I burned with shame at the praise, knowing I didn't deserve it, and I let Kurt lead the conversation on the way back to the laundry.

Chapter Twelve

The clothes were dry, but the underwear were no closer to being on me than they had been while wet, since there was no place to go to put them on. I folded them with longing and placed them in the bag with regret; I was moving around in there, chafing, and it was about to get embarrassing as Kurt bent into the dryer, retrieving another armload of clothing. His ass stuck out invitingly, green fabric stretched tight over his buttocks. As I looked away, I noticed the girl whose things I'd knocked over looking at him, too.

"Hey, guys, I think one of you left this in the washer." She came over with a wad of damp, blue fabric, which she snapped out to transform into a pair of Kurt's underwear. She was standing up very straight, with her chest out.

"Thanks." Kurt reached for them, but she pulled back a trifle.

"Kind of nice to know it isn't ranger green all the way to your skin." She flipped her long, blond hair back over her shoulder. "Your stuff is pretty much dry. I've got a load going into the dryer, want me to throw them in? We could go over to the coffee shop and have some pie while they dry." Her smile included me in the invitation, as if handling laundry was a social introduction.

I snapped a towel into straightness, irritated with her, yet knowing that Kurt did attract that kind of attention -- this was hardly the first time, even today.

"They can air dry, thanks, may I have them back? I don't usually let strangers handle my underwear." He held out his hand again.

"I'm April, now I'm not a stranger." She swung the underwear by the elastic on one finger. "Really, they can dry with my things."

"Not with a car full of foods that have a long way to go to get to the fridge, and we still need to build the fridge." He looked at her cajolingly. "Please, April?"

If he worked this right, he could have dry underwear, a piece of pie, and probably a piece of her. I just didn't want to hear him work his charm on her, and he wasn't laying it on, either. There'd been other times, but he'd stopped short of leaving with anyone when we'd gone bowling or to the diner.

"We should chill the eggs before we can hear the salmonella dividing in there," I put in, as I folded the last of Mrs. Chief's ranger towels. April handed over the underwear, shoulders slumping, and went back to throwing things from the washer to the dryer.

We did move the car this time because of the laundry and groceries. Dropping off the towels would be our last stop in town, and I could do a small task to complete our wilderness fridge. The Chief led me back to the garage with the ninety-five quart container in hand. Kurt ducked into the house

with the stack of clean towels. “What size bit do you want?” he asked, as he pulled his power drill off the shelf.

I’d thought about weight and water when I’d stowed the plastic box in the back seat. “Quarter inch, or larger if you have it.” He handed me a half-inch masonry bit, which I chucked into the drill and then I squeezed off an experimental burst of electricity.

“That container would weigh about what you do, if it were full,” the Chief said, brow wrinkled. “You’d need to drain it to lift it at all.”

“I might need to do a proper block and tackle anyway.” I started a series of holes across the sides, wondering how many holes it would take to fatally weaken the bottom. “But this should get it down to not much more than the weight of the food.”

“Let me know how it works,” said the Chief, as he left me to the scream of the drill.

We’d cleared the edge of town before Kurt brought up the girls. “Maybe I shouldn’t have been making your decisions for you back there, Jake.”

“Didn’t notice you making any I disagreed with.” At this point, I still wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“All you’d need to do is crook your finger at Lindy and she’d come running. Or April. I don’t think she’d care which one of us she got her hands on, and you’ve already seen her underwear.” He tipped the seat back down a bit and stretched out.

I passed a stock truck before I answered that. “No kidding, either one of us would do. Fresh men in a small town, they’re all over us.”

“They don’t know every embarrassing thing about us going all the way back to kindergarten. We could probably be horrible trolls and they’d still find us attractive. Not that you’re a troll or anything,” Kurt said. “In fact, you’re less trollish now that the puppy fat is gone.”

I cringed. Puppy fat? Well, I had been a little soft around the middle when I got out here. Blame it on a student lifestyle, where easily available pizza could overpower the gym time. I’d had a pretty good physique, just hidden under a bit of padding. At an even six feet tall, I was still a little short for the one hundred eighty-five pounds I had been packing. Domino’s didn’t deliver out to the cabin, morning doughnuts were forty miles away, and I’d been doing a lot of physical labor. Three weeks away from the treats and I was down some weight -- I’d had to take my belt in another notch this morning. The T-shirt was tighter in the arms, too, and it wasn’t because it had shrunk in the laundry, either. I’d had a good look at myself in the bathroom at the HQ. If the Lindys of the world noticed Kurt first, they still had reason to notice me.

Kurt had just noticed me. I swallowed hard.

He went on. “It can work out, though. Look at Rich and Abigail.” I’d met them briefly and hadn’t gotten to know them much -- the ranger teams weren’t usually in the same place at the same time unless there was a disaster going on. “Abigail was working at the gas station when Rich came up from Pueblo, and they got engaged. Now they’re a ranger team, which should be a good trial for

married life.”

“It’s one way to get to know someone real well, I guess.” I eased off the paved road and onto our dirt road, ready to rattle some more. “You weren’t thrilled about Lindy and Tanya coming out to fix dinner, et cetera, et cetera. Sounded like there could have been a lot of et cetera.”

“I’m picky. Face it, Jake, this is a small town, and we’re a nice addition to the male landscape. And Rich is kind of a cautionary tale, even though I like Abigail. We could sure get laid, but how much do you want to bet we’d end up with angry daddies marching us down to Pastor Blivens at shotgun point?”

“Is that what happened to Rich?” I hadn’t heard anything like that, but I’d been mostly listening to Kurt these last few weeks.

“No. I think Abigail arm-wrestled April, Lindy, and Tanya for him.” We broke out laughing.

“Where did you want to hang the pulley?” Kurt asked as we surveyed the shore at the lake.

“See that limb? It should work there.” I pointed to a sturdy cottonwood that stuck out over the water.

“It will foul the Tarzan rope,” Kurt warned.

“Which is more important, playing Tarzan or having cold food?” I knew which way I voted, but the rope was a lot of fun. We hadn’t been swimming since I’d started noticing him in a big way, but Kurt would probably suggest it soon. Since we always skinny dipped, that could be reeeal interesting.

“The food, but... Maybe we can hang it separately enough that we can have both.” Kurt took off his heavy boots, stuck the pulley and the hank of thin rope in the leg pockets of his utilities, and started to shim up the tree. I could only watch in amazement -- I thought we’d have to bring the tank truck down to stand on that. Must be that old rock-climbing background. He got out on the limb to tie the pulley on, cutting the cord to length with his pocket knife.

“Okay, throw me the rope, I’ll thread it through.”

Trying to throw the end of an unweighted rope is kind of frustrating. I tossed it, but it fell way short of Kurt’s waving hand -- I had to reel in the wet nylon twice. The third time, I tied the chunk of parmesan cheese to the end, and the weight made it a lot easier to throw. It was almost accurate enough; it was within inches of his hand, so close that he was tempted to lunge after it. Mistake -- he overbalanced and fell headfirst out of the tree, screaming and flailing all the way down into the water.

I laughed out loud when he surfaced, spitting out a stream of lake water, hair plastered flat to his scalp. “How deep is it out there?” I called, knowing it was well past eight feet.

I got a crusty look for that on his swim back to the shore. “Deep enough,” he replied.

Once on shore, he untied the cheese from the rope and threw it like a fastball at me. He peeled off

the T-shirt, gone dark from the water. Wringing it out, he made a puddle at his feet as muscles rippled in his arms and chest. The shirt got draped over a fallen log to dry before he tied the end of the rope around his waist and headed back up the tree. This time I watched his bare arms and back, and dropping my eyes let me see the wet cotton clinging to his ass as he scaled the trunk. I had to look away before my body responded to that, so I started packaging food into the gallon zipper bags, pressing the air out as best I could. Soon Kurt was back on the ground, and we rigged the box with both ends of the rope, one to raise and lower, the other to pull the box toward shore.

“First, a wet run,” I decided, so the box dipped into the water and was retrieved without incident. Putting the food in changed the balance -- too many heavy things must have been on one side. The box came out of the water, draining in cascades from all the holes, when it slipped to one side and opened. All the precious food went flipping into the lake.

“Shit!” we yelped. I started pulling off my boots, and Kurt peeled out of the wet utilities. The wet clothing would be a danger as we went down to the bottom to retrieve our goodies, so I peeled down, too, more easily since my clothes were still dry. Still no underwear, since I hadn’t been able to find a way to smuggle some into the bathroom at HQ. Didn’t matter now. I wrapped a bight of rope around a rock to fix the box in place over the water, and then followed Kurt into the lake.

We dived and surfaced, hands full, loading some of the prizes into the dangling box, then taking things to shore when the box didn’t look like it could take any more safely in its tilted position.

“Did you find the mayonnaise?” I asked, once we’d both been down and back twice empty handed. The water was not clear enough to find anything by sight, so we were hunting by touch.

“No, I thought you did,” Kurt said as he treaded water.

“Damn, I really wanted that mayonnaise,” I said. I resigned myself to another chilly trip downward. Kurt twisted in the water and did a tucked surface dive, shooting to the bottom as he uncoiled his legs, which gave me a brief look at his package before he submerged. That couldn’t have been intentional, and I was grateful for the cold water that would hinder me from getting hard. I’d seen him naked before, but that was before. Now I was noticing, and I was as naked as he was.

Almost oxygenated enough to go down again to help hunt, I had started to turn in the water when Kurt surfaced next to me. Actually, he’d nearly come up underneath me, and he stroked the length of my body as he rose to the air. Pushing off me to gain a little distance, he planted a foot on my thigh, dangerously close to my groin. The cold water was my ally, I reminded myself -- the face full of splashing would help me not react.

“Success!” he crowed, waving the jar around. “Is that everything?”

“I think so,” I said, and we swam to shore.

“Careful,” he warned as we pulled the dangling box over to land. “I don’t really want to go after all that again.” Me either, I thought, though if he brushed against me again, I wouldn’t mind. I just wished he’d done it on purpose.

We rigged a cradle for the box, using more of the thin rope that Kurt had used to secure the pulley to the tree. Kurt hadn’t put his clothes back on, which meant that I couldn’t either without calling

attention to my nakedness. Chilly enough to not embarrass myself, I bit the inside of my cheek when I got too much of a look at Kurt's body. He squatted to tie the cord with some complicated climber's knot that he assured me would not come undone accidentally. Then we secured the box around with the forgotten bungee cords, a move that would have saved considerable trouble had we done it half an hour earlier. Satisfied that the box wouldn't tilt now that the rope went through a few of the drain holes, no matter how badly unbalanced it was, we lowered our fridge into the water.

"That box is on belay," he said with a grin. "It goes nowhere now, unless we move it."

"All right!" We high-fived each other, and then Kurt flopped onto the grass in a sunny spot, on, dear Lord, his back. He put his hands under his head after selecting a stem of grass to chew on, and raised one knee. This was nothing new -- the only new thing was how much I wanted to run my hands over him.

"Want to swim some more after we warm up?" he suggested around his grass stem, which waggled in the air. "See if the fridge box and the Tarzan rope are compatible?"

"I'm pretty cold," I said, and that was only the truth. My teeth wanted to chatter, but warming up would endanger my composure. Looking at Kurt would really endanger my composure, so I shaded my eyes and looked across the lake at nothing at all. "I think I'll start dinner." That gave me the excuse to pick up my clothes and dress, pants first.

"Do you usually go commando?" which was a stupid question for him to ask -- he'd seen me get dressed often enough to know. Oh shit, it meant he was looking. At least I wasn't hard.

"No, I forgot to throw any clean ones on the pile this morning," I replied, cursing my flawed memory.

"Did you remember to save out the stuff you wanted to cook with, or did it all go into the water?" he asked.

"Damn, it's all in the box." Okay, I'd been a little distracted.

"Early onset Alzheimer's, it's a bitch." Kurt sat up to put his boots on. "See you up at the cabin." He stood up and then bent to grab his wet clothing, which he slung over his shoulder rather than putting it on. After all, there was no one here to see but me, right?

Kurt headed up the hill, wearing nothing but boots, whistling some tune. Hauling up the box was a good reason to drag my eyes away before he turned around and caught me looking at him with the longing I was sure showed on every feature. I didn't want to watch him walk away naked, I wanted to watch him walk toward me naked. Rummaging in the box let me catch glimpses before he disappeared around the curve, the dark green fabric covering only his shoulder and back. My body remembered how he'd slipped against me as he rose from the bottom of the lake, mayonnaise in hand.

He'd been so close, and still so far.

Chapter Thirteen

Breakfast was delicious, though it was a good thing Kurt made it -- I would probably have burnt everything from sleepy inattention. Last night had been horrible. I'd forced myself not to toss and turn, but sleep didn't come for a long time. I could hear Kurt's soft breathing from less than ten feet away, but it might as well have been miles for all I could go to him.

The memory of him walking up the hill in nothing but his boots would have killed sleep all by itself. Wet, green clothing tossed over his shoulder just played up the way he moved, and I'd only been able to sneak peeks while I fished things back out of the box. Thinking about that sent me out of the cabin to relieve tension around midnight, when I ducked into the trees and let myself remember his broad shoulders tapering to his waist and the way the muscles in his ass flexed as he ambled off. The red fox that made the rounds by our cabin lolled his tongue in the moonlight at me when I was done. I threw a pine cone at him for catching me at it.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take. He could be upset at the way I burned for him, or he might think I was a pervert for wanting him. He might give me the sideways beady eye for the rest of the season, never being at ease with me again, or he could tell me to get the hell out.

Maybe getting out of the Forest Service would be the better answer. Running seemed like the right thing to do around two a.m. Then Kurt would never have to know how much I wanted him, he'd never have the chance to tell me "no." He'd never have a reason to think less of me for what I wanted to do with him.

He'd have other reasons, though. At two-ten I remembered that he'd been happy when I said I wasn't leaving the Forest Service when we talked about food, so running would disappoint him, especially if my reasons sounded like cowardice about fire. I wondered if I could pull off a lie about family responsibilities.

Kurt lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing at my worn appearance -- the shaving mirror confirmed that the sleeplessness had marked me. He might have had some inkling of what was going through my mind, because he didn't take the opportunity to twit me as he usually would. Maybe it was all going to come crumbling down on me anyway. The blue sky had that kind of omen in it -- there was a front visible to the northwest. Except that rain would be a good thing for this parched land, and there was no guarantee we'd get it.

The morning patrol was uneventful, which was good, because I missed most of it. The rumble of the big diesel engine was putting me to sleep more than keeping me awake. After the third head bob, Kurt tossed me a jacket and told me to curl up and sleep for a while. "I'll wake you if anything happens. You aren't going to be a damned bit of good like that; you might as well catch a couple of Zs."

The dreams were jumbled and strange; this wasn't going to be really restful sleep. Kurt kept talking to me in these dreams, and he was telling me all the things I wanted to hear, when I could

understand the words. Trees and motorbikes dueled weirdly as I shot at formless things with the bow and missed.

I must have drifted into a better sleep after a while, because the dreams stopped, and I was vaguely aware of being more comfortable. A pillow beneath my cheek helped, then I was out like the proverbial light, no dreams, no thoughts.

The peace was shattered some unknown time later, but I sure didn't wake on my own. Kurt was shaking my shoulder, saying, "Jake, wake up! Come on, wake up!"

First I said, "Wha'?" and then I screamed, "Ow!" when my face connected sharply with the steering wheel. Flopping back where I'd started plopped my head on Kurt's thigh, and I put both hands to my battered nose. My eyes were scrunched shut from the blow -- I could barely register where I was or what had happened.

"Guess you're awake now," Kurt said wryly as I sat up. "Anything broken?"

"Don't think so." I touched my nose gingerly.

"Good, because we have a fire to put out."

Chapter Fourteen

It was a quick ride to a point closer to where the smoke was visible. There was even a wide spot to get the truck off the road. The Chief took down the coordinates over the radio on the short trip, promising to send someone else over if we needed it and warning us that erratic winds were being reported all over the National Forest. “There’s a storm moving in, but it might be a dry one, boys.” We groaned at that, because dry storms carried lightning and one fire was enough.

We jumped out of the truck to extract the things we needed: our heavy, fire-retardant pants and jackets, the helmets, air tanks, shovels, and the axes. I eyed the fire shelters in their vinyl bags. “Think we should take these?”

“No, I don’t think it’s that big of a fire, we should have it out pretty fast.” Kurt slung the axe over his shoulder.

There was a small amount of smoke curling up out of the trees. The whine of an engine made me pull my head out of the equipment locker on the side of the truck in time to see the red RAV4 come pelting around the bend. They didn’t stop; they actually sped up going past us, hauling out of range without stopping.

Sweat started to trickle down my back even with the jacket open as we marched into the trees, going farther, once again, than we could squirt with the hose. Where to go was pretty obvious -- follow the cigarette butt trail. Max’s lesson in manners hadn’t stuck. What we found looked not much worse than what we’d coped with the other day, though this time human stupidity was the cause. Asshats, burning my woods.

The trail of cigarette butts led from the road to what had been a camp site. The tent itself was a few charred shreds of fabric on poles that curved into the air in the center of a circle of burning pine duff. The trees were thick here, tall and thin, fighting to reach the light with the green upper branches. Lower branches had lost the race to the sun, forfeiting their needles and becoming dry snags. Conditions were bad for a fire to get loose here where everything looked like dry fuel.

“I think if we clear a fire break on the ground, we can keep it from getting into the trees,” Kurt said, and we started scraping the earth clean. Starving the fire would work better than trying to put it out directly. We worked diligently and were nearly two thirds around the fire zone when the wind whipped up.

