



Mountain Man

MAREN SMITH

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By Maren Smith

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Chapter One

Go North far enough and you'll run out of road. Highway Eleven ended just outside of Mayo, in the heart of the Yukon. But a narrow, gravel road brought the more persistent travelers as far north as Elsa. Only the truly dedicated came as far as the old mining town of Keno. After that, what roads there were made by the placer miners and weren't found on any maps. Which suited Tom fine. Mapped roads meant travelers, and travelers meant unwelcome visitors trespassing at his claim. It had been nine years since the last one. In retrospect, the use of his Winchester probably hadn't been necessary, but it had encouraged the man to turn his land rover around and head back for Keno.

Like most miners, the only time Tom wanted to see another human being was when it grew too cold and the days too short for digging. That was when he came down out of the hills and ventured into town for fresh supplies. It was a seventy-three mile journey over roadless, rugged countryside, through dozens of long since abandoned gold and silver claims, and occasionally around a mine which was still in operation and owned by a rifle or shotgun toting miner at least as eager to see trespassers as Tom was himself.

With the trailer hitched to the back of his pickup, and decent weather conditions in the forecast, the trip into town generally took just over four hours. Today, it had taken almost seven. Either he was running a little late this year, or winter was setting in early. Already there was a foot and a half of snow on the ground and most of the tourists had packed up and shifted their vacations a little further south, where the risk of getting snowed in wasn't quite as desperate.

In fact, when Tom backed up to Hank's Mercantile, there was only one unfamiliar vehicle—a white Subaru—parked in front of the Keno City Hotel. With a town population of twenty-five, it didn't take long for even a placer miner, who only came out of the hills once or twice a year, to identify the residents from the non-locals.

When he stepped down out of the cab of his pickup, he sank into snow up to his shins and almost to the tops of his black boots. Stretching, he headed for the Mercantile's front porch. Of all the residents, Hank was one of only a handful that Tom felt comfortable calling a friend. A huge, grizzled, bear of a man, Hank was an old-timer, who'd first come to Keno in the fifties to work the silver mines and who'd just never left after the silver petered out. Now he owned the only grocery, souvenir and, if you're a resident, gas and diesel shop in Keno.

When Tom pushed open the door, the musical string of chimes that sang out his arrival elicited an immediate bellow from the back room.

"Kick the snow off!"

Tom glanced down at his feet, then dutifully stepped back outside and stomped the excess snow from his boots.

"Damn miners," Hank was grumbling when he came back inside. "Every one o' 'em, raised in a barn."

Having been known to grumble himself upon occasion, Tom didn't pay much attention until he heard...

"Shut the damn door, too! Think I'm heatin' up the whole blasted valley?"

A massive hand swept back the heavy red curtain that separated the backrooms from the rest of the store. As Hank ducked through the doorway, Tom said, "Not without shaving that mop of a beard and losing a few pounds first."

Hank's grin upon seeing Tom vanished abruptly. He looked down at his stomach, which preceded his belt buckle by a good two inches. "What d' you mean? This here's my winter stores. It's

gotta get me through to spring." He patted his belly fondly with both hands. "It's lookin' a might lean, if you ask me."

Tom shut the door. "I'm sure you've a hidden stash of Twinkies to help with that."

"I got only one box this year," Hank corrected. He met Tom's knowing stare, then sniffed. "All right, I lied. There's four."

Tom continued to stare without blinking.

His bushy, greying eyebrows crashed down over his eyes and his thick bush of a beard shifted around his mouth in a way that might have suggested frowning. "Jimminy Christmas! You're worse'n a woman! Nag, nag, nag! All right, fine! There's fourteen!"

"That's what I thought." Striding over to the payout counter, Tom prodded a burlap sack, one of what looked to be no less than fifty, stacked in a neat mountain of a pile, along with several boxes and a half a dozen crates. "This mine?"

"Only been sittin' there three weeks, waitin' on you. Me and Jack Thrasher been darin' one another to drive on up to your claim and Toss the Rock, see if you was even still alive."