“Shit!” Kurt sprinted for a section of the fire zone that had started expanding a whole lot faster as the wind pushed the flames. I followed, knowing that he wanted to keep the ground fire from hitting the trees, and we scraped frantically before two of the endangered trees, but the third caught fire before we could get there.

Flame licked up the trunk and tasted the branches. “It’s candling,” Kurt snarled, craning his head to peer into the treetops.

The fire was consuming the tree from the base upward and had already spread along the lower limbs. I craned upward, too, looking for what else would be in danger from this tree.

“The one damned beetle-killed pine on this acre and it’s right there!” He whipped the axe around. “If we take it down, away from the candle, it won’t take the fire into the crown.” He started chopping, and I cleared ground around the candling tree, lest the fire spread farther. The wind continued whipping around, blowing smoke into our faces and making little sparks jump into the air. It seemed to change direction every few seconds, which raised the risks -- we couldn’t be in every place at once.

“Push from here!” Kurt had his hands on the partly severed trunk, so I helped him shove the tree over, away from the fire. Satisfied that the most dangerous bit of ladder fuel wasn’t going to burn now, we looked around for what to do next. The wind howled again, pelting us with debris -- once again it had shifted directions. Now it was pushing the fire back over onto ground that had already burned, or that had fire break scraped, which made the wind our ally.

That didn’t last. The winds changed yet again, lifting burning bits into the air. Some went out like fireflies, others fell back onto burned ground, and a few sailed over the firebreak to land in fresh fuel. I suddenly hated the springy pine duff -- it burned too easily. We stamped out the spot fires that started, but the candling tree had not exhausted itself and now it came apart.

Burning chunks flew in the wild wind, bouncing on the ground, shedding sparks. Some flew upward as one evil gust caught them, flipping at least one into a tree that was mostly dead and had not fallen completely. It smoldered twenty feet above our heads.

“If we take down that one?” I pointed at one tree, but Kurt swung his axe at the next one over to bring the dead tree down and within our reach. I started hacking at the tall pine that Kurt thought supported the dead tree the most. If we tipped it right, the whole burning mess would come down onto scorched ground to die.

But it was too late. The dead tree became its own funeral pyre as it burst into flame, crackling and popping. The wind played with the flames, sharing them with the other trees, and it didn’t matter any more that two burning pines dropped onto what was left of the tent.

“The operation was a success, but the patient died,” Kurt quipped. We counted how many trees still standing had flames dancing in their tops. “It is now officially bigger than the two of us. Let’s get out of here.”

“What if we took out the trees at the perimeter?” I asked, but I gathered my equipment anyway.

“Won’t help, the perimeter is too big, because the wind keeps changing. We can chop away while it blows fire over there.” Kurt pointed at a tree on the far side of the burnt circle that had orange licks curling around the trunk. “Come on!” He set off at a brisk pace back to the truck. “We need a look at the map.”

Remembering glumly that wind could carry fire long distances, knowing that a crown fire was well beyond the ability of two men to extinguish, I followed Kurt back to the truck.

“Think we can hit it with the water now?” I asked. I slung my shovel onto its hook and slammed the cargo door.

“Not going to stick around to find out,” Kurt told me. “The wind is so crazy that the fire is spreading fast. Count trees.” He got into the driver’s seat and picked up the microphone before turning the engine over.

I counted trees on fire -- it hurt to see that the number had nearly doubled while we hiked back. Kurt was talking with the Chief. I tuned back in to what they were saying when the Chief’s voice crackled out, “Head out to a safe distance. We may have to let this one burn out against the scarp. Got a dozer team headed to the east of you now.”

“Roger that, out,” Kurt finished. The wind took fire to another two trees.

“Don’t we have enough distance now?” I asked. “The trees are about fifty yards off the road, there’s just this scrubby stuff here.”

“This scrubby stuff is gambel oak.” Kurt turned over the diesel engine. The noise drowned out my words before I remembered that I knew the significance of gambel oak.

“Gotcha,” I said, looking over at the trees again. “How fast do you think this fire is expanding?”

Kurt did some calculations in his head. “It’s not going to set any records,” he said, throwing the big diesel into gear, “but if it was moving fourteen miles a day, it would have gotten us already and taken out Rendezvous Lake Lodge before tomorrow night. The dozer team is between them and the fire. They should be fine. Us, on the other hand...”

“What’s our problem?”

“Jake, did you or did you not learn to read a map?” He was trying to get the truck turned around, and doing it by his usual Braille system, though to be fair, it was a one-lane road with brush on either side. Given what that brush would do once alight, I didn’t begrudge a few scratches and a bit of testiness.

So I grabbed the map, a USGS topological map, and looked at it. “Where do I start looking?” I was forced to ask. Falling asleep had left me uncertain where we were.

The truck was pointed the other way at last, so he took a moment to stab a finger to the page. “Here.”

It took me a minute to figure out what the trouble was. “This road ends about a mile up, so we’re turning around instead of getting caught on a dead end. Whoa, I bet the RAV4 people went up and found out they’d trapped themselves.”

“Yeah. If they even had a map. So, we’ll go back the other way instead of sticking around with all these nice green incendiaries.” He picked up some speed as he glanced at the forest that was putting out huge clouds of smoke. “We want to get at least seven miles away. Look at the map and tell me why that is.”

“Because that puts us seven miles away from the fire?” Looking at the wavy lines on the topo map wasn’t telling me enough, apparently, because he snorted.

“We can’t go the other way, at least not and stay with the truck, and we need to get past where the scarp ends.” I was going to have to ask another probably dumb question, but he decided to just give me *Map Reading for Dummies*, chapter four. “See all those lines really close together? That means steep terrain. Now look to our left and tell me how those things go together.”

It would help if I knew what the hell a scarp was, but I could see gambel oak stretching maybe a half mile to a rather imposing cliff that ran back behind us a long way and stretched out parallel to the road a long way ahead. The map showed the wavy lines separating about six miles ahead, so the cliff must be the scarp. “Because if we don’t, we risk getting trapped between something we can’t climb and the fire.”

“Right, and...” Before he could finish the thought, the wind had changed yet again, blowing massive amounts of smoke and dirt across the road. Visibility went to nothing, so Kurt slackened speed, but not soon enough to let him avoid an obstacle that he would rather have gone around. We’d known this thing was there, we’d avoided it the other day, I realized, but we took that damned rock in the road at about twenty-five miles an hour with one wheel.

The impact was enough to swing the medium-duty truck halfway around, so the rear wheels caught in the brush. Sixteen thousand pounds of water in the back kept right on going, though. There was a sickening moment of inertia as we tipped up on one set of wheels, and I thought we were going to go right on over, but the backsplash in the tank knocked us back onto six tires. We were sitting with a distinct list, but we were upright.

Not that it did us much good. Kurt and I both scrambled out of the truck to assess the damage.

“Damn it!” Kurt and I swore with dismay over the blown front tire. We chucked our heavy fire jackets to one side, preparing to deal with this latest setback. I slung myself under the truck to grab the jack.

With one eye each toward the blazing trees, we shoved that jack into position and took turns pumping the handle to raise the truck high enough to get the weight off the split tire and then farther, to get the axle high enough to put the spare on. Sweat pooled under my arms and on my breastbone. Kurt’s shirt grew dark and stuck to his back with the exertion of yanking the handle up and down.

“It would have to be a front tire,” I grumbled as I wrestled the sixty-five pound spare out from under the chassis. If it had been a rear tire, we’d just limp along on the redundancy of the other two tires on that side, but I had to roll the spare along the ground to where Kurt was wrenching the tire iron around and around to remove the bolts on the damaged tire. On the fourth bolt, Kurt leaned his full weight on the tire iron, but it didn’t budge until I leaned on it with him. The horrible screech sounded like the bolt stripping, but it turned at last. The fifth bolt didn’t fight us, letting me throw the casualty to one side into the brush. If the tire survived the flames, we’d salvage it later, and if it didn’t, we’d count the cost cheap, but time wasn’t our friend now. The wind pushed smoke and ash into our skins.

Kurt and I heaved the tire, struggling with the weight as we mated the holes in the rim with the

bolts. What would have been a moderate task if we were fresh was burdensome now, while we were tired from fighting the fire. I fumbled the nuts onto the bolts, dropping one into the dirt, where it rolled under the truck.

“Leave it, Jake. We’ll be okay,” Kurt said with one hand gripping my arm. I swore and tried to dive after it. “Four bolts will get us out of here.” He turned the iron again, tightening the nuts into drivability.

After we finished the exchange, Kurt looked at me wryly. “It never rains but it pours,” his face seemed to say, but we said nothing, we just scrambled into the cab. The flames had advanced toward us, a thumb of fire reaching out into the gambel oaks, trying to find the road. I’d always liked the smell of burning oak, but that was in a fireplace. The smell wouldn’t mean home any more, only danger, after this.

“Let’s get out of here,” Kurt suggested. He turned the key to bring the big diesel to life. “It’s going to get hot.”

“No shit.” I looked out at the fire coming toward us. “Can we go, already?”

“Okay.” Kurt threw the truck into gear and stepped on the pedal. We didn’t move, though the truck howled. He tried wrenching the gearshift into what should have been first gear, though it didn’t look like a different position than before, let out the clutch, and stepped on the accelerator again. We didn’t move, though the noise coming from below was ghastly. “What the fuck?”

He tried reverse, but nothing happened except that the noise changed slightly, from a grinding scream to a metallic clanking.

“Kurt, stop! You’ll take out the transmission if you keep that up!” I deciphered what had happened -- something essential had broken when the truck smashed back onto the level. “The pinion gear is gone -- that’s a couple days in the shop, at least.”

“Fuck!” Kurt smashed his hand against the steering wheel.

“What do we do now?” I yelled back, more out of frustration than hope that he’d know. The fire here was well past the edge of the pine forest, but the wind was shifting crazily again and would get the fire past the road soon. The edge of flame was too low to see, but the explosions announced burning gambel oak becoming superheated. I wanted to be well away from brush that turned to flaming shrapnel.

“Start walking, Jake.”

Kurt tossed down the map and picked up the radio. “Bad news, Chief; the truck is cratered. We hit a rock and busted the pinion gear. It’s not going anywhere.” There was silence for a moment, and then the Chief’s voice crackled out.

“I’ll send Rich and Abigail after you, stay put. ETA in one point seven five hours.”

“No can do, Chief. Fire’s coming this way.” The wind had changed again, bringing the stink of smoke through the vents. “We’re going to head out. I think we can get around the fire and up Road

Twelve far enough to be out of range. But yeah, send..."

I missed the rest of the conversation because I had gotten out of the truck, armed with an idea. The pump gurgled on, the hose filled, and I started squirting five hundred gallons of water at the brush around the truck.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Kurt screamed into the wind. He'd finished talking with the Chief and followed me out of the truck.

"I'm laying a wet line!" I screeched back. "It might help."

"Getting our asses out of here would really help!" he yelled, this time out of anger rather than trying to be heard over the wind, which had hit an inexplicable lull.

"Yeah, well, the fire isn't advancing right now, so it doesn't matter! It might save the truck if it does come this way." I kept spraying water in a large semicircle around the truck. It would be great to salvage the truck, but it would be even better not to see if exploding gambel oak or exploding diesel fuel created more havoc.

"It would be more time for us to haul ass!" Kurt insisted. "Come on!"

"I have another hundred fifty gallons to lay down. Go get stuff while I do it." Might as well empty the tank -- that water sure wasn't doing any good where it was.

"It's going to evaporate before the fire gets here," he warned, but went to get things out of the compartments in the sides of the truck.

The pump coughed dry, so I left the hose on the ground. I wasn't going to demand the time to coil it. The wind was getting insistent again, but parallel to the flames now, and I hoped it would stay that way, since it was blowing the eastern edge of the fire back on itself. I didn't think there would be a western edge because we'd put that side out pretty much. If we were lucky it would put itself out that way on the eastern side, but we couldn't depend on it. I went to collect my share of the equipment. Kurt had laid out the fire shelters, extra oxygen tanks, and all the spare drinking water bottles we had. With luck, the two gallons would be enough. Without, they'd be enough for the rest of our lives.

"Saddle up, Jake." Kurt heaved his own shelter, which was a bit bigger than a scuba tank, on his back and collected some more air tanks. I filled my pockets with water bottles, hoisted my own gear, and we set off down the road. We marched silently, sometimes because the wind veered on us and we needed the masks, sometimes because there just didn't seem to be anything to say.

Chapter Fifteen

We could be out of range in two or two and a half hours, I judged, at the pace we were able to make in our tired and laden condition. I tried not to think about anything more than putting one foot in front of the other, and I looked at nothing more than the road. Someone might be by to get us before we'd gotten past the scarp, but only if we stayed on the road instead of going cross country on a short cut.

Our pace was slowed by a bad gust of wind which blew into us, making every step twice the effort. When it changed, it buffeted us from the side, not exactly an improvement, because now it brought more ash and smoke, obscuring the roadbed. Kurt and I could see each other enough not to collide, and that was about it. Too bad the elk outran their visibility.

The herd, which might have numbered only six or seven but felt like ten thousand, came bounding out of the smoke at us, spooked at last by the fire. Big animals seemed bigger for coming out of nowhere, their brown backs as high as my chest. Wide, tall, and frightened, they knocked us back and forth as they passed us, throwing us against their herdmates. We were helpless in the short maelstrom, bouncing from one hairy assailant to another, ending in the dusty roadbed as the herd disappeared, quickly as it came.

"Are you all right?" I asked Kurt. I dragged myself to sitting, but he hadn't moved yet.

"I am going," he paused and grunted, "to come back during hunting season and shoot every last one of those damned elk." He sat up, reached to his ankle, and probed inside his boot, hissing. "I don't know if I twisted it or if one of those damned things stepped on me, but my ankle is shot."

"You probably twisted it, because you'd be bleeding if they'd stepped on you." The fire shelter I'd dropped in the stampede had huge rips in it – there was no point even picking it up again except to toss it out of the road. I put my mask on to look upwind to the fire, trying to judge where the leading edge was relative to us. The answer wasn't good. "Can you walk?"

He flexed the ankle and got next to no motion out of it before he hissed in pain again. "I'm going to have to. Help me up."

What might have been a really bad idea in better circumstances was necessary now, but the damage would be compounded by putting weight on it, I thought. "We need another idea, Kurt. The fire is running parallel to us and coming this way. You aren't going to outrun it on that leg." I yanked him to his feet. "What's over that way?"

He touched his toe to the ground and tried to stand. "The scarp. We can run away faster that way, but our ride won't find us."

"Our ride will find two crispy rangers if we keep to the road."

Kurt dragged the map out of his pocket and sank back to sitting. He ripped the map open. "I think if we head up to the scarp, there's a place we can hole up until morning. Max and I found it last fall when we were bringing my elk out." He ran his finger over the close wavy lines, looking for some feature only he would recognize.

Since I was coughing and my eyes were streaming, I was ready to believe him. "What is this place?" I'd have put my mask back on, but then we couldn't talk.

"Cave." He kept hunting. "Jake, I think we've only come about a quarter mile from the truck. We're going to have to let the Chief know plans have changed."

I didn't want to leave him; I couldn't bear it if he wasn't okay when I returned, if I returned. "I can get there and back pretty fast, Kurt." I shed all the equipment except my fire suit. "Keep an eye on this, okay? And use the shelter if it looks like you need to." I couldn't look back again to where he sat in the road after I rested my hand on his shoulder. Dear Lord, I hoped he wouldn't need to.

Scouts' pace, a hundred paces jogging, a hundred paces walking, would get me to the truck and back fast enough, but without overwhelming me in my exhausted state. The temptation was to run, but that would jeopardize completing the trip, and I would not let anything prevent me from returning to get Kurt. I could not let that happen. I nearly ran into the truck before I realized it was there, and got on the radio as soon as my breath was back enough to speak.

"Chief, Jake here. Change of plans. Cancel the ride."

He crackled back at me, "What happened?"

"We got run over by a herd of elk about a quarter mile from the truck. Kurt's injured, and he's waiting for me to get back." There was a stretcher in the back of the truck, completely useless without a third person, as the Scout had observed a few days or an eternity ago.

"How bad?"

"His ankle's injured, but I can move him. Staying on the road isn't safe, the fire's moving too fast, but we're headed to the scarp, there's a cave."

"Where exactly?"

"Don't know the coordinates. Truck's here." I rattled off the coordinates from the truck's GPS. "It's somewhere up the scarp. Kurt thinks he can find it again, and Max from Rendezvous Lake knows it from elk hunting. If we have to, we'll stay on the scarp, it's rock." I didn't have time to argue with him. "Chief, I have to go get Kurt before the fire does. Ask Max. We'll be there." I dropped the radio and collected the bigger first aid kit because the small one in my pocket didn't have anything Kurt needed in there.

The distance back to Kurt was at least twice as long as from Kurt to the truck. I glanced fearfully at the fire as I trotted back to him, when the wind permitted it. If he'd been overrun, or thought he'd be overrun, he'd get into the shelter; he could get it open and zipped around him even with his injury. I kept reminding myself that neither his hands nor his brain had been damaged. He'd survive where he was, but could I get back to him?

Yes. I could. The wind had changed again, and I could see Kurt sitting there in his mask, looking toward the flames with one hand on his shelter. I yelled to him, hoping he could hear through the roar of the flames, but he didn't turn his head until I was nearly upon him. Grateful that we had nothing to fold back up, we could load and head away from the flames.

"Hey, buddy. Let's get out of here!" I offered a hand, which he took to swing to one foot. Reloading my pockets and shouldering the remaining shelter took a few minutes. Kurt started to argue with me but stopped, deciding I could handle the equipment better that way. "Where to?"

Hooking his arm around my neck let me put my arm around his back to catch him beneath his arm. I'd be his other leg, because he wasn't touching the damaged foot to the ground.

"Straight out into the oak, Jake. I think I'll know where after we get some distance -- we may need to turn east a ways." He said nothing about how long my trip back to the truck had taken, nor about what it was like to be left all alone; he only lifted his chin with fortitude and we set off into the brush.

The oaks were patchy and short, with enough room to travel between them two abreast in most places, though they caught at our clothing. A few green-lobed leaves swatted as high as our faces, but the oaks were mostly short enough to see over, thanks to the grazing of the thousands of elk that lived on the national forest. They were taller closer to town, where the animals didn't come, but here they didn't obscure the scarp, which came nearer with excruciating slowness.

Kurt leaned on me heavily when he tried putting his injured foot down, but he limped badly. I would not let him try this unassisted, game though he was. Instead, I dragged him sideways between the crooked branches, which bent to our passing and even through places where the oaks grew close together and it was too far to go around. Once I stopped and insisted he drink some of the water, and tried to put the bottle back in my jacket pocket without him noticing.

"Drink," he ordered me. "I'm hurt, I'm not ill or stupid, and you're more dehydrated than me." Busted, I drank, wondering why I'd thought he wouldn't notice.

"Veer toward the left," he told me when he'd gotten his bearings. "Line up with that tall tree and the lopsided boulder. Not far now."

I followed Kurt's directions, trusting that he could find the place again before the monster chasing us caught up. I tried not to look at the fire too often, because it was well into the gambel oak now. Echoes of explosions boomed off the scarp. Hope was burning along with the brush -- I hoped Kurt's cave would be enough to get us through the fire.

He hadn't mentioned it being seven feet off the ground. I had nasty visions of barbecue grills above the coals. The view would be spectacular, but I suppose steaks weren't thrilled about the view, either.

Kurt threw off his equipment. "Give me a leg up, Jake." He stuck the knee on his bad side into my cupped hands and scrambled up the wall with his good leg, ending on his belly on the ledge. I passed the shelter up first, thinking that if it came to that, we could unfurl it inside the cave while the blaze licked along the edge of the rock wall. Steaks turned to baked potatoes in foil jackets in

my mind. Air tanks and water bottles went up, then he stuck his head back out. "Come on."

It was only a foot above my head, so I grabbed the edge and climbed. I hadn't quite gotten my upper body over the ledge when my footing crumbled. I started to slide out, but Kurt grabbed my arm and hauled. He was kneeling, so his giant yank pulled me almost onto him. I landed nearly across his knees, something I would have appreciated more in other circumstances, especially since he gasped with pain as I jostled his injury. I rolled to a sitting position before turning to see where he'd brought us.

"All the comforts of home," he said wryly. We shed the heavy fire suits, turning them inside out to dry before dropping them on the floor of the cave. We'd marched with the jackets open, but we'd still sweated through our T-shirts. It was a measure of my thirst and tiredness that I wanted to look at the water bottle instead of him. We drank, torn between conserving our supplies for what could be a stay of days and the need to replenish all the water that was making our shirts stick to our torsos. The evaporation started right off and felt damned good.

"Time to look at the leg, Kurt." I brought the big first aid kit over to where he sat, leaning against the cave wall and unlacing the boot. "Let me do that." I spread the laces widely before easing the boot away from his ankle, trying not to bend it. His lips thinned before the sock was off, exposing the puffy ankle. I'd dreamed of undressing him, but not like this.

"No hoof marks," I noted. "You must have twisted it on the way down."

"Probably," he agreed, eyes closed. "This ankle always seems to be the one to get it. I brace it to ski."

There was an ACE bandage in the kit, which I used to strap him. "We'll have to RICE you as best we can. Rest, well, after our little journey you are going to have to rest. Compression, here we are." I secured the ends of the wrap with the clips. "Elevation, here, lift." I stuck the fire shelter under his calf, which raised it about eight inches.

"Ice would feel good," he noted, naming the missing letter of the acronym, and it was the closest to a complaint that he'd made all day.

"Knew I forgot something," I jested weakly as I poured a bit of precious water on the ACE wrap, hoping the evaporation would cool the joint. There was ibuprofen in the kit, which he swallowed with a sip of water. There wasn't much else I could do for him.

"How far back does this go?" I asked, after a short breather where all I could do was lean against the wall.

"Not sure," he said. Kurt sat with one knee up and head tipped back, the picture of exhaustion. We'd shoveled, chopped, toted, wrenched, and run for our lives -- he'd earned the weariness. When he opened his eyes again, the blue was startling in the smudges, and I supposed that I had smoke and dirt all over me, too. Rubbing a sleeve over my face probably just rearranged the mess.

"No bears, though," I tried to joke, though a cranky, giant carnivore lunging out of the dark was just all we needed to complete the day. Blinking into the cave to adjust my eyes let me see, eventually, that there was a rocky, uneven floor that sloped up to meet the ceiling about ten feet in.

No bears, just a big rock pretending to be a bear. Once my heart quit pounding, I draped over it belly first, letting the stone pull the heat out of my body.

Someone's stomach rumbled, might have been mine. Lunch, what lunch? We'd been chopping down trees. No point in complaining.

"Here." Kurt stirred enough to dig something out of an inside pocket of his fire jacket. "Must be my night to cook."

Smashed sandwiches never tasted so good. Pickles and potato chip crumbs washed down with warm water were five star fare tonight, though we sure could have done without what passed for candlelight outside. The wind had shifted any number of times as we hiked here, and now it was blowing toward the scarp again, sending smoke in with us. The bear rock became our windbreak, which he traveled behind on hands, one foot, and butt, only letting me move the shelter to keep his foot up. He had vetoed using the masks yet since our need might become a lot greater before this was done. I don't know how he managed to fall asleep leaning against that rock.

Wired and exhausted is a bad combination, worse when it's coupled with fear. I sat next to him, listening to his breathing the way I'd listened so often in the night. Then, it had meant all was right with the world, but now it was the only right thing happening. I couldn't sleep, I wouldn't wake him, and I was alone with my thoughts, mostly ugly. It had all gone so bad, so fast. Looking at Kurt, who had been my biggest issue until the wind whipped up, was my distraction.

Asleep, he looked so young, so vulnerable, that it was all I could do not to touch him. His head was tipped back against the rock -- exhaustion had to have overwhelmed him or he would have made a nest on the cave floor. My own nap in the truck this morning came back to me as a shock. Had he looked at me and seen something similar? Could he possibly have wanted to touch me?

My nose stung with the smoke and throbbed with the injury I'd done it when he did wake me. I'd smacked it on the steering wheel, and the only way I could have done that was if my head had been in his lap. Memory replayed my troubled sleep growing comfortable, with a pillow -- he'd moved me there, or he hadn't objected when I'd fallen there, and his hand had been resting on my side. I'd felt safe enough to sleep deeply.

His head lolled alarmingly, and he made no effort to recover. Safety wasn't something I could offer him; we were as safe as we were going to get, but I could offer him comfort. Gently I lowered him down to his side and rested his head on my thigh. A deep breath and exhalation were his only response; he slept on. Napping near the fire line was a Watch Out situation for rangers, especially with unburned fuel between us and the fire, but the Standard Firefighting Orders covered this -- I posted myself as his lookout.

Chapter Sixteen

He slept for perhaps an hour, and I might have dropped off, too, had he not stirred. When he moved a little, I took my hand away from his arm and then had to find an innocuous place to park it in my lap. A giant yawn creaked him once he sat up, so he may not have noticed, and he said nothing other than, "I needed that." He drew up his legs to sit cross-legged, but thought better of it and left the damaged leg outstretched. He leaned forward to rest his forehead on one bent knee to finish waking up. I could have rubbed his back from where I sat, to ease his transition to awareness, but did not.

"Anything different happen while I was out?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

I'd been his pillow, and we were in the lee of the rock, so I'd seen nothing. "I'll check."

The wind shifted yet again, letting the air clear and letting me stand at the edge of the cave to see what was happening. So far, the truck seemed okay -- the oaks around it hadn't burned. That was probably more luck than my wet line, since the fire burned patchily. Part of the land was nearly untouched while a hundred feet to one side was scorched to black, and patches of gray-green gambel oak showed unscathed in the sea of fire. The pines still burned fiercely with a roaring that was not the wind, which shifted erratically. The light was starting to leave the sky, but the red and orange in the woods pretty much made up for it.

"What do you suppose they'll call this fire when it's over?" I said. "And do you think we'll get a nice monument?"

He heaved himself to his feet and limped to stand next to me. "We may or may not be fucked," he said, looking at the fire. "What did we do right?"

"We had an escape route, even though we, uh, couldn't get all the way out with it." I couldn't blame him for the truck -- I'd probably have hit the rock, too. "And we had another escape route. We knew the weather forecasts, even though the wind got us." I tried to think of what else we'd done right. "You could consider us to be posted lookouts. And it's fairly flat here to the fire, so we didn't really run uphill." The Storm King casualties had tried to escape by running uphill, though they'd had a solid wall of flame coming at them and there wasn't much choice. We'd both heard the talks. "And it isn't really downhill, burning stuff can't roll at us. We've got the shelter." If two of us could fit.

"Where did we screw up?" Kurt asked, and it wasn't rhetorical.

"We didn't allow enough for the wind. And we should have yelled for backup when the spot fires started."

"Maybe earlier, because of the wind."

“It looked small and containable, Kurt.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t. And we’re out of contact with our supervisor now.”

“A problem, but he knows where we are and what we’re doing.” I could tell where this was going, and yup, that’s where it went.

“I should have known better, Jake. But I thought we could do it, and I may just have gotten you killed.” He looked down.

“Don’t take that all on yourself, Kurt.” I put an arm around his shoulder, but looked out at the fire. “The fire was what it was, and I didn’t say anything, either. I could have called for backup; I know how to use the radio. And we’d be long gone by now if it wasn’t for the rock. I could have hit it just as easily as you. You just happened to be driving.” I squeezed him and let go, though I could have stayed like that a long time.

He didn’t move away from me. “I feel responsible, though.”

I knew he would. “Shut up, Kurt. You aren’t.” I was the one who should have kept my big mouth shut.

We were silent a long time after that, moving around only to get a drink of water. The sun set before anyone spoke again.

“If the weather wasn’t so screwy, the fire would settle down once dark came.” Kurt knuckled his eyes. “But with the wind, I don’t know that it will.” The gambel oaks let off booms now and then, sending flaming debris flying, sometimes into unburned territory. The fire line had gotten to the other side of the road now because of that -- it was still creeping our way. Dying was beginning to look more possible.

I’d been looking out the mouth of the cave at the fire while Kurt sat on his fire suit to buffer his butt from the rocks. “Wish there was a way to leave a message for the folks.” Kurt had never really mentioned his family much. “They’d take this pretty hard anyway, but...”

“Yeah.” I thought about my mom and dad back in Michigan, my sister, Gramps. I was the fair-haired boy, and they expected great things from me, like starting pharmacy school. Getting me back in a box would devastate them. “What’s your family like?”

“My dad raised me, pretty much, after I was ten, though Larry and Vanessa helped a lot. My brother and sister, they’re a lot older than me. And then when they got married,” Kurt snorted at some memory, “Cliff and Polly got in on the act. Just what a teenaged boy needs: five parent equivalents to dodge instead of the usual two. But they were good to me.” He played idly with a handful of rocks.

“What about your mom?” Sounded like a big gap in there.

“She died.” Just a flat, bald statement, and he put the rocks down. “She died,” he whispered, and he had to be wondering if he’d be joining her. He didn’t say anything more for a long time.

I didn't know what to do for his pain. Whispering, "I'm sorry," wasn't nearly enough, so I stayed at the mouth of the cave until the wind drove me back in. When it changed again, I resumed my lookout.

"So, is it going to get us?" Kurt asked me. He'd pulled out of his memories and started watching me.

I turned to come back into the cave before the damned wind hit me with another faceful of smoke. "Maybe. This isn't the way I expected to go."

"Really? How did you expect to go?" Kurt watched me.

"I don't know, maybe from extreme old age, or shark bites, or something else that isn't this." I shrugged. "Kurt, I'm twenty-two years old. Dying wasn't on the agenda. I have too much stuff to do yet."

"I know what you mean. My to-do list isn't a quarter done. I'd like to think I'll get some more things crossed off."

He looked so pensive that it was all I could do not to go to him. I'd do the next best thing -- I'd distract him and maybe learn something about him. "So, what's on your list?"

"I'd like to ski Vail for a season," he told me after a long pause. "Or Wapiti Creek. There's some amazing terrain up there."

"A whole season?" I'd never been to a big resort even once.

"Yeah, that's what I do in the off season. I do ski patrol at a resort, sometimes I teach. Best thing to do in the mountains when there's snow." He smiled at some memory, but before I could ask him, he asked me, "What about you?"

I want to rip your clothes off and... "I'd like to dive Vanuatu. Going to have to come up with some serious bucks for that." Diving was the one thing that had made me hesitate to come to Colorado: no reefs.

"Where the hell is Vanuatu?"

"South Pacific. I've gone diving in the Caribbean twice, but this is a whole different thing." Being in Vanuatu sounded really good just now. Surrounded by water. With Kurt.

"I hear you. I want to climb the Dolomites that way. Italian Alps," Kurt clarified. "Hey, I'll teach you to climb if you'll teach me to dive."

"Sounds good," and it did, since it meant that we'd survive this mess. I hoped I'd be able to take him up on that. "Or maybe teach me to ski first."

"Could do that. Or I could teach you to cook first." I just shook my head at him. That would be funnier some other time or place. He realized his joke had fallen flat, because he went on. "What else is on your to-do list?"

“I’ve never eaten sushi. A guy should eat sushi at least once, right?”

“If I’d known that, we wouldn’t have cooked the trout the other night. You could have had it raw.”

“Didn’t think of that.” I gave him a little smile -- I didn’t want him to think he’d screwed up. “But you didn’t make rice. We’d need some rice.”

“I’ll have to take you to a restaurant for that, it’s tough to make rice in the mountains.” He sounded like he was seriously considering how to make sushi happen for me. “Water doesn’t boil at the right temperature up here.”

That made me think of heat. At least the cave was somewhat insulated by the surrounding rock and wasn’t uncomfortably warm, even with the wind. I turned back to look out the mouth of the cave at the fire, orange swaths and blobs in the night. Could cook a lot of stuff on that much heat. The wind had died a little with dark, but not much. At least it wasn’t pointing straight into the cave. I heard him come up behind me. For a guy who was supposed to rest with the leg elevated, he wasn’t staying put very well. “I put my foot in it, didn’t I?”

“No. Don’t worry about it.” There were a thousand other, worse things than that, dancing among the trees and brush. Hungry orange things that wanted the wood and our lives. But my life was mine, for these few hours -- shouldn’t I be able to spend it how I wanted? Or at least try? If I asked, and Kurt said no, the humiliation might dog me the rest of my life, but it wouldn’t be long. He might say yes. He might spend the rest of our time angry with me. Might take a swing at me. He might just think I was a jerk, or he could laugh. I looked into the fire, trying to find words that would make him say yes. I’d had my arm around him as I helped him travel the distance to the cave, he’d let me do his first aid. He had let me touch him out of necessity, but would he let me touch him out of desire? He had let me comfort him a little bit ago.

I wasn’t sure what he was trying to see, but now Kurt stood next to me, helping me look at the fire.

“There has to be something else you want.” I spoke without turning to look at him. He shifted slightly, first left, then right. Left again, away from me. Wrong way, Kurt. “Something you could even get without a plane ticket across an ocean or going forty miles into town.”

“There is.” He turned to me, but I couldn’t look at him yet. His hand on my shoulder burned hotter than the fire -- why was he touching me? “Jake, I want to suck your cock.”

Chapter Seventeen

Now I whipped around to stare at him with my mouth hanging open. Of all the things Kurt could have said, this was the one thing I both wanted the most and expected the least. He wanted me? He wanted sex with me? Maybe he just wanted the sex and I was the only one around? I didn't care; I'd take it. He'd been driving me mad for days, and now he was offering to do what I wanted most? I was struggling for the words, and he could just say that?

I must have taken too long to think all these thoughts, because he took his hand away, leaving me cold and alone. His gaze dropped down and left -- his face was so vulnerable. "I'm sorry, forget it. I shouldn't have said anything, sorry." He turned to retreat -- maybe it hadn't been that easy to say.

"NO!" I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, pulling him into me. "Don't be sorry!" He was pressed against me, the way I'd been dreaming, and his mouth was just below mine. Then his mouth was pressed to mine -- I kissed him roughly, passionately responding to the invitation that dovetailed so perfectly with my deepest longings.

My hands were on his upper arms -- I felt him flex and nearly twist out of my grasp, but he wasn't tearing away. No, he had his arms around me, pressing me as close as I was pressing him. My cock had responded before my brain did, filling to stiffness inside the denim prison.

"I thought..." he started, when I let him up for air, but I wouldn't let him speak.

"Don't talk!" I growled, and stopped his mouth again with mine. "Don't say anything!" My tongue ventured between his lips -- he parted them to let me in.

"But..." he tried again a moment later, so I shushed him the best way I knew how. He sagged in my arms for just a moment before standing tall and strong again, to return my kisses with equal force. Then he took the lead, pulling my lower lip into his mouth and sucking on it. I moaned as he tongued me, ferocious with passion, and I pulled him closer yet with a hand at the small of his back.