The Rock had been around for almost forty years now. About the size of a man's fist and painted bright orange, if you didn't want a backside full of buckshot, it was also the safest way to talk to a miner during the middle of a dig. Simply toss it into the middle of a claim, hunker down in the bushes, and hope it got noticed before the miner bulldozed it into the ground or scooped it into the sluice box. It wasn't a perfect means of communication, but a man delivering a message lessened his chances of getting shot at when he 'Tossed the Rock' then by any other method yet devised.

"Seein' as how you're still around," Hank reached down to grab the first crate, "let's getcha loaded up. Jasper heard tell from someone outta Elsa there's a storm comin' in. S'posed to be a bad 'un."

"It's a couple hours off yet, but I can smell it coming." Tom followed suit, lifting a fifty pound burlap sack of beans up onto his broad shoulder. As they headed for the door, Tom spotted the store's 'greeter'—a life-sized carving of a plains Indian Hank had bought out of an Arizona western catalog eight years ago. He stopped in front of it. "What happened to Hook-Nose?"

"Damn tourists," Hank growled, his mammoth hand resting on the door handle. "Folks jus' don't know how to raise kids anymore. Let 'em run all over wild and never say nothin' to 'em." He shook his shaggy head. "He's re-named No-Nose now. I still got the busted part, but don't know yet if I'll reattach it. He ain't so handsome no more, but mebbe it gives him character. Kinda like one o' them conversation pieces."

"You think people actually stand here and discuss your statue?" Tom asked dubiously.

"We are."

There was some logic that just couldn't be argued with.

It took twenty-nine trips each to relocate the mountain of goods from in front of the payout counter to the back of the trailer. By the time the last of the huge burlap flour sacks was dropped on top of the pile, while Tom was hardly winded, Hank was red-faced and breathing hard.

"Now, let's see." Panting, he combed his fingers through his full, gray bush of a beard and moustache and made a quick tally of the trailer's contents. "That's four hun'ert pounds o' flour, and two hun'ert each o' the beans, cornmeal, an' rice. Three hun'ert pounds bacon, one o' dried fruit, seventy-five pounds coffee, an' twenty-five o' the salt an' pepper. I already filled yer drums in the truck with diesel. Let's see, where is it...ah, there it is. Six boxes o' egg powder, eight sacks potatoes, and ten crates o' canned vegetables—no asparagus."

"Thank you."

"I also threw in a case o' the best brandy this side o' Kentucky." He tossed Tom a careless wink. "Medicinal, o' course."

"Oh absolutely." Tom cracked the barest of smiles.

"Them twelve cases o' canned peaches is in the back by the soaps, shampoo and band aids. Anythin' I'm missin'?"

"Milk."

Hank snapped his fingers and lumbered back up the steps, disappearing through the store's front door. As Tom turned to follow, a disturbance at the Keno City Hotel, a half a block down, caught his attention. Raised voices: a man and a woman. The man was throwing suitcases into the back of the Subaru, while the woman stood well out of his way. The only word of hers that Tom could make out was, "Please..." Everything else she spoke too softly for him to hear.

The man's response, however, he heard quite clearly. He'd shouted it loud enough for everyone in Keno to pick up. "Fucking bitch! Get in the God damn car!"

The poor woman looked ready to cry, though whether her blush was from embarrassment or anger it was hard to tell. When the man went back into the hotel, in a moment of frustration the woman turned around. In the briefest of instants, her eyes met Tom's. When he only looked back, she turned and chased after her man.

Tourists. Tom shook his head and headed back into the Mercantile.

While Hank loaded up six sacks of powdered milk, he picked through the clothes folded on one of several display tables, picking out a new pair of jeans, some long underwear, and a couple of thick flannel shirts. One blue and one green.

"Them, too?" Hank asked when he came back inside.

"Yes." Tom lay them on the counter and waited while Hank tallied the bill.

"Well, then, come on back here and we'll do the financin'." Hank swept aside the heavy red blanket, and Tom followed him inside. "Lemme jus' find a chair."