He was as hard as I was, as trapped inside clothing. That couldn't continue. The hand at his back grabbed the T-shirt and yanked. I had it off him in one smooth movement once he realized what I was doing and let go that small amount that let me get it off him. More kisses would fortify me enough to release him again while he stripped me -- only being skin to skin at last was enough to loosen my grip. I'd dreamed of this, fantasized about this, touched myself over and over again while I imagined this -- at last Kurt was crushed to my bare chest, with promises of so much more with every second. I had to squeeze him and run my hands over his bare back. The fabric over his ass was going to have go, too, but first I ran my hands over his utilities, then under. The cheeks I'd been thinking about were now in my hands. One muscular bun in each palm let me pull him tightly against me to feel his stiff cock against my own.

Kurt had his hand on the back of my head now, controlling the kiss, touching me. His other hand

was on my back, burning like fire, and then it slipped down my denims. He gripped my ass the way I gripped his, and again, I mirrored his motions. We played with each other's butts with our mouths crushed together, tasting of smoke and fear and potato chips, but tasting of ourselves and each other. Best taste in the world.

His cock rubbed through the cloth; time to change that. Hands on shoulders turned him around to press his back to my front -- my mouth found his skin. His smell was intoxicating, smoke mixed with honest sweat, underlain with maleness. It made me fumble as my hands searched for his fly. We got in each other's way trying to undo his belt and button, so I reached lower to rub his shaft while he undid the hardware. I had a free hand for one nipple -- he liked this, I knew, and the rolling of the hard little peak in my fingers was the gentlest thing we were doing.

His cock was springing free, and it would have been easier to push his utilities down if I hadn't been grinding against him from the back, but my hard cock was pushed up against his ass, his muscular ass that I'd watched walk away from me, and he was here close to me now. If we could just get these damned denim body condoms off, I'd be pressed against his crack.

It almost didn't matter, because he was free and jutting out from his clothing where I could touch him at last. With my cheek against his neck, I groped around -- my fingers found him and closed around his shaft.

Hard and full in my hand, he was what I'd dreamed of every time I touched myself. He was nearly as long as I was, maybe seven inches, letting my hand move a familiar distance to stroke him. The uncut skin slipped farther than I was used to, over his glans and back. Without thought I began that stroking that I'd done so often lately, only this time it was Kurt's cock I stroked, Kurt's soft skin traveling over hard shaft, and Kurt who was going to come from it.

"Slow down, Jake, slow down!" he gasped as he grabbed my hand to show me what he wanted. I wanted to do it his way, but I was so focused on the fulfillment of my dream that I had trouble doing it. The feeling of my length nestled into his ass didn't improve my ability to follow directions any, and when I licked the salt and sweat from his back, it was too much for both of us. I held still, but it was a moment too late -- Kurt spurted and screamed his pleasure, his cock rippling in my grip. He shook with his spasms, leaning heavily against my arm across his chest. My own orgasm would have spilled over, too, but I jerked my hips away from him just barely in time -- two more thrusts against his butt would have done it. It would have been great, but what he'd offered would be better -- only that kept me from finishing.

As I pulled back from the brink, my mind cleared a little, enough to be aware of Kurt panting in his aftermath. I'd be his aspen tree at last. I turned him around to hold him slumped against me. His arms crept around my waist, his face pressed into my neck. He'd let me know when he was ready to go on. He'd come, I hoped he'd still want to go on. The faint, orange light made his skin glow. I stroked little tracks into the sweat.

"Offer still stands," he mumbled into my neck a short time later. Tipping his face up for a kiss meant yes. The first desperation was gone, replaced with a more controlled yearning. I could be patient for the twenty seconds it would take to get me stripped.

We hopped him to the bear-shaped rock that had given me such a jolt earlier -- it was the right height to lean my butt against. He kissed me with his hands on my fly, undoing me in every way.

Slowly, too slowly, he drew the zipper down, then worked underwear and utilities down over my hips with his hands slipped under the layers. His tongue trailed over mine, and his hands helped my cock escape my clothes to bounce against his belly. I moaned as I touched his body with my cock for the very first time.

It must have taken twenty-one seconds because my patience was gone. Crushing him against me to kiss him hard brought my erect cock against his semi-erect one. Kurt gave as good as he got until he decided it was time to get on with it. He broke the kiss with his hands against my abs, pushing me backward until our mouths separated and my bare butt hit the rock. His back was to the entrance of the cave, putting his face in shadow, but I could imagine the cheeky grin as he slowly lowered himself, his hands tight on my hips. The tip of my cock drew a line up him, and if it felt this good to touch his skin, what would his mouth be like? Maybe he was going this slow to pay me back for going too fast -- it was delicious agony to slide against his cock, then his belly, then his chest.

It took damned near forever before he was on his knees in front of me, hands on my hips, holding me still. There was enough light to see his face tipped up to mine. I don't know if he could see my naked longing in the flickering orange light, but he must have known anyway, because at last, at last, he took me in his mouth.

I never knew it would be this good.

Never knew what the velvety softness of tongue would be like, never knew what the heat of lips would be like, never knew what the slide against palate would be like. Never knew. Imagined, yeah, but the reality of Kurt was so much more than anything I'd fantasized. Now I knew.

He'd taken the head into his mouth, just enough to play with and tease as he slipped it in and out. His lips crinkled in a smile around my cock when I let out a long, shuddery moan, the only way I could tell him how wonderful it was, because there wasn't a molecule of oxygen left in the part of my brain that made words. "Ohhhh" must have told him plenty, because he came down farther onto my shaft now, a fraction of an inch with every stroke. His tongue swirled, wetting me -- his lips slid over my skin as he took me bit by bit into his mouth. Now and then he'd come off me completely for breath, and I was bereft until wet warmth engulfed me again.

I wasn't too sure what to do with my hands. I wanted to touch him, but all I could reach was his head. Mindful that I'd already given him too much and brought him to orgasm too soon, I kept from touching him, because I might pull him down onto me farther than he wanted to go. Both hands on the rock would keep me from falling over, because my knees were going to custard.

Kurt went from playing to serious now. One hand left my hip and gripped my hard shaft at the base, which still left a lot of room for his mouth. When he moved his mouth and his hand the same direction, it was amazing, but I think he'd gone too far, because he gagged and pulled back. Pumping me with his hand let him catch his breath, and now I could run my fingers through his short, blond hair without risking a choke.

"So good," were all the words I could form, but I wanted him to go back to what he was doing, oh I wanted to be in his mouth again. It was so good, amazingly good, mind blowing good. "Please," I managed, and he laughed.

“Fuck my mouth, Jake.” Now he had two hands on my wet cock, stroking in unison, letting a couple of inches of head and shaft show when he pushed close to my groin. “Do it, fuck my mouth,” and he slipped my cock back in, flicking madly with his tongue.

I’d been holding still, letting him pick the rhythms, but now I was sure I wouldn’t choke him. I began to flex my hips, pushing as much of my cock as I could into his busy mouth, glad for the safety his hands afforded because I had to keep touching him. I thrust into his greedy, sucking mouth, screaming wordlessly. I wanted to do this endlessly; I wanted to climax. The way his tongue swiped over me, I would soon explode.

Burning gambel oak had nothing on me as I caught fire and detonated, spewing hot come in bursts and pops. He held me as I exploded, never taking his mouth from my shaft, holding tight against the waves pulsing through me. His hands were gentle but firm, holding me still; his mouth was gentle but firm, catching my climax. A last shudder went through me, and I was able to stroke his hair to let him know I was done.

I had no idea he would do with his mouthful. I’d come to orgasm in the middle of a lot of screaming -- it probably wasn’t enough warning if he didn’t want to taste.

With a last little lick, he let me slip from his mouth. I kept my hands lightly on his head, ready to let him pull away if he needed to, but he stayed on his knees before me. When he swallowed, I brushed my fingers through his hair but did not dare to speak. I thought he might get up, but he leaned his forehead into the hollow of my groin, equally silently. He put his arms up on my thighs, hands on my waist. We stayed like that a long time, until he began to shift his knees uncomfortably. The rock was making my butt ache, too, making it time to stand and bring him to his feet.

The salty tang of come met me with his kiss, just the one, and it was gentler than any we’d already shared. We stood, embracing, in the dark cave, and for a time I was able to forget about the fire in the wonder of what we’d just done. His head was on my shoulder, my cheek against his hair, when the world lit up.

Chapter Eighteen

Our heads snapped around -- the thunder boomed before the lightning disappeared. That was a doozy of a way to break a reverie -- I'd been to quieter reggae concerts. Might be able to hear what Kurt was saying again in a few minutes. I assumed he was saying, "Come on!" as he hobbled to the mouth of the cave. We stood looking over the scrubby oaks with night vision that only slowly returned, searching for anything new that had been set alight.

This was the darkest sky I'd seen since I'd come to the mountains. The sky, normally swept with stars, was ugly gray and could have been mistaken for concrete. It wasn't all smoke, though that still flowed from the pine and oak torches. The lightning flared again, farther away this time, letting the thunder have half a second to catch up. The fire that had grown with the shifting winds was nearer now, orange, mindless malevolence that crackled in the gambel oak. I'd almost believed the flare and crash had been the truck going up, but the spot where I knew it stood was still dark.

More lightning crazed the sky -- the truck was right where we'd left it. One more step back into the cave seemed like a good idea before the electrical charges built up enough for another blast. The dry storm that had threatened all day, pushed by the unreliable winds, was here to torment us with the laden clouds that dropped nothing.

The night was magnificent, it was inimical, it would kill us and never know. The danger from the fire was less than the danger from the skies that crashed and flickered, leaving afterimages that swam with spots. We could only watch the heavens battle the flaming land and feel small.

I felt a little less small when I stepped behind Kurt to wrap my arms around his chest. I pulled him just a little farther into the cave, having no other way to keep him safe from the night. He stepped back against me and put both hands on my forearms, clinging tightly. Together we watched the night, our heads together, saying nothing, though we groaned when the truck took a direct hit.

The wind changed again, the damned wind that could not make up its mind, coming straight against the scarp and our refuge. The sandblasting sent us both dashing for our clothing, the fire jackets being the best protection against the debris, but it changed yet again before we got all the way into the clammy sleeves.

The night itself changed when another brilliant bolt of lightning struck practically on our doorstep. The thunder pealed and would not die away -- it became a low hissing that made me shake my head, as if I could dislodge the noise. It wasn't the crackle of fire, it wasn't thunder, it wasn't any noise that I could comprehend, until Kurt dropped his jacket and began to hop and whoop.

"It's raining! Oh, my Lord, it's raining!"

Together we dashed the few steps to the mouth of the cave, where we leaned out into the night to taste the blessed water falling from the skies. Hands out into the torrents that were only now released, we touched splashes of hope.

The rain attacked the flames, making the night hiss. If the wind carried the rain drops sideways from one fiery branch, they would only collide with another. The vanguard drops turned to steam before they hit, but as the storm went on, the water came closer and closer to actually touching, then sizzled away on the hot wood, until at last the forest began to moisten.

The rains came down, down, down, for time untold -- the fire struggled to breathe against the wetness. Kurt and I stood, faces to the rain, watching the orange flames dwindle to flickers and then to red glows in the night. Still the rains came. We edged as close to the brink as we could. We'd have left the cave completely and done the rain dance on the ground, but the lightning kept us cautious as it lit up the sky.

Enough rain fell into our hands that we could scrub our faces, the dirt scraping as we washed it away; wet hands against skin took off layers of smoke and sweat after the boots and the utilities came completely off at last. Kurt's hands ran down my back and sides as the rainwater poured over us -- mine roamed over him, cleaning him and touching him. We'd break off scrubbing from time to time to hold each other tightly, to warm up a little, not just to embrace. The hugs warmed my heart but not my groin, because this natural cold shower was making my teeth chatter.

"Your lips taste blue," Kurt told me after hours of storm. "Let's go in."

"Let's dry off with just the one shirt," I suggested. "Then we can wear the rest of the clothes." I was planning to dry him with mine, because he had less insulation than I did and needed some clothing.

"Nope, going to sleep next to you naked," Kurt told me, and there was a smile in his voice before the yawn hit.

That was just fine with me. I suddenly realized that I was cold, hungry, and exhausted. Happier than I'd ever been, though, because I was going to sleep next to Kurt and live to wake up again. We opened the fire shelter on top of a layer of fire pants to pad the rocky cave floor, then crawled in and covered ourselves with the jackets. It was a tight fit, the two of us in a one man shelter that wasn't much bigger than a sleeping bag anyway, but we cuddled up with much wiggling, knowing that turning over wasn't going to happen. I lay spooned against his back, my arm over his chest, my lips near his ear.

"Good night," Kurt told me, as he'd said every night since we moved into the cabin.

"Good night," I told him, as I'd replied every night before. Tonight was different, though, because he kissed me.

Chapter Nineteen

It had been well after two a.m. when we'd finally gone to sleep, and I still woke up early. Another four hours of sack time sounded really good, but only if I could turn over. Holding my sleeping partner was the only consolation for being stuck on my right side. His chest moved gently under my arm as I watched him sleep and thought about how much I'd wanted this very thing. Naked and snuggled up against him, I could wake him with a kiss, or...

He might be as stiff as I was. My cock was as stiff as my muscles -- while I might be hard and raring to go, my body might not be able to move enough to thrust against him without a good long stretch. I was ready for more sex now that the barrier of the first time was breached. His ass and my cock were crushed together, it would be a few inches' motion to go from close to inside.

A few inches and a liberal application of something slippery. I knew enough to not even try without lube, and now that he'd seen me, Kurt might not want to do that at all. He'd had both hands full with some left over for his mouth. I'd measured, every guy has, and would almost eight inches long and close to five inches around even fit in such a nice tight place? So far, Kurt had had the answers -- this time I'd just have to ask the question.

I'd turn over for him, if he wanted. I'd held his hard cock last night; I wanted the opportunity to taste him the way he'd tasted me. I wanted to feel him inside me, moving, thrusting. Make him call my name. I was a little scared to try it, but I trusted Kurt and wanted to try it. Wonder what we could use for lube.

The little first aid kit was inside the pocket of the jacket covering us, so I slipped it out and opened it. My right arm was under me, so I had to unzip the little pouch with my teeth, and I was clumsy enough that I dumped the contents all over Kurt. He woke to a shower of Band-Aids in his ear.

"What are you doing?" He brushed the packet of burn cream off his cheek. Hmm, that might work.

"Looking for ointment?" I answered.

That got a puzzled laugh. "Let's see where it went. First, let's get out of this tinfoil sarcophagus, because I can't feel my right side."

He opened the flap the rest of the way and rolled out, groaning. He made it to his feet without favoring the injury.

"How's the ankle?" I asked, since he had both feet down on the ground.

"A lot better. I think it works again." He rolled the foot, experimenting.

Watching him stretch aroused me -- I rolled to my back to let him get a look once he'd put his arms down, but he headed to the mouth of the cave, limping only a little. I stuck my head out of the

shelter to watch. The view from the back was fine indeed.

The sound effects weren't so fine, though, because I could hear Max's voice yelling out, "You can't put the fire out that way, Carlson!"

I have never scrambled into clothes so fast in my life.

The banter at the mouth of the cave continued while I dressed, good-natured nonsense between old friends. That Kurt could carry this sort of thing on while being caught damned near *en flagrante* made me wonder if either he just didn't care or if he was that good of an actor. Thinking back to the other night, he hadn't panicked when he'd had a knife at his face. I should quit panicking, too -- the banter went from yelling to conversational tones, as if Max was getting nearer with every word.

"Ho, Max!" I called, coming to the mouth of the cave with a boot in my hand. "What brings you out this way?" We didn't have to act like we'd been caught circle jerking -- we had a legitimate reason to be out here, that just happened to include reasons to be buck naked. Kurt headed into the cave to dress. Max had brought the perfect excuse for me to be uneasy; he was leading two saddle horses and a pack horse. Most of what I knew about horses was that one end kicked and the other end bit.

The brown and white paint horse Max rode was partially covered by his yellow slicker. The rain was still coming down, not like last night, but a normal summer rain. "I'm the cavalry, come over the hill. Since I'm the only one besides you who knows where this place is, exactly."

Still, I was surprised that the Chief hadn't sent one of the other crews in a truck for both assessing the fire and collecting us. "Rich and Abigail would have parked by our truck and leaned on the horn until we showed up," I pointed out.

"They could have been honking a while, but they're over on the other fire line. The lightning started another blaze on the other side of Meeker. Everybody else is on that crew, since the Chief thought LandSat on this site looked pretty good. So I volunteered." Not even Max called the Chief "Harold."

"Glad to see you and the horses, too. We humped the equipment over here on foot." Kurt was clothed now, and he'd brought a couple of tanks to the mouth of the cave. "Could have been a long walk out."

"Didn't know what you'd have, that's why I brought the pack horse." The animal shifted uneasily as Max dismounted, making me think he didn't like the rain or the smell of wet ashes.

"Not all that much. Come on, Jake, let's get the shelter folded." Kurt brought the axes up, handing them to Max, who started to attach them to the harness. We returned to the silver cocoon, where we collapsed the thing back into its tank-like shape and wrestled it into the bag. Everything got packed up and carried out: we left no trace in that cave, no sign that my life had been altered forever in there. The bear rock looked no different -- it was only me who had changed. I didn't know about Kurt; we had no chance to talk.

Max tied the last strap as I jumped down off the ledge. "Hand on my shoulder, Kurt."

“Hah.” He sat down and prepared to slide down the scarp.

“Be macho some other time. You need both feet to ride. Or,” I had an idea, “Max, can we strap him across the pack horse like a rolled-up rug?”