That was almost laughable. In Hank's living room, 'finding a chair' meant sifting through sixty decades of pack-ratting. Mounted fish of all sizes and species were stacked on the shelves, pelts covered the sofa where the springs had long since failed, and hunting trophies overflowed one another in the corners. A mound of books obscured the coffee table, the pile crowned by a stuffed raccoon that was wearing, adding insult to injury, a coon-skin cap. There were kerosene lamps, German beer steins, license plates from all over Canada and the United States, and assorted dusty fossils that Hank had found or bought off the locals over the years. A single mammoth tusk curled on the wall above the couch. Its twin had never been located.

"Ha! Found one," Hank crowed, holding a chair aloft. Then he looked about him. "Now, where's the table?"

"Isn't that it?"

"Where?"

"Under the moose head."

While Hank cleared a path to the moose, Tom studied the mass of individually framed photos that blanketed the walls. He was only able to look at those closest to him, since the rest were impossible to approach without wading through the piles of odds and ends stacked hip high around him. It was probably for that reason that Hank hung his favorite pictures around the door, and it only took a second for Tom to find Luvy Belle's. He leaned in to see it better.

From behind him, Hank said, "I'm gonna miss that feisty ol' biddy. She were one o' a kind."

"Thank God," they both said in unison, but there was a sadness to each of their smiles.

"I never knew a woman what could out-cuss, out-chew--"

"Out-spit," Tom added, admiring the false-blonde old woman, who grinned sassily back at him from out behind the glass and frame.

"--an' out-box any man in the Territory."

"She sure cleaned my clock fast enough." Wiping a thin layer of dust from the top of the frame, Tom then straightened it on the wall. "I was twenty-four, but if I hadn't run when I did, she would have taken that switch to me."

"Too bad your brother didn't move as fast as you."

"He limped for two days after she got done with him." Tom drew a deep breath, then turned from the pictures. "But she had the right of it; we never should have been up at her claim. We were green. What the hell did we know?"

Having finally reached the moose, Hank set it on the shoulder-high pile at his left, revealing the table underneath. "Well, looky here. There's another chair. Guess I can sit down, too."

He groaned as he lowered himself onto the seat, the chair creaking ominously beneath his weight. Taking a tin flask from his pocket, he unscrewed the top to take a drink while Tom moved along the door, from picture to picture, until he abruptly stopped. For the longest time, he didn't move. Then he straightened that picture, too, and wiped the glass with his sleeve.

"I'm sorry as hell what happened to your brother," Hank growled. "Justin was a good man. He didn't deserve to die like that."

Tom just looked at the picture. "How much do I owe you, Hank?"

"Weren't your fault, you know."

"How much?" Tom asked again. "I have to get going if I'm going to beat the storm."

Shrugging with his bushy eyebrows, Hank clapped his hands against his thighs. "Right." But there was a distinct tightening in the beard around his mouth as he frowned again. "I figure you're into me 'bout two grand."

From his coat pocket, Tom withdrew an old marble bag. Coming to the table, he untied the top and gently spilled three gold nuggets into his hand. He placed them in front of Hank.

"This ain't placer gold." He turned them over in his hand. "Damn, Tom. This here's real nuggets!"

"If there's anything left after the bill's paid, keep half for yourself and give the rest to Jasper to put in my account at the Mayo Bank. If it isn't enough, let him know and my account will cover the rest."

"I don't s'pose that'll be a problem. In fact," after a moment's hesitation, Hank held up the largest of the three. "This 'un here'll jus' 'bout cover most o' it. You give me too much."

He started to hand the smallest of them back, but Tom just turned around and walked out of the back room and then out of the store. Slipping a padlock onto the back of the trailer, he pulled the keys out of his jeans pocket and climbed into the truck. Though Hank followed him as far as the porch, Tom neither looked back nor waved. He just headed for home.

* * * * *

Tom barely beat the snowstorm back to his cabin. The scent of it was heavy in the air, and he had to agree, it was probably going to be a bad one.

Backing the trailer up to the front porch, he put the truck in park and shut off the ignition. His breath fogged the air as he climbed out of the pick-up. The crisp air felt like needles against his face as he pulled his gloves on, the snow crunching under his boot heels. He walked the length of the truck and trailer, rounded the back and unfastened the padlock. Throwing back the bar, he opened the first of the two doors. And stopped.

Wedge'd tightly into the farthest possible corner, between the burlap sacks of coffee and the stacked boxes of peaches, was the woman from the Keno City Hotel. She was near blue despite her zipped jacket with its fancy fake-fur trimming. Her split lip shivered, her teeth chattered. Either too frightened or too cold to speak, she stared back at him with only one large, baby blue eye. The other was already swollen shut and well on its way to bruised. In her mittened hand, she held the mangled remains of a bloody Kleenex tissue.

Tom immediately shut the trailer door again. He half-turned around, staring past his cabin and out over the white expanse of snow and the occasional towering pine. Other than his own breathing and the occasional creak of the snow-laden trees, there were no sounds. He put his hand back on the door. Hesitating briefly, he then opened it again.

Nope. She was still there.

"Aw, hell," he said, more out of surprise than real irritation. That came a few seconds later as the first, fat snowflake floated down between him and the open trailer. It was followed almost immediately by another. Then by a heck of a lot more.

Tom looked up. The storm that had threatened all morning had chosen this moment to finally arrive. He growled, "For the love of--"

He glared at her, then back up at the sky. Maybe if he loaded her into the pickup right now, unhitched the trailer, and drove like a bat out of hell, he might just make it back over the mountains before the advantage of four-wheel drive became a moot commodity. But then what was he supposed to do? Chuck her little ass out into the snow and let her walk the remaining thirty-odd miles back to Keno? She wouldn't last longer than three. If the bears didn't kill her, the cold certainly would.

Which meant he would have to drive her all the way back to town. After seven hours of snow like this, he could pretty well kiss his chances for wintering in his own cabin good bye. While Hank would gladly put him up until the mountains became passable again, Tom had serious doubts as to whether they would both survive six months of being snowed in together. He was damn certain their friendship wouldn't.

"Hell," he said again, more forcefully.

Other than her shivering and chattering teeth, she still didn't move.

Tom turned sharply. He stalked up the front steps, his boots clumping heavily on the wooden porch as he stormed through his front door and slammed it behind him. He glared at the stone fireplace that dominated the wall straight ahead. Bracing his hands on his lean hips, he shook his head slowly. And to think, only this morning, he had considered this two room cabin an extravagant luxury for only one man. She hadn't come in yet and already it was too damn small. Before winter was over, the crampedness would likely be unbearable.

Shaking his head again, Tom turned around and went back outside. With a heavy sigh, he forced himself back down the steps. The woman was where he'd left her, still cowering in the corner, although with her head in her hands. She barely looked up when he reached in to lift out a box of canned vegetables.

"Well," he growled in the calmest voice he could manage. "You going to come in, or sit out here and freeze?"

Chapter Two

While he unloaded the back of the trailer, she sat on the front porch, shivering and alternating between holding clumps of snow to her eye and her lip. Every time he stomped past her up and down the steps, she would lift her head and watch him warily. If their eyes met, she averted hers. He probably wasn't helping matters. His black scowl alone should have told her how unwelcome of an intrusion she was.

He was down to the very last box of peaches when she spoke, her voice very soft and subdued, "Where are the other houses?"

"There aren't any," he said tersely.

"We didn't go to another town?"

"No."

"But—" She stood up, looking first one way along the snowdrift and tree-dotted countryside, then the other. She stepped off the porch, her sneakers disappearing to her ankles in the snow as she shuffled around the trailer. "There's another town close by, right? We were driving for a long time. There has to be another town. Right?"

A more vindictive man might have smiled at her. Tom was too damn mad to make the effort.

Heaving the box onto his broad shoulder, he climbed out of the trailer, shut the doors and threw the bolt. She gave him the most forlorn of expressions when he shouldered past her and stomped up the stairs.