“We could.” Max eyed Kurt appraisingly. “Do it his way, Carlson -- I know you’re hurt. Or no breakfast for you.”

“It’s a lot better,” Kurt argued, but he did slide down with my help.

We were wearing the fire suits again. It would be our protection against the rain, and we’d need them for scouting the fire site where we wouldn’t take the horses. “Food, anyone?” Max produced shiny cylinders from his pack. “I brought sausage and egg burritos, with my notorious green chile.”

“Yum!” Kurt reached for his. I unwrapped foil to get at the good stuff inside, thinking of last night, knowing I had better not watch Kurt put something like a burrito in his mouth or I’d lose it completely. Should have turned so he didn’t have to watch me eat, because Max had to pound his back before he choked completely.

“Slow down, buddy,” Max admonished him, and this time I choked.

“What’s with you two?” Max said as he thumped me between the shoulder blades.

“Unfamiliarity with the concept of food,” Kurt told him. “Lunch should have been about twenty-four hours ago.” He finished the burrito, crumpled the foil, and placed it in his pocket. “That was good, thanks. Think we should check the truck first, check in with the Chief.”

We would have called in, but that direct strike last night had taken out the radio. There wasn’t a lot else to do except scout the burned areas for any pockets of live flame and determine if smoldering areas posed a threat. The horse posed the bigger threat to me, since I hadn’t ridden in years and hadn’t done much even then. Getting on had been a trial; the beast had sidestepped as I hopped after it, one foot in the stirrup, trying to get enough leverage to swing my leg over. I couldn’t get on, and I couldn’t get all the way off, and I might have had to hop all the way to Rendezvous Lake Lodge if Max hadn’t caught the bridle and held the horse still.

“There’s a reason I’m not on one of the horseback teams,” I told my companions as my face burned. The ground was a long way down, and the way my mount swiveled his ears back at me, I might be traveling that distance. Of course, Kurt was sitting there looking like a firefighting John Wayne, so grabbing the saddle horn was not an option. He did ask Max for a big leg up, out of respect for the ankle, which made me feel only marginally better.

“It’s a skill, like any other,” Max reassured me. “You can learn.” He looked like he’d been born on a horse.

I was going to have to learn fast -- it was a long way back to the lodge.

What would have been thirty miles by road was twelve miles by horseback, twelve long miles that turned my thighs to rubber, punctuated by a bit of shoveling. Max stayed with us and helped with

the shoveling. I thought the lodge needed tending, and I sure needed the privacy to talk to Kurt, so I asked him why.

“Jake, this is the first day off I’ve had in two weeks,” he replied. “I live and work in Paradise, and I never get to just enjoy it. A day on horseback with friends feels pretty good to me. And Kurt needs more help mounting than you can give him.” He could have added, “And because Kurt won’t be able to help you if you topple off the horse and it runs away, which looks entirely possible,” but he didn’t.

Okay, I couldn’t chase him off. I wanted to, though, because every single time I’d gotten my nerve up to talk to Kurt about the previous night, Max moved into earshot. Hiking back to town the long way with full gear would almost have been preferable to this. I had to ask Kurt, “What next?” before I went completely berserk. Not even the promise of a hot shower in the bunkhouse when we got back to the lodge made me like Max’s company one bit more right then.

There were plenty of opportunities to master mounting and dismounting as we dealt with a few pockets of coals, but for the most part, nature had controlled the fire for us. I was grateful, because I had envisioned the whole mountainside burnt black to the base of the scarp. “It will recover,” Kurt told me as we walked the horses back to the lodge. “Some species even need the fire to reproduce because the cones don’t open to let the seeds out without heat.” He pointed at a pinecone whose scales had flared widely when I was used to seeing them furled up tight.

The rain stopped a few miles past the burn zone, so I had another bit of practice getting on and off that blasted horse. This time, I wrapped the reins around the saddle horn enough to keep him in one place when I remounted after shedding the fire clothing, which I tied onto the pack horse. Kurt nodded approvingly. “You’re getting it.”

Riding was just one more skill that Kurt had perfected -- he sat the horse easily and offered a little coaching.

“These boots aren’t right for riding, but we’re stuck with them. Try to keep the balls of your feet on the stirrups.” Kurt and the horse both winced as my foot came out of one stirrup. “You might only get your toes in, but it works on your balance.” Before we got back to the lodge, the horse had concluded that I was there for the duration, even if I had all the grace of a sack of potatoes. He’d turn around, with, “What? You’re still there?” written all over his long, horsey face, and yes, I was.

When the temptation to grab the saddle horn had dwindled to once every five minutes, I had more leisure to think. “Why aren’t you riding a mounted patrol?” I asked Kurt when we were in sight of the stables. “The Chief was crying for more riders.”

“I rode the last two years. It was time for a change.”

“I’m surprised the Chief let you switch; you’re good.” He’d controlled his horse expertly when a rabbit jumped up under its hooves. My horse had bounced sympathetically, and the best that can be said is that I didn’t fall off.

“Jake, I grew up riding and skiing, and after all these years, it’s time to do them both so they’re fun. I want to drive a truck for a while.” He swung off the horse and wrapped the reins around the fence rail.

I had just flipped the stirrup over the seat to get at the girths under Max's watchful eye when a small woman in a blue chambray shirt and jeans came up to the fence. "I'm glad you're back. The Chief called about two hours ago. He wanted to talk to Kurt and Jake, and he seemed real anxious to know when they can get to the fire site."

Max shooed me away. "Kurt and I will unsaddle for you. Go call him."

Following the woman back to the main lodge, I had a sneaky suspicion that Max had had enough of the novice handling his horse. The novice certainly had had enough of riding the horse; I hurt. Cowboys must toughen up after a while, because I'd never seen one totter around like this. My butt felt like hamburger, and my thighs might never come together again.

The Chief wanted to get us out to the other fire site right away. "We need you boys out here with the hotshots, Jake. The fire is headed toward town," he told me when I called in. I didn't know how to judge the severity of the blaze when the hotshots, who were the real firefighters of the Forest Service, needed rangers as backup, but assumed it was, or could be, bad. He then asked, "How is Kurt's ankle?"

"He's walking with a limp, but he rode in without a problem." Kurt got irritated any time Max or I inquired, though he'd swallowed some more ibuprofen when he thought I wasn't looking.

"I can put him on command post; he can free up an able-bodied man. How soon can you be here?"

"I don't know. We came in on horseback with Max. We'll have to find a ride." No one was going to fetch us when it meant taking hands off the fire line.

"Find one and get out here, Jake. The woods are burning." With that, he left me. Great.

"How do we get out to the fire site?" I asked the woman, whose name was Diane. Maybe Max would lend us wheels, or someone headed to town wouldn't mind dragging a couple of rangers and gear along.

"You come with me," she said. "I'm going into town after the mail and the food order, and I thought I'd drag along a pot of chili for the firefighters."

"Great! Kurt and I will just do a quick clean up and we'll be ready to go!" I wanted that shower, even if the clothes I was wearing were all I had with me.

"No, you won't, and I'm punishing myself for saying that, but that food truck won't wait, and the kitchen can't wait until it gets back around from Grand Junction." She wrinkled her nose at me. "We'll keep the windows open, and maybe I won't be able to tell you guys apart from the smoke in the air. You can hold the chili for me."

On the way to the pickup truck, Diane, the chili, and I met Kurt hobbling up from the barn. "Where's the gear? We need to load it," I told him.

"No shower?" His face fell.

“We’re loading now. The Chief wants us pronto, and Diane is kind enough to haul us out there, but she’s got a schedule to keep.” I motioned with the pot of chili. “Dinner will be good, though.”

Once in the truck, Kurt and I juggled the pot as we tried to find places for four long legs. Diane had the seat pulled up enough to reach the pedals, cramping us considerably. I finally stuck my feet in Kurt’s foot well, resting my thigh against his, which suited me just fine, until Diane had to notice it out loud.

“What have you been doing to the poor boy, Kurt?” she teased. “Nobody saw you guys for days, and when we get you back, you’re all snuggly and you’re both walking funny.”

“You’re short, I’m hurt, and he just got off his first horse in ten years.” There was a chill in Kurt’s voice. It was all true, and he could be telling her to back off because she was out of line, and maybe because I’d already gotten everything I was ever going to get.

Damn it, it was nobody’s business but ours, even though nothing we’d done yet would account for my gait. Maybe later we’d have that issue. I pulled my thigh away, but we were so close to the dashboard that there was nowhere to pull to, and I slopped some chili out as I shifted.

“Sorry, that was tasteless,” she said, chastened. “I didn’t realize Jake was such a greenhorn.” She adjusted the bench seat to give us a few more inches and sat up at the edge.

It didn’t matter. Kurt pulled farther toward the door and looked out the window, lips pulled into a thin line. I didn’t know what to do. What I wanted was to put my leg right back where it had been, but Diane didn’t need to know our business. Especially when I didn’t know what our business was. Kurt and I really needed to talk.

The Lodge’s chili and two extra sets of hands were about equally well received. The other rangers and the hotshots were happy to see us -- there was plenty of wind-driven flame to go around. The dry storm had set a dandy blaze here, and they hadn’t gotten the rain we had. It had gone undiscovered for about twelve hours, giving the fire a big head start. For the next day and a half we chopped, dug, cursed, and sweated, until the fire was adequately contained and the Chief started sending people home.

“Rich, Abigail, you can drop Jake up at his cabin on your way,” the Chief said. “Jake, you’ll do fire watch as best you can with the binoculars, just call anything in if you find it, and Rich, you two will just patrol farther into the borders of Jake’s section until we get the truck repaired. Kurt can work down here and then take it back up.”

There had been no time to talk with Kurt on the fire line and there was no goodbye now. I nodded, and he nodded back, saying, “See you soon,” leaving me to get into the tanker with a couple who would be sleeping together tonight.

This would have been my big opportunity to get to know them, if I’d felt like talking, but I’d just left the man I desperately needed to talk to back on the fire line. The churning in my belly was getting worse with time.

Abigail, who at five foot eight was the shortest, got the center of the big bench seat and the task of staying out of the way of the gearshift. Every time Rich shifted the manual transmission, she had to

spread her knees to avoid getting whacked, and the soft murmurs and laughter they shared were probably salacious little couple jokes. I tried not to listen, and I didn't want to know -- I could imagine. I wanted jokes like that with Kurt.

They seemed to sense that I didn't want to talk, or maybe it was the way I snarled when they tried to ask about the fire Kurt and I had fought alone. I did apologize and told them what they needed to know about the lightning storm and the rain, but it was twenty miles of silence after that.

We did finally start to talk about halfway home, after we hit a bump in the road that lifted us off the seat. Something flashed at Abigail's throat as she bounced back to the seat -- her engagement ring hung on a chain around her neck. It finally penetrated my thick head that here were the two people most likely to know about a ranger team getting along when sex was involved. Whether or not they'd be upset if the rangers were both male wasn't a question I planned to explore. Neither Meeker nor Pueblo, Rich's home town, were known as bastions of open mindedness on the subject.

I nodded toward Abigail. "When is the wedding?"

She reached up to play with the ring at her throat. Rangers were cautioned against wearing rings on our hands -- that was an invitation to an injury in our line of work. "December. We'll need some time after the fire season ends to put it all together. It will take weeks to make the dresses and all that." I tried to imagine the tomboy currently clad in ranger green utilities and smudges decked out in wedding white.

Rich laughed. "All I have to do is show up, relatively sober."

Abigail whacked his arm, ignoring his playful yelp. "You'll have a to-do list, buster!"

"Is anyone giving you grief about living together?" What was taken as a matter of course in bigger communities probably didn't fly very well in a place as small as Meeker. This might be my only way to sneak up on what I needed to know.

"Hah! Everyone! My dad tried to get the Chief to reassign us, even, or drop me from the crew completely. Old dinosaur with old dinosaur attitudes. You'd think if anyone would be for it, it would be him and Mom." Abigail wrinkled up her brow, while Rich blew air out between pursed lips. Guess he was destined for some interesting relationships with the in-laws. "They sure didn't know each other well enough before they got married, or they never would have done it."

"Abigail's mom lives over in Rangely now, and I don't think it's enough miles between them," Rich put in.

"What I figure is that if Rich and I do a ranger season together and I don't kill him before the end, we'll have a long and happy life together." Abigail patted Rich's thigh.

"How is it working so far?" Now we were getting someplace.

"Pretty good. I say 'yes, dear' a lot." Richard lifted a hand from the steering wheel to rub his mouth, probably to hide a smile from Abigail.

“Only when I ask you for something you already plan to do, you, you, you man!” Abigail didn’t sound particularly annoyed with him. I concluded that it was working fairly well.

“You might decide to throw me back. The season is young.” Rich didn’t look very concerned about the possibility.

“That would trigger a feeding frenzy among the girls.” I had a sudden vision of Lindy, Tanya, and April with big shark teeth, circling around Rich.

Abigail and Rich both laughed, but she sounded amused, and he was acknowledging a real and present danger. “I put a ring on Abigail to get Tanya to back off.” She thumped his thigh with the side of her fist. “Among other reasons.” She stroked the thumped spot. Could Kurt and I ever touch each other so casually in company? First we had to work out the touching each other in private part.

“Tanya seems to have set her sights on Kurt,” I said, thinking back to our trip to town. I hadn’t met her, but it sounded like Kurt had, in previous seasons.

“She’s been chasing him for the last two years. They all have.” Abigail looked toward me. “Though some of them will start chasing you.”

“Lindy already has.” Next week’s grocery trip would be an exercise in diplomacy -- I didn’t plan to get caught.

Abigail considered this. “You could do worse; she’s sweet.” Abigail had probably known Lindy since they were small. “But she won’t be the only one. Rangers are popular guys.”

“Yeah,” Rich agreed, making me think his bachelor days had been entertaining, especially after Abigail frowned at him. Well, good for him. “So far, nobody has caught Kurt, though everybody tries.”

“Not ‘everybody,’” Abigail objected.

“No, sweetheart, not everybody.” He grinned at her, and it was plain that willowy, brunette Abigail and tall, lanky Rich had eyes for no one but each other, though I reminded Rich to have eyes for the road. Our turn off was coming up.

“Still, he hasn’t dated anyone, exactly, he’s just friendly to everyone,” Abigail went on. “From something he said, I think he got his heart broken before he got here, and it’s taking a long time to heal. He never talks about her. Never.”

Maybe, maybe, it had been a him.

Two seasons of pursuit, and none of the local girls had captured Kurt. I thought back to the enormous trout I’d caught without planning to, and a spark of hope grew that I could capture the larger, more desirable prize. He’d been in my arms briefly -- I did not want this big one to get away.

They dropped me off at the cabin, which was both home and a totally strange place. Without Kurt,

it was a shack in the wilderness.

As I offloaded my gear, Abigail caught me for a quiet word. “Jake, Kurt sent this.” She kissed me lightly on the cheek, making me gawp at her.

“Did he?” I didn’t know how he could have. Privacy was nonexistent on the line.

“He should have.” Abigail looked troubled. “Jake, don’t hurt him.” Then she got back in the truck, leaving me to wonder just which way she meant that.

Chapter Twenty

If I just sat at the top of the ridge, scanning for fires in a big circle, I was going to go mad. The restlessness was the product of trying to come to terms with what Kurt and I had done that night. I wanted more, I needed more, I was desperately afraid that Kurt didn't want the same.

"Don't hurt him." Abigail's words rang in my head. She meant well, and she'd known Kurt longer than I had, maybe, but how well did she really know him? Well enough to speak for him? I didn't want to hurt him -- I wanted to believe that night was more than the product of fear and impending death. I didn't want to be the last novelty before oblivion.

If that was all it would be, I'd have to live with it. Not sure how, but maybe leaving would be best after all.

"Don't hurt him." Was that supposed to mean that if he made a pass, I should accept it, or at least not punch his lights out? Did she know something I didn't about how close Kurt liked to get to his partners? This was his third season with the Forest Service. Did he make a habit of seducing his wingman? How or why would Abigail know?

If I was one in a long list, there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it. Maybe he'd keep me until the end of the season.

"Don't hurt him," she'd said. What about him hurting me?

I spent a lot of time running from the ridge to the archery range. I'd scan the surrounding terrain, then run back down to shoot another three quivers' worth of arrows. The quiver had eleven arrows in it after Fat Boy rode off with number twelve. Trying to remember everything Kurt had coached me about shooting was keeping my mind off other things, sort of. The aspen tree and I had two interludes that first day back, in between firing and fetching arrows.

My shooting was improving, even if my mental health was not. Kurt and I had shared the archery before the fire -- we could at least have that after, no matter what. Without him nearby, I could concentrate as I never had concentrated before. I had to be good at this, for Kurt, for us, and for my own self respect. I shot the last quiver with every arrow in the target, and two in the red, stopping only when my hand hurt too much to draw another bowstring.

Dinner wasn't much fun. I didn't have the heart to cook something, or even run back and forth to the bear box and the lake for some variety. A lonely peanut butter sandwich at the bear box, where all the ingredients were and I didn't have to pretend to eat it for any enjoyment, was about it. It was the wilderness equivalent of eating over the sink. I might have brought it back to the table and tried to read one of the library books, but I'd already looked at the short stories and thrown the book back into the cabin, frustrated and unable to concentrate.

I ended up at the lake after my last run up the ridge with the binoculars. Nothing was burning that I

could see, so I went to what I guess was my happy place here. The fish were safe from me tonight, unless they got conked on the head with the rocks I skipped. The plink, plink, plink of the stones across the lake was soothing; probably the water level changed by two inches from all the rocks that went to the bottom. I did finally drag the fridge box up for a drink of milk straight from the carton. The milk was still good after several days. I'd have to tell Kurt that our new fridge worked.

It was dark and my day was over, but the empty cabin didn't welcome me. It wasn't home tonight. Tossing and turning wasn't going to disturb anyone tonight, no soft breathing from across the room would tell me all was right with the world. I lay in my sleeping bag, but there was no comfortable position in that cot, no matter how I searched for it.

There might be a comfortable spot across the room. Silently I padded over to Kurt's cot to zip myself into his bag, and only then could I fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

I woke to the scent of Kurt's shaving cream, which clung to the flannel lining of the bag and to the pillow. Lying on my back with the pillow clasped to my chest, I thought again of the man who usually slept here.

All the overtures had been Kurt's, all the moments of casual nudity in the last week had been his, at least initially. Had he been offering himself all along and I'd just been too stupid to realize it?

Too good to be true, I decided as I got up, leaving the bag unzipped and rumpled, which matched the one on my cot. We'd been scared, he'd been thinking of his lost mother, he'd needed some comfort, that's all, and I'd been the only one there. Maybe he thought I couldn't respond to anything other than sex, although I didn't think of myself as that heartless. Did he? I had at least fifteen reasons stored up for why he wouldn't want any part of me once he returned to the cabin, and why one of us wouldn't remain there once he returned.

It would probably be me to leave, I thought glumly on the climb up the path to the ridge with a water bottle and binoculars. He was the more experienced ranger; he knew what he was doing. I was the newbie, the liability. I had somewhere to go, a backup plan that started in early September. If I just called the School of Pharmacy and told them that I wouldn't be deferring entrance after all, that I'd be there this year and not next, as I'd thought, Kurt could keep his job and livelihood, and I'd just miss out on the year of freedom from academics that I'd hoped for.

It would put miles between us, if he didn't want to look at me again, to remember what we'd done in a cave while waiting to die young.

By my second trip down from the ridge to the archery range, I had amassed another set of reasons that would keep me there in the cabin, with my lover by my side. Kurt, my lover, oh, those words sounded good. I wanted to hold him again, to touch him and explore him, to find out where the ticklish spots were and the ones that made him moan. He'd offered, he'd enjoyed, he'd touched me. He'd kissed me. Didn't that mean more than anything else? If it was just some comfort sex with a fellow ranger in a time of peril, he didn't have to kiss me. He could have just dropped my trousers and done what he'd suggested. Wiped his mouth and gone back to watching the fire, maybe holding tight to me for the illusion of safety in numbers. But he'd kissed me, hard and completely.

No, I had been the one to kiss him. He hadn't seduced me -- he had offered to blow me. He had only kissed back, and I had better never expect that to happen again, short of the woods burning down around us.

The sad, bad thoughts chased me up and down the hill from ridge to range. More than once I turned the binoculars to our road, hoping to see our battered old tanker grumbling down the track, knowing that the mechanics had probably only gotten the differential opened up. The busted pinion gear would probably need parts brought in from Grand Junction, if not freighted in from Denver. It

would be a while yet before I saw Kurt again, before this horrible dilemma could be resolved.

A few good thoughts pursued me, too. He might have meant it. He might not have known where to start, any more than I did, and so he started in the only place that he thought I would start, by offering benefits to a friend. If that was all he wanted, I might have to leave for pharmacy school after all, because I didn't think I could stand being just another activity, an alternative to fishing or archery. "It's raining, so drop your drawers." Or maybe I could, if that was all I could have. Banter in the day, boffing at night, just to stave off the boredom. He hadn't made me any promises. The good thoughts went sour really fast when I thought of it like that.

The way to his heart might be with six inches of steel, if he came back with, "Oopsy, let's just forget that ever happened." That thought brought me to a halt halfway down the path. I didn't want to forget, I didn't want to ignore it, I didn't want to put aside the most amazing experience of my life. Kurt wouldn't do that to me. He couldn't do that to me. If he did, I still couldn't attack him, though his words would be steel plunged into my own heart.

I could live with, "It was great, but let's not do it again." I'd just have to be miles away from him to live like that, because I could never look at him again and not remember what it was like to touch him.

The way to his heart might be through being as hyper-competent as he was. I sighted the arrows at the target, loosing them one at a time, and retrieved all of them from one ring or another -- not a one had missed. My cluster was getting smaller, just like he'd promised. I stowed the arrows and the bow in the cabin for the night. Seven trips up the ridge and seven trips down to the range had eaten up most of my daylight.

I wanted little jokes and single words that told an entire story just to us. "Bear" would be one. "RAV4" might be another. "Beans." That made my stomach rumble, which sent me to the bear box. Cooking anything was beyond my initiative. Dinner was another peanut butter sandwich.

I had a little light and nothing to do with it, so I took my rod and tackle box down to the lake. The evening sky was going a deeper blue, with streaks of clouds at the horizon. The evening star would be coming up soon, as would the moon, but for now it was not yet twilight, something that didn't exist long in the mountains. There was a shallow, rocky section where the big trout came to feed.

A small, hairy fly seemed about right, so I tied one onto my line and tried a cast. Kurt didn't fish with me. He was too impatient to sit and flip the hook into the waters where the fish might be, over and over, waiting for the hunger to overtake the caution. A man of direct action, he'd joked that he was the netting sort of fisherman -- he'd get in there and scoop out what he wanted.

A second and then a third cast produced nothing. I was reaching the tip of the rod behind my head, preparing to cast again, when movement on the other side of the lake drew my eye.

They were deer, smaller than the behemoths that had run us down in the smoke. Four animals had come to the water's edge to dip their muzzles into the coolness. It wasn't the season for racks of antlers; all four heads were bare of adornment. One watched while the others drank, then dipped its head to the water. Twilight was their time to feed. One nibbled on something that sprouted from the bank. I watched, content to let the wild things have the peace of the lake. Something startled them, and they were gone.

Another cast, and the fly sat on the surface of the water, an enticing morsel to a hungry cutthroat trout. I idly wondered if I really wanted a fish tonight, and had started to reel the fly when something took my hook.

Something big, something feisty, and trying to get away. The tip of my rod jerked down, seconds after the fly had disappeared below the surface in the center of expanding ripples. The fish and I dueled from our respective ends of the line -- I worked it closer to me, the rod dipping and jinking as the fish fought to escape me. "Come to me, my pretty," I crooned to the fish flapping in the shallows, but when I'd beached the beautiful, fourteen-inch cutthroat, I couldn't bear that it should die by my hand. It had done nothing to deserve a wanton death -- I wouldn't eat it tonight.

The hook was through its lip, so I clipped the barb with the pliers. The hook slipped out, giving me the chore of remounting the fly, but allowing the trout to live without encumbrance. I helped the flapping, struggling fish regain the lake, where it lay in the shallows, sucking great gouts of water through its gills, gathering the strength to disappear. A quick flash, and it was gone.

There would be no more casts tonight; I had caught and released my fish. Instead, I would lie back in the grass and watch the sky. The stars were coming out into the indigo of the night, which would fade to black soon. The moon would rise sometime, but for now the pinpoints of the Milky Way were a path through the sky. I looked up, hands behind my head, and tried to recall the names of the brighter stars. Arcturus... Mizer, Merak, Dubhe in the Big Dipper, and Polaris I could find, the others were a bigger mystery. The constellations I knew better: the Big and Little Dippers, Draco, Bootes. The Big Dipper was part of Ursa Major, the Big Bear, and that was as close as I wanted to get to any bear at all, though our visitor from the other day might still be near. I'd like to lie on my back near Kurt, with the breezes soft across our skins, and point out what I knew to him. He might know more, he so often did, and I would watch his finger trace a picture in the stars.

Back to hoping that what Kurt and I had started might continue. I wanted to feel his mouth under mine, I wanted to pull his thighs around me, I wanted... I wanted to have a lot of things with him that I couldn't even imagine properly, so I recalled what we'd done in our frenzy in the cave. Once again I opened my fly and let my rampant cock out to meet my palm. Kurt had touched me, he'd held me, he'd slipped his lips over all of my cock, taking it deep into the wet heat of his mouth. My hand rose and fell, slowly this time, as I tried to recapture what had been too fleeting. I could feel him once again tonguing me, and imagined his head blocking out the stars, rising and falling over me, sucking and licking. I wanted more of that, I wanted more of him, and this might be the only way I'd get it. My thumb rolled over the head, spreading the drops I leaked, becoming Kurt's tongue in my mind. The tight, one-fingered grip I switched to became his lips -- a little reality helped my imagination along, but I wanted him, not the ersatz and memories.

I wanted... I wanted everything that Kurt could do to me. My utilities got shoved over my lifted butt and down toward my ankles. I lay on my back, letting the breezes whisper through the little hairs as I drew my knees up and apart. Fingers slipped into my mouth, then brushed lightly down my chest and belly toward my ass. I had to be ready for him to fuck me, if he would fuck me, no, when he fucked me, I wouldn't let it be any other way now. I would be ready for him. Squeezing my eyes shut, I did what I wanted him to do, touching, probing, preparing. My own hand felt strange -- I wanted it to be Kurt who looked down on me and inserted first his fingers and then his cock. I wanted to see his face and feel him stretch me. I wanted to open enough to let him in. Somehow, I would make it all happen; I had to, or it wouldn't happen. Two were too many -- I had

to back off to one finger, but it was Kurt's, in my mind. So much practice in imagining his hands, his body, I could imagine he was touching me now and it was glorious and yet, inadequate -- I'd have to do more. Screaming, "Fuck me, Kurt!" into the night helped me feel my hand as his, and then I screamed again as the climax rolled through me. Semen launched toward the stars when the spasms took my breath and left me panting in the grass.

But I was alone by the water -- even the animals had left me. Surely every fish had retreated to the bottom of the lake, and Kurt was miles away.

I refastened my pants and went back to staring at the sky, thinking of Kurt and wondering if he was a better fisherman than he'd let on. In my post-orgasmic haze, the last week looked more and more as if he'd trailed himself like bait before my avid eyes, ever more enticingly, as I stubbornly stayed in the depths, hungry, but afraid to lunge. Had the fire provided his net, that he could finally scoop me up for his trophy? The lump in my throat refused to swallow down -- had he caught me only to throw me back?

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sound of the diesel engine brought me down from the ridge, binoculars in hand. Yet another day of running back and forth between the lookout point and the archery range had left me able to travel the path without looking down, a good thing because I was craning my neck for a glimpse of Kurt.

Missing him and not being quite sure what to say to him when I saw him left me desperate and confused. He was always confident, except for that one moment when he thought I didn't want what he'd offered, so maybe he'd have some idea of how to start the awkward conversation that we were going to have to have. Days of whirling thoughts hadn't brought anything any clearer in my mind about what he might want, though I knew exactly what I wanted.

Kurt. I wanted Kurt, and I could only hope he'd want me, too. Abigail should have said what she'd said to him instead of me. Maybe she did. I could hope.

The nice thing about sound carrying in the mountains is that I had enough time to find some clean clothes, brush my teeth, and scrape the stubble off my face. Kurt pulled up by the cabin in time to see me come out and wave, which made him wave back and poke his finger at the passenger seat. I swung in beside him.

"I brought your hat back." Kurt handed it to me, like it hadn't been sitting on the seat, waiting. I'd missed it these last few days in the sun, so I put it on. It was oddly warm.

"Thanks. How's the ankle?"

"Fine, now." Could the small talk get any smaller?

He threw the truck into gear, then headed for the little road down to the water.

"I left the tank empty," he said, and wouldn't pull over when I suggested I should thread the narrow track to the water. "I need to be able to do it."

That sounded grim. So did the scrape of branches on the passenger side -- maybe I should take that one tree down, since it seemed to be the biggest obstacle.

Once at the water, he jumped out and unfastened the intake. Kurt's hands on the hose made me think of his hands on me back in the cave -- I had to swallow a moan. He glanced up at me and glanced away again before he dropped the intake into the lake, while I turned away to start the pump. Guess we were going to have to clear the air right now, because we were both so tense we could have twanged.

He looked better than a guy who'd spent days on a fire line had a right to. Mrs. Chief must have taken mercy on him and let him use the washing machines at the house, because I couldn't see him

huddled in a towel at the laundromat, watching green clothing spin around. She must have taken some other mercies, too, because the truck had smelled of good cooking and there were some brown bags on the seat between us. I'd have leaned over them to kiss him hello if I was sure he wanted it.

Moving down the bank to get away from the noise of the pump, we looked at each other uncertainly. Kurt was the first to speak. "You look awful. When was the last time you ate or slept?"

I had been sleeping just fine once I got into the right bag to do it. Last night I'd gotten directly into his bag, and the crickets sang me to sleep after a while. The other, though -- I just shrugged.

Kurt snorted. "Thought so." He marched back to the truck and brought one of the bags. "Here. Eat." He held a chocolate brownie by my mouth as I stared at him. "Come on, eat it."

I wanted to nibble the morsel from his hand, but his gruff manner was making me hesitate. "Jake, you can eat it or I can shove it up your nose, but it's going into you. You need it." He pressed it to my lips, and I opened them to take a bite. Chewing and swallowing activated my brain enough that I took the remaining bite of the brownie from his fingers the same way, instead of reaching up to take it and feed myself. He shuddered and reached into the bag for more food. "Good. I brought you some of Mrs. Chief's fried chicken."

We sat on a fallen tree where he handed me a piece of golden brown deliciousness -- even his strained manner couldn't stop me now that I had been made totally aware of my hunger. Another piece disappeared before I thought to ask him if he'd eaten.

"I ate before I left town. No, don't talk to me before you've finished." Kurt handed me a plastic fork and a container of homemade macaroni salad, which got chased down by another drumstick and a bottle of water. I did feel a lot better in one way, but worse in another, because I was so scared of what he was going to tell me. He was regretting everything, I just knew it, and he was going to tell me good-bye after he'd fed me. Just the thought made me feel like I was going to throw up. Waste of good chicken.

"Why did you want me to eat so bad?" I waved away the other brownie he offered.

He put the brownie back into the bag at his feet and stared out over the water before turning to meet my eyes. "I thought that if your blood sugar came up into detectable ranges first that you might not ask me to move out right away."

I goggled at him. "Kurt, that didn't even cross my mind! I wouldn't ask you to leave!" He didn't want to go!

He sighed. "So you've decided to leave instead."

I'd spent the days fearing getting thrown out, but there was no way in hell I'd leave! "No! Kurt..."

He wasn't listening; he was sunk in his own thought. "It's been bothering you, I can tell, you haven't been eating, you haven't been sleeping, you've been thinking about it and going crazy that we did it..."

"Yeah, Kurt, I have been thinking about it a lot, and going crazy, but--"

He interrupted again. "I really did think we were going to buy the farm, and I had to, Jake, I had to ask. I couldn't stay there waiting for the flames without saying something, and you made it so easy, I had to touch you once before..."

"That's what I thought, too, Kurt," I tried to interject, but he talked right over me.

"So now that we're going to live, maybe you can't stand to be around me after that," he concluded miserably.

I rose to my feet, put my hand on his upper arm and dragged him up, too. "I can stand it just fine, Kurt."

"You say that, but you've been so disturbed that you haven't been..."

This time I interrupted him in the only way I thought might get his attention and make my point. I kissed him. Completely, thoroughly, and if he didn't like fried chicken breath kisses, too bad. My hands on his upper arms kept him from sagging out of reach as I stroked my tongue over his. My mouth over his kept him from uttering any more nonsense. It lasted until I let him up for air.

"Oh, Jake, I've been so freaked out about this. I just knew you were going to walk out on me after..."

There was more than one way to interrupt his babble. I pushed him in the lake.

He came up sputtering, spewing, and maybe with a clearer head. "What the fuck was that for?" He glared at me as he stroked the few feet to the shore.

I stood with my arms akimbo, watching him heave out of the water. "Maybe now you'll let me get a word in edgewise?"

"Maybe." He removed his boots before taking the hand I offered. "Depends on what you have to say. My boots are soaked."

I swung him to his feet and into my arms for another kiss, which he got before he quite made contact with me. No reason for us both to get wet. "They'll be dry before you need them again."

"Really?" His face lit up, and he looked like the Kurt I remembered, instead of the uncertain man with the lowered eyes. "Why's that?"

"Because you're going to be naked for a while. Because I don't want what we did in the cave to be a 'one time only' thing." I'd only spent days fantasizing about what I wanted with him. But..."You do want more, right?"

"Lots more, Jake." Taking his wet shirt off over his head muffled the words, but once it was off, he could see my face.

Getting wet denim off took four hands. Now Kurt stood before me in nothing but his wet skin and a smile. "Use my shirt for a towel." I started to pull it off, but he reached to grab my hat first. Holding it by the brim, he glanced at the lake and feigned a throw at the water before tossing it into the grass.

"You really hate my hat, don't you?" I had started to leap after my much-maligned headgear, but stopped when it landed safely.

"No," and he brought me to his mouth for another kiss. "I just like to tease you about it."

I wiped him down, lingering in crevices where water might collect, swiping slowly over the planes of his stomach and back. He reached to my shoulder, saying, "I was scared that it was just the fear of dying that made you say 'yes.'"

"That's what was bothering me more than anything, Kurt." Kneeling before him to run the shirt down his legs brought me to eye level with his cock, which was slowly recovering from the cold dip in the lake. Rising to about half mast called for a celebratory kiss, which I placed on the firming shaft. The kiss was followed by an experimental lick and a gasp. I was going to have a new experience of my own here in about a minute. One more kiss there and I had to stand up, because I needed a few more minutes before opening my mouth for him. All of a sudden I knew I could fulfill a fantasy that had been pursuing me since the day I first really noticed him, standing in the shower from the hose. "I was afraid that maybe I was just a new experience, kind of the last opportunity to check off a box before the fire got us."

His hair had dripped down, leaving trickles of water on his neck and shoulders. I put my mouth to his skin to lick up the little rivulets, trailing my tongue upward to catch them as they escaped his hair. Kurt tilted his head for me to reach his neck better, and moaned softly as I lapped him from collarbone to ear. Holding him close against my bare chest, he warmed from the chill of the lake, growing against my groin.

"No, Jake, that wasn't it at all." Catching his earlobe in my teeth cut his words off in a gasp.

"Better tell me what it was, then," I breathed softly against the captured flesh.

"I spent most of two weeks trying to get your attention, and you have to ask that? I did everything but drop one wing and run in circles," he told me in a shaky voice.

"Two weeks?" I must be really dim, but those last few days had gotten my attention all right -- he was telling me what I most wanted to hear about those days, and he wasn't throwing me back. I put my hands on his ass to pull him close, working my fingers over the muscles there, and it felt better than I had imagined, too.

"Yeah, two weeks. I couldn't be really blatant about it, just in case you didn't swing my way, but true confession, Jake, I wanted you from the start." He'd put his hands down the back of my utilities and was playing with my butt, too. "And then I thought we were out of time to be subtle."

"True confession, I wanted you so bad, but I wasn't sure you were sending signals on purpose." I paused to explore a muscle in his neck, which made him moan. "I've been going berserk thinking about you." That's all he needed to know -- the turmoil was best forgotten entirely.

“You have?” Kurt threw his head back to let me explore some more, and rubbed his groin against mine, which reminded me of something I’d planned to do.

“Hell, yes. Haven’t jacked off so much since I was a kid and discovered that I could.” I wasn’t going to mention what I’d been doing yesterday and today that went with it. Let him think it was natural talent.

“That explains the muscular development -- you must be ambidextrous.” He playfully pinched my biceps and then yelped when I bit his shoulder. This was like normal, only with full body contact. I could get to like this kind of teasing a lot. A kiss landed on top of the bite.

“Hang on a minute.” The sound of the pump had changed. I’d have to go turn it off. That meant letting go of Kurt, but then I’d get to return. “Go sit down over there.” I shoved him toward the fallen tree with a little pat on the ass. “I’ll be right back.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Heading behind the truck to get the pump switch gave me a minute to decide what I was going to do. I could leave my utility pants and boots over here and stalk back to him naked, or I could drive him mad with anticipation, the good kind, by leaving them on. What I had in mind to do I could do with pants on, once I'd moved this throbbing erection into a better position.

Silence fell as the pump stopped, gauge at five hundred gallons. Nothing but mountain sounds, a few bird calls, the croak of a raven, the whisper of the breeze in the trees accompanied me back to the fallen log where Kurt sat. One leg stretched out in front of him, the other foot back, he leaned back just enough to keep his erection from poking his belly. I'd keep that from being a problem for him.

Forcing myself to go slowly instead of running back to him made me saunter rather than walk. Unplanned but effective, it made his eyes go wide in the late afternoon sun that slanted down on us. Certain at last that he wanted what I wanted, I let my need flood my face. So much was pent up that it made my lips go dry -- I licked them for comfort and also because I wanted them moist for what was coming. First a kiss, with my hands on his shoulders, and then I did to him what he'd done to me, traveling slowly down the length of his body with my hands, tantalizingly, maddeningly. When I reached his waist, I started to go to my knees. Now, at last, I would repay the glorious things he'd done to me.

Kurt looked at my body with yearning as naked as my own before putting his arms around my shoulders. "You're sure you want to do this?" he asked me before placing his lips to mine.

"Never surer." My hands roamed over his groin. I'd had days to decide, and this was what I wanted above all else: to touch him and be touched by him, in every way.

I could kiss him as I explored, gently, taking the time to feel his textures. Crisp, curly hairs against my fingertips, soft skin over hard shaft, thicker skin covering his balls, perfect for cupping. I played him with both hands, slowly this time, wanting him to feel everything I could imagine to do. I had daylight, I could look, too, but that meant taking my mouth from his, something I wasn't willing to do just yet.

One hand under his sac, the other on his shaft, I stroked my thumb over the head of his cock in perfect time with the stroke of my tongue, feeling the slickness in both places. Kurt moaned, and that was my signal to do something that would bring louder noises. I want to hear my name come out of his throat, coming from someplace deeper within. He'd done it for me -- now I'd do it for him.

Taking the time to look, just a little, showed me his hard cock, full and thick. Smaller than my own, but still more than a handful and a mouthful, he had to be just about seven inches long and thick enough that my finger barely met my thumb. I'd worry about what that meant for other things later; now I wanted to put my mouth over the glistening head and flick the little slit with my tongue.

>From my place between his knees, I could do that.

Kurt's hands were flat on my back, gently encouraging me to bend to him, to take his hard cock with my mouth for the first time. My name was a whisper with the wind as he breathed it out; his scent was salt and musk as I breathed it in. So soft and still hard, so smooth -- I licked the head with its salty droplets, venturing farther down to lick along his shaft. My lips rubbed his length with each movement of my head, tongue flicking along from base to tip. Slowly, then faster, then slowly again, coming back to where little hairs tickled my cheek before rising up and taking him into my mouth completely. Down I went, taking as much of him in as I could, and up again, to end with the lightest of tickles before sucking him back in. If my imagination hadn't been equal to the reality of him sucking me, neither had it been equal to the reality of me sucking him. I could make him feel as good as he'd done for me and enjoy the sensuous feel of him against my tongue, his hands in my hair.

Kurt was moaning my name, but I wanted to hear more, I wanted him to explode screaming. I'd put my hands on his waist for balance, but now I needed one for his hard shaft, wet with my saliva and throbbing against my palm. The little veins jumped under my fingertips as I caught a breath, licking the edge of the head because I couldn't bear to take my mouth away, and then I plunged down on him, stopped only by my hand, which rose against my lips with each stroke.

"Not going to last long," he choked out, his hands tight on my shoulders now.

"Good," I took a moment to say, hand never stopping, before taking him back into my mouth. I meant it, too, I wanted him to explode in my mouth, I wanted to taste him, I wanted to know that he climaxed because of how good I was making him feel. It would mean that I was doing it right, even though I'd never done it before, which I hoped he couldn't tell. If I was messing it up, maybe he'd just teach me better, but it suddenly didn't seem to be a problem.

Kurt's climax rippled through him an instant before come spurted out into my mouth, followed by his shout of pleasure. If it wasn't my name, that was okay, because he started saying, "Oh, Jake, oh, Jake..." a moment later, before I'd quite made up my mind to swallow the thick, salty proof of his orgasm. In order to respond to him I'd have to do something, and a moment later a slightly bitter aftertaste was all that was left.

Rocking back onto my heels let me make just enough lap to pull Kurt to straddle me. I had to feel as much of his skin as I could, while he wrapped his arms around me, still murmuring my name. I held him tightly, my face pressed against his chest, while I caught my breath and he caught his. It also put his groin right against mine, which made my hips move almost involuntarily against him. Even through the britches, it was enough to tip me over after what I'd been doing to him. I screamed into his skin with my climax, the waves of pleasure amplified by the man I held.

"Crikey!" I mumbled. I hadn't even gotten my pants off.

"I knew you'd say it eventually," Kurt reassured me through his laughter. "The beauty of being a twenty-two year-old horndoggy is that you'll be ready to go again in no time." Yeah, with Kurt in my arms, I would be ready again fast. "It also gives us a few minutes to get some other things done." He looked down into my eyes before he kissed me and got to his feet. I let him pull me up, too, and held him tightly before peeling down to rinse my underwear in the lake.

“Naked together at last,” Kurt observed, eyes dancing. It was kind of funny -- four orgasms and no nudity until afterward, and I realized this was the first time I’d laughed since we’d left the cave with Max. For that I had to hug him again, still laughing.

“Come on,” Kurt said, “let’s get up to the cabin while we still have some light.” He led me to the truck, where we threw our clothes into the cab.

There was still a brown paper sack on the seat, so I peeked in. “What’s this?” I pulled out a large, blue carton, the sort that meant he’d hit the warehouse store in Grand Junction.

“Hope in a box,” he told me, with eyes that didn’t dance quite so much. “There’s lube, too.”

“And a lot of it.” I pulled a warehouse-store-sized bottle of lube out of the bag to go with the condoms. “Kurt, you had to have some faith that I wouldn’t just throw you out, or you wouldn’t have bought all this.”

“No, just a lot of hope.” He started up the engine. “I had visions of blowing them all up like balloons for the foxes to play with if you left.”

Forty balloons would keep the foxes entertained for a while. “You do realize that this will only last a month, don’t you?” I grinned at his expression, glad to have shaken the grimness that had threatened to come back. Flabbergasted was better than sad.

“You are a horndoggy, aren’t you?” he asked lightly. He pulled up the little road to the cabin -- making that truck go forward wasn’t a problem.

“So are you. So the giant economy box is a good idea. I do believe,” and after he pulled in next to the cabin, I stopped to make him look at me, “that we are going to need it.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The cabin felt different, I thought, as Kurt and I carried things in from the truck. He was here again, he was happy to be here, with me, and that turned our little sixteen by sixteen hut into home again.

“Think we should drag the cots together?” Finding places on the shelf for our new toys prompted other thoughts. “Those damned things aren’t any substitute for a king-sized bed.” I regarded the cots glumly -- they were Army surplus and less than thirty inches wide. The sleeping bags on both were in disarray. I’d forgotten to straighten them out, again. How did Kurt manage to “make his bed” every morning and still have socks everywhere?

“No, they aren’t. I thought I left this thing straight.” He flapped the rumpled sleeping bag open, put it on the floor, and started to fold up the cot.

Suddenly, he turned to me, dawning realization on his face. “I did leave it straight. You never do.” He began to laugh softly. “If I had just come into the cabin before I talked to you, I would have known. I could have saved myself all that anguish and a dip in the lake.”

My own laugh was kind of embarrassed. “It was the only way I could get any sleep at all.”

“I intend to wear you out enough that you’ll sleep like a log tonight,” he told me with a grin, so I pulled him close and kissed him. “Now, fold up that miserable excuse for a sleeping surface. Condoms weren’t the only thing I bought in Grand Junction.”

“Oh?” I followed Kurt out to the truck, where he opened an equipment hatch, revealing a queen-sized air mattress in a box.

“Are you sure it wasn’t faith in me sticking around that sent you shopping?” I asked again as we unfolded blue vinyl on the floor. “And where’s the pump?”

“Charge for one hour before use,” Kurt read, and we looked sourly at the grapefruit-sized air pump that would do us no good at all without electricity.

“We can charge it on the next trip into town, Kurt,” I consoled him as he seethed about not recalling the need for charging. “Besides, I have another idea.” Taking him into my arms, I went on. “I’d really rather be outside, down by the lake. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. I wasn’t thinking,” Kurt replied, rubbing his hand up and down my back. “Or I was, but only about sleeping next to you for the rest of the season.”

“Good thought, but for tonight...” I waved my brows wickedly. “Hey, I have to go retrieve the archery equipment before it gets full dark. Meet you there at the lake?”

My last sight of him was bare legs in boots poking out from a moving mound of sleeping bags as he headed down the path to the water.

Something about running around in the woods in near dark while naked just didn't appeal, so I yanked my utilities and boots back on for the hike back to the archery range. The possums I didn't want for pets would be quick to gnaw the salt-laden handgrip -- I didn't want to leave the bow and arrows out overnight to be chewed on by them or the skunks, porcupines, and raccoons that all craved the salt.

With the quiver at my waist and the unstrung bow across my shoulder, I trotted over to the target to pull the arrows out. This time, they were all in one ring or another, and one was on the very edge of the gold center circle. Kurt would be pleased with my hard work over the last few days, I thought. I gave a quick pat to the aspen tree that had been such a pal to both of us, feeling a little foolish. Then I headed back to the cabin, confident that the night could only continue to be good.

The sky was purple and aqua at the edges when I got back to the lake. Kurt was zipping the two opened bags together at the end when he smiled up at me, his hand out to welcome me to our bed. "I get to undress you at last?"

"Oh, yeah!" He'd chosen a spot on the grassy edge of the lake, near a stand of fir trees, not too near the water, I noticed with a chuckle. Didn't want to toss my boots in by accident, so I left them several steps away in the grass.

Kurt was completely bare except for the shadows painted on him by the fading light. The moon would be up later, but for now, he was mysteriously vague in his nakedness. I'd touch him all over, didn't need light for that. Kneeling next to him let him put his hands at my fly, where I'd had my own so often, but not tonight. He unzipped me slowly, running his hands over my groin, making me shiver. His hands traveled over more of me, up my chest and around my waist, as he kissed my chest, licking me now and then. I ran my hands over him, too, wanting him to hurry and slip my clothing off, yet wanting to stretch out the moment.

Warm fingers finally crept under my briefs; Kurt ran his hands down my thighs as he took my britches down. The evening breeze tickled me when the fabric came away -- once again he was right, I'd recovered fast. Didn't think he was very far behind me, either, though I couldn't see and he wasn't pressed against me -- he would be soon. Now, in fact, because he pushed me down to the open sleeping bag to strip the utilities away. Once I was bare, Kurt stretched out on top of me, mouth to mine, body to mine, skin to skin. He was hard -- I could feel him pressed against my belly, next to my own erection. I wanted to lose myself in his kiss, so I closed my eyes and let our tongues explore.

My hand went exploring, too -- I checked every inch I could reach, from the muscles in his back to the round globes of his butt. I squeezed, I stroked, I pressed, all to take in the feeling of him. He'd stressed the importance of learning the terrain. I assumed that was true for the terrain of his body as much as the terrain of the land. I thought I'd be a better student for Kurt's own landscape.

"Tell me what you want," he invited between kisses. "Tell me what you like."

I froze. "I don't know." I'd been dreading explaining -- it was just one more thing where Kurt had experience and I did not.

“If you don’t know, who does?” He cocked his head slightly. “Oh, Jake...”

He figured it out fast about the sleeping bags, and he was deciphering this, too, in record time. I could practically hear gears turning in his head, which was good, because I didn’t want to say the words.

“Jake, what have you done before?” he asked softly. I didn’t think he was supposed to ask that, but what else was he going to say? The slow motion of his hips stopped, but his arms tightened around me.

The heat had to be rising off my face detectably. “Uh, a little oral.”

“When? Just this week?” At least he was asking questions in the least embarrassing way possible.

“Yeah. That’s all.” I lay back and shut my eyes tight. “Well, some touching before.”

“That’s okay, Jake,” Kurt told me, stroking my face with his fingers. “It makes sense of some other stuff. I’m glad you told me.” He kissed me again, softly. “I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me. If there’s something you don’t even want to try, we won’t.”

“I want to try it all!” I said fiercely, rolling him over so that I lay on top of him. “Everything! Everything that you’re okay with,” I amended, remembering my doubts about being able to fit inside him.

“I’m okay with trying everything, too.” Kurt looked up into my eyes, and then we tried more kisses with open mouths.

Then we tried kisses everywhere: necks, shoulders, chests, and hands everywhere, as we rolled over. His skin was salty, and he smelled of musk and masculinity; his muscular body felt so right plastered to mine. His hard cock rubbed my hip, and I suddenly had to taste there, too, so I flipped around. I’d done this earlier for him, which he’d liked a lot, so if I tried that again, I’d be starting from solid ground. From between his thighs, I could suck him long and slow.

So I took his hard cock into my mouth and let my tongue work over the head. We had time to try everything now, so I did, with lips, with tongue, with my hand. Some things made him cry out, which I wanted to remember, other things made him sigh, and his hand was gentle as he ran fingers through my hair. He leaned up on one elbow to watch me, making me wish for the moon to come up so I could see his face. The starlight wasn’t bright enough yet, though it was getting a bit brighter.

“You need some, too,” he told me after I’d spent a long time trying to drive him crazy, and suddenly he was straddling my head and leaning over me. That put his cock where I could reach him. He took my cock in one hand and then his mouth. “Turnabout and all that,” he came up long enough to say, before he started slowly destroying my sanity with his tongue.

Writhing and whimpering was about all I could do -- I couldn’t do him justice with what he was doing to me, so I had to let his cock slip from my mouth. I could kiss and nibble his inner thighs without worry as he played me, and when he came up for air, I took him again with my lips. One

hand for his cock, one hand for his ass, and then he drove thoughts away with his mouth on me again.

If this continued much longer, I'd come again. It would be wonderful, but it would mean waiting on some of the other things I thought we both wanted. With his ass over me like that, I could see the dark crevasse between his cheeks where I'd been yearning to explore.

"Whoa there, Kurt." I ran a hand under his chest to raise him. "Got to let me be for a bit." I kissed his balls for a consolation before he turned around to drop against my side.

"I got more yelling out of you in the cave," he said with a smile. "Wasn't I doing it right?"

"More than right, and you know it." I slapped his ass, the sound sharp against the night noises of the mountain. "I had something to muffle on this time."

"Muffling, huh. New name for it. You just about made me come. Were you planning to?" He gave me an arm for a pillow and bent his head to mine while we both pulled back from the brink.

"I plan to do that a lot, just thought we'd try another thing or two first," I told him. I ran a hand over his hip.

"Mmmm, such as?"

I'd thought about it on the way back from the archery range. I thought I was ready. The words weren't coming easily, though. I had to nibble his ear for a little before I could say, "I want you to do me."

He moaned at the words. "I've been wanting that for so long. Just, don't let's make it have to be all tonight, if you aren't feeling ready when..."

"I'll be ready. We'll be great." I pulled him on top of me again and let my hips pump a tiny bit against him.

"We'll try getting you ready, but Jake, we have all the time in the world, you don't have to push it if..." I could hear the anticipation in his voice right there with the hesitation.

"You aren't the only one with high hopes, Kurt. I'm ready." I pushed my forehead and nose against his to speak at closest range. "Or I will be, once you play with me a while."

"Do I even want to know the source of this optimism?" he asked, but wisely didn't wait for an answer he wasn't going to get. Instead, he rolled us over so he could reach the bottle of lube. "Hang on to this," he said after he poured some over his hand and rubbed his fingers.

I had tried hard to make up my mind which I wanted more, to do him first or for him to do me. I was less likely to mess up if I let him show me the way, I decided, not without a little trepidation now that I'd handled him. Still, when he knelt between my knees, that was the place I wanted him to be most of all, and he reached for my ass.

"Okay, just relax, Jake," he whispered hoarsely, as he touched me and slipped one fingertip inside.

It had to be a rush for him to do that every bit as much as it was for me. Low, needy sounds rumbled out of my chest as he slipped in and out, expanding me, preparing me, fucking me with his hand. “You’re too damned far away” brought him kneeling over me, close enough to touch, close enough to kiss, but never stopping the slow, persistent action. It was good, and it got better because he never stopped kissing me as he penetrated me with gentle fingers, adding as he felt I was ready. Once, I asked him to pause, but a moment’s rest and some more lube and I asked him to go on.

“Come where I can reach you” made him knee-walk to my side. I had two hands to put the condom on him, then the lube to slick him. Kurt moaned when I did it, partly from my touch, partly from the anticipation. The moon had come up over the trees so I could see his face -- so much yearning showed, all for me. “I’m ready, Kurt.”

“How do you want me?” he rasped, his fingers still moving slowly into me.

“I need to see your face” was all I could tell him, and hoped he’d know what to do with that. He did -- he was between my knees again, bringing his hard cock close to my ass.

“You’re sure?” I could tell it cost him to hesitate, but he didn’t ask again when I whispered my “yes.” With my legs wrapped around him, he used his hand to guide himself, and then he pushed his hips forward.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kurt lay panting on top of me -- he might have caught his breath more easily if I hadn't been holding him so tightly. Forcing my arms to relax just a bit, I made up for it by running one hand up and down his back. He exhaled with an "Ahhh," and lay a little more heavily against me.

He was a welcome weight, a welcome presence in my body. He'd finally entered me, his hard cock slipping inside me, filling me, stretching me. He'd gone slowly at first, letting me get used to his cock inside. Leaning over for kisses let me see his face. There was enough light from the quarter moon to show his eyes wide with wonder. Kurt's mouth changed with his movements: now a smile, then lips parted with pleasure. Mine had to be doing the same because happiness ran together with sensation.

If imagination hadn't come close to the reality of Kurt's mouth, neither had my practice alone come close to the reality of Kurt inside me. He stroked slowly, pushing in and slipping out, gaining only a little speed as I encouraged him with sounds, hands, and legs. I'd rested my heels on his shoulders, making the happy discovery that he could lean on my thighs and I could direct him without words.

Words beyond "Kurt!" and "Oh!" and "So good" were neither needed nor possible as he rocked his hips against my butt. Now and then he'd ask, "Like this?" and I'd nod or moan, amazed at what he could do to me. I was totally vulnerable to him, and he used it to bring me joy.

Not that I was just lying back enjoying -- I had to touch him, too. Holding his upper arms to brace him gave way to sliding my hands all over his shoulders and sides, where the hard ridges of muscle moved. Once he'd reared up away from my thighs, letting me stroke his chest. Finding the hard little nubs of nipple solved a mystery; he liked them played with every way I found to do it, judging from the noises he made. I was making plenty of noises of my own, especially when he pressed against something inside that felt wonderful.

Kurt had reached for my cock, intending to pump me as he fucked me, but I stopped him with a little shake of my head and a quick hand -- we'd save that for later. What we were doing now needed my complete attention, and my brain was shutting down to the narrow awareness that the man I yearned for was giving me everything I'd dreamed of and more. I wanted it to last forever -- I wanted him to explode with climactic pleasure. I wanted it all and at the same time.

Kurt blocked out the sky as I looked up at him; he'd lifted himself to his knees again and was framed by stars, painted with moonlight. I held out my hands to him -- he took them as he changed rhythms. Long, slow strokes gave way to shorter, choppy thrusts as his climax built. His face changed as he pushed inside me.

I'd wanted to see his face at this moment, when all his pleasure erupted into me, because of me, for me. His last thrust brought him completely inside me, where he stayed, pulsing and shuddering. I gripped his hands as tightly as I could -- he clenched back as the spasms swept through him. His

wordless cry trailed off, his hands opened, and the shuddering became swaying, so I took his shoulders to bring him down against my chest before he fell.

Now he lay on top of me, panting, his hands slipped under my back, his face in my neck. His breathing mingled with the other mountain sounds, the night bird's cry, a splash in the water as a fish rose. The chorus of frogs and crickets that was our nightly serenade became something I could hear again, but it faded away when he whispered, "Oh, Jake..."

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Good?” Kurt asked, before he rolled us to our sides.

“Wonderful,” I told him as I rubbed his face with my own. The sweat from his exertions made my nose slide across his. “The best. Let’s do it again.” I wanted him to know just how much I wasn’t planning to leave, now that we’d done this new joining.

“Horny boy,” he said with a chuckle. “You need to come sometime tonight.”

“I plan to,” but I wasn’t entirely sure how, because he’d filled me enough that I was scared again of hurting him if we switched places.

I think he heard the doubt in my voice. “Something is worrying you,” Kurt murmured, with one thumb stroking my cheek. “Tell me.”

“Kurt, it’s just, well, you’ve seen me. You’ve held me and all. I’m big.” I stuttered to a stop to think of what to say next. “Buttholes are small. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Buttholes are stretchy. You won’t.” He sounded confident, and I wanted to believe him. “Did I hurt you?”

“I’m feeling it, but no, you didn’t.” I couldn’t leave it alone. “I’m just worried.”

“Don’t be,” he said, looking up to me now and seeing that reassurances weren’t working. “True confession, Jake. I had two nights alone in a pup tent on the Chief’s back lawn after I’d seen you. You won’t hurt me.” He lay back down with his head on my shoulder now, one leg thrown across my hips. Okay, I could guess -- I’d done the same.

“For a guy who says he didn’t expect me to stick around, you’ve done a lot of stuff that says otherwise.” And I was glad of it, too. “Why were you so afraid, Kurt?” If it was something I’d done or said beyond the screw up I knew about, I wanted to know. “I was jumpy around Diane. Was it more than that?” He’d been hurt when I’d pulled away, but I still didn’t know the right way to respond to that sort of teasing. Maybe if I was further out of the closet, I’d know.

“Having you react like you’d been burned was rough. It reminded me a whole lot of another time.” His breath tickled my chest. “It... happened to me once. Getting dumped hard, after a disaster. Halfway up El Capitan. I told you part of the story, not all of it. We were cold and frightened -- you know, it’s a long way down and a real narrow ledge -- and we comforted one another. Next day, the weather cleared, but we climbed down, not up, because he said he didn’t trust me any more. He hasn’t spoken to me since.”

My heart broke for him, because this was exactly what I’d been afraid would happen between us. I was willing to bet that the guy’s bitching about breath had nothing to do with any beef jerky, either.

“He was an idiot, Kurt. There isn’t anyone I’d rather have with me in a tough situation, and if he couldn’t let the sex part go, or keep you forever, he was a complete idiot.” I squeezed him hard. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good.” He squeezed me back.

“Was that about two years ago?” Abigail’s words about a broken heart came back to me.

“A little more. How did you know?”

“Because you left civilization behind right about then.”

“I like the outdoors.” Kurt shrugged with one shoulder. Then he whispered, “Yeah.”

Something niggled at the back of my mind. “Kurt, you could probably have climbed the scarp, couldn’t you?” The scarp wasn’t nearly as high or as vertical as El Capitan.

“Maybe. The ankle would have been one hell of a handicap.” He was drawing lines on my chest with his finger tips, and he sounded like he didn’t want to pursue it.

I kept on. “Then why didn’t you suggest it?”

“Because you couldn’t. Or maybe you could, but not without equipment we didn’t have. I wasn’t going to leave you, okay?” He sounded fierce now, like the admission was getting dragged out of him with hot pincers.

Hot damn, it wasn’t just sex for him any more than it was for me. I’d stop pushing now. Start kissing, though.

Damn it, every time I stopped kissing him, he’d start spouting nonsense again. “You didn’t leave me when Fat Boy showed up.”

I didn’t want to talk about that. “Course not.” I kissed him some more and started stroking his neck and shoulders -- that ought to have distracted him, but it didn’t, because my bowstring-roughened fingers caught his skin. He brought my hand up to his eyes, but was defeated by the dim light. Rubbing his thumb over the skin told him more, and then he sucked my fingers into his mouth. It was soothing and arousing at once, the way his tongue explored the forming calluses, making me moan. I needed a better way to deflect him, because he was asking more questions now.

“You’ve been at the archery range a lot these last few days?” Then he sucked my fingers back in.

I took my hand away because his mouth was making me lose my caution on this topic.

“Yes.” Rolling on top of him might distract him, besides being exactly what I wanted.

“Why?”

I stuck my hip between his thighs and wiggled closer, trying to change the subject. Telling him to

shut up didn't seem appropriate at the moment. "Improving my aim, Kurt. Why else?" If I got the condom on and got lubed up, we'd see how good my aim was at short range. I started groping after the little foil packet that had to be somewhere close by.

"Your aim was pretty damned good when it counted." Kurt handed over the condom.

Ripping the packet open with my teeth bought me a moment. "No, it wasn't, and I wish everyone would stop talking about it like it was." This line of talk was causing my erection to subside. Rubbing against Kurt might help, but I was getting upset, because the Chief, the sheriff, and now Kurt had all praised me when I didn't deserve it.

"But..."

"Kurt, stop." Okay, I'd tell him. Then he could laugh about something that wasn't my deep desire for him. "My aim that day sucked." I kind of collapsed on top of him, and he held me close, not saying anything, at last. My forehead was touching the sleeping bag next to his face as he rubbed my back. "It worked out okay, but that was good luck and not good planning."

"It worked," he offered.

"Yeah, but Kurt, I couldn't have deliberately shot that damned bike if your life depended on it, and I thought it did. But you were to my left, and I always, well, not so much now, but I was shooting with a bad left deviation, and I couldn't risk shooting you, so I over-corrected. Shot behind him." I lifted my head to look at him while I confessed this. "Kurt, I was trying to kill him."

My head shadowed his face a little, because the moon had changed position in the sky, though I could still see his eyes, wide now with understanding. "You were trying to kill him," he echoed softly.

"He was threatening you." That said everything to me, and it must have said everything to Kurt, because he clutched me tightly and kissed me with a ferocity unlike his previous passion.

"You shouldn't have that on your conscience because of me," he gasped out eventually. "I'm glad you didn't."

"Me, too, but I can't depend on that kind of luck. I have to be able to hit what I'm aiming at." I reached to stroke his cheek, letting him suck my fingers back into his mouth and then release them to speak.

"We'll work on it together," he promised with more licks, and now I just might be able to concentrate on what he was saying instead on him, at least on the range. "The rewards for good shooting will be worth it." Anticipating the rewards might screw my concentration, but I intended to collect, somehow. He grew solemn again. "I have one more thing to tell you, since we're confessing all tonight."

That sounded really bad. I pulled back to look at him, heart pounding.

"When we went into town, you really did bring clean underwear. I hid them." His face cracked with a grin.

“You what?” My yell silenced the night creatures for a few seconds -- Kurt and the crickets went on together.

“I wanted you to be really, really aware.” Kurt laughed, and I did, too, a little, but damn, he had to know what it was like to walk around commando.

He was pinned under me -- revenge was mine. “I was, you wretch!” Swift pokes under his arms made him yelp and writhe, but I’d gotten my fingers into his armpits and was merciless. He twisted around enough that he could roll away as I pounced after him, grabbing one foot, but he escaped. While I was scrambling to my feet, he danced farther down the shore, laughing and teasing me.

“I stuck them under the front seat of the car. You were six inches away from them all that time! They’re still there!”

“Why, you...!” I lunged after him -- he stepped back, but caught his heel on a tree root and started to topple backward, which would have sent him for another frigid dip into the lake. He windmilled his arms frantically in an attempt to regain his balance. I managed to catch a wrist as it whirled by and yank him back upright. Since that just happened to throw him against my chest, I could wrap my arms around him and hug him tight. My prisoner showed no inclination to escape. Instead, he put his own arms around me and hugged back. Our mouths met and my eyes closed -- a moment later I had to shift him to let my cock stand up between us. Plastered against me once again, Kurt rubbed his belly tantalizingly against me, pulling moans from deep in my throat.

One handful of his ass wasn’t enough. I had to reach down and grab his other buttock. The muscles moved under the skin as I pulled him to me, helping him rub. Thinking about what lay between, wanting to be there. Suddenly I couldn’t get enough air, and then he took my breath away even more.

“Do me,” he whispered into my mouth. “I want you to do me.”

Anticipation turned the short steps back to the opened sleeping bags into slow motion, kneeling down together took an instant and eternity. His eyes were nearly closed and his lips were parted -- he stroked my body, running warm hands down my chest and belly, catching my cock. Two hands made a warm haven for me; he held my shaft as I thrust, tiny, experimental motions. If I leaned on his shoulder, I could reach the partially unwrapped condom, which he unrolled over me, a pleasure in itself. Still on our knees while he found the bottle of lube to slick my cock, he made sure I was very, very slick, so slick that I had to stop him before I came.

“Let’s grease you, too,” I murmured, still concerned about hurting him. When he went to his hands and knees before me, smiling, I poured lube down his crack and massaged him, reveling in the soft skin, the little ridges, the opening I’d dreamed of breaching. What he’d said about stretching was true, I learned. I slicked him with a finger inside, my other arm wrapped around him from below, my face against the small of his back. He rocked against my hand, small sounds escaping him, followed by larger sounds, then by small, choked requests for “More. More.”

I gave him more, until the only more I had to give was my hard cock. “Get behind me,” Kurt whispered. “Come in.”

There was moonlight, but he was turned away from it. "I need to see you." Kurt rolled to his back, legs open to me, but I'd just been there, pinned in one place. "You need to be able to move more than that, Kurt -- you have to be in control here."

He flipped up to his knees to face me. "You are going to drive me crazy, Jake," he said before he kissed me and pushed me down to my back on the sleeping bag.

"Trying to," I suggested, but now I was the one going crazy, because he'd straddled me, sitting on my cock. He flexed his hips against me, rubbing me, then rose a little way to point me. The head of my cock was poised at his entrance, then in. We both cried out as he slid down, rocking a little to bring more of my cock within him at every move. Slowly he took me in, until he was sitting against my groin with his full weight, and I could have come just from the tightness of his ass. Kurt panted, sending waves through his torso. I took tiny breaths, trying not to move. We stayed still against each other, getting used to the feel of each other's bodies, until I thought I could move just a little.

With tiny strokes, I shifted my hips, slipping inside him. Kurt helped me by lifting himself and coming back down to my slow rhythm. My hands on his waist guided him, and though he could choose any speed or depth he wanted, he let me set the pace this first time. I could see his face, just as I wanted to, needed to -- the moonlight showed me his white teeth between the parted lips, as what I did made him turn up to the stars. The tall pines behind us whispered in the light breeze that didn't touch the ground -- their needles rubbed together and the trunks creaked as they reached to the sky, mixing with his gasps and small cries.

I wanted Kurt to have the control here, but he wanted me to have it, and he made no move unless I moved, or moved him. Up and down, in small strokes, then larger strokes, but not wildly, because wildness would make me come. This had to last, this first wonderful time, as long as I could make it last, for him, for me, for us. We might do this again ten thousand times, but never again would it be our first, my first. I writhed up from the sleeping bag, thrusting up into his ass, looking up into his face, so open, so aroused. He cried out wordlessly as I plunged up into him again, meeting me midstroke, pulling up and coming down to me again.

We drove against each other, one stroke followed by another that brought me ever closer to ending it. I writhed into him, clasped tightly in his ass, his hands tight on my arms for leverage against me, meeting me movement for movement, gasp for gasp.

With my hands on his hips, I dragged Kurt down onto my hard cock -- I couldn't bear to let him up again. Deep within him I spurted, pulsing and screaming -- it might have been his name that left my throat raw and my heart pounding.

He leaned down to hold me in the aftermath of my orgasm. I curled up to his chest, wanting every inch of skin to touch, and he held me tight with one arm, nuzzling me for a moment before gently unhitching himself to drop next to me on the sleeping bag. I groaned as my spent cock slipped out of him. The fires he'd roused in me had flared and banked, but he'd stir them to open flame again soon. Kurt stretched out close to me, propped on one elbow to make his forearm my pillow. His skin was warm where he pressed mine, and the flannel sleeping bag, smelling of shaving cream and his skin, was warm below me. My breath returned after a bit, letting me pull away from his chest enough to look up at him.

There was enough moonlight for me to see his face as he smiled down on me. His dimple, which only showed when he was happy, was a dark smudge near the right corner of his mouth. I'd had to fight not to touch that dimple only days before. My left hand came up to cup his face, and he leaned into the caress. Kurt, my friend, my companion, was now Kurt, my lover -- I didn't have to be afraid to reach for him. Softly, gently, I pressed my thumb into his dimple.

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