"May I use your bathroom?" she asked.

Tom paused at the door and turned part way around. Then he pointed to the left side of the porch. "It's about fifty yards that way."

Her shoulders drooped a little. "It's outside?"

"Most outhouses are." He stomped inside and slammed the door.

Adding the peaches to the stack in the corner that made up his kitchen, he bent to lift the trapdoor to the cellar. He was on his third trip down the wooden staircase when she lightly rapped twice on the door. When it creaked open, she stuck her head inside.

"Hello?" she called. "Um, Mister Mountain Man?"

He paused in the middle of shouldering the peaches to glare at her.

"I used the last of the tissue. Just FYI, I guess."

He continued downstairs, stacked the peaches against the back wall. When he reappeared up the stairs a moment later, he tossed a fresh roll of toilet paper at her and grabbed another box from the pile.

Looking at the roll in her mittened hands, she cleared her throat. "Um...when you get done there, would you mind driving me to the nearest town?"

"I look like a cab to you?" he asked evenly, shouldering the box.

She blinked. "Well, no. But..."

"Lady, if I could have driven you anywhere without getting caught in this storm, we'd have been gone already. Unfortunately, neither one of us is going anywhere for the next six months."

Her mouth dropped open. "Six months!"

"Six," he emphasized. "Months. That's how long it'll take the mountain to become passable again."

She fidgeted with the zipper of her grossly inadequate coat. "May I use your phone?"

Now he did smile, though it wasn't very friendly. "Knock yourself out."

She glanced around the small living room, then meekly stated the obvious, "You don't have one, do you?"

"No."

"Cell phone?" she asked hopefully.

He continued to stare at her.

Her shoulders drooped even more. "Two way radio? Electricity?" But she was already looking at the Coleman oil lamp on the only table set by the only chair in the cabin as she said it, so he didn't bother answering. Her eyes fell to the full bearskin rug on the floor in front of the fireplace. "Oh my God, I'm in the dark ages."

He snorted and shook his head. Tourists.

Shouldering the peaches, he headed back downstairs. By the time he resurfaced again, she had come all the way in and was now standing at the edge of the trapdoor.

"I don't mean to be inconvenient--"

He snorted again and grabbed another box.

Frustration raised the pitch in her voice. "You don't understand. I can't stay here!"

"Guess you should have thought of that before stowing away in the back of my trailer," he called back over his shoulder.

"I didn't have a choice!"

He stacked the peaches against the wall and stomped back up the steps. "There's always choices."

He grabbed the sack of salt and pepper and a box of egg powder and started back down again. Halfway to the bottom, the roll of toilet paper bounced off the back of his head and she stomped across the floor. The front door slammed. Stowing the supplies on an otherwise empty shelf, he sighed and headed back up after her.

By the time he reached the porch, she had already put a good thirty feet between them, stomping stiff-legged through the snow, her shoulders hunched against the cold and her arms folded tight across her chest. That coat was grossly inadequate and whoever had allowed her to dress so lightly in this neck of the country obviously wasn't a native to it.

Stomping down the steps, he jogged after her. "I hate to burst your bubble, lady, but where do you think you're going?"

"Home!" she yelled back over her shoulder, without even slowing.

"You won't make it to morning!" Personally, he didn't think she could survive until midnight. He could see her shivering from here and there was still a good twenty feet of distance between them.

But she kept walking.

Swearing under his breath, he doubled his pace until he caught up with her. "You must want to die, is that it?"

If anything, she walked faster. When her sneakers slipped in the snow, he barely managed to catch her before she went down. The second she got her feet back under her, though, she wrenched her arm from his grasp. "Let go of me!"

His temper hit an all new high. To throw her over his shoulder and haul her back to the cabin was his first instinct. He barely managed to restrain it. Instead, he grabbed her arm and jerked her around to face him.

"Let me explain something you're either too pig-headed stubborn or too stupid to understand," he growled, looming angrily over her.

The blue eye that wasn't swollen shut, widened. She tried to pull away and when that failed, she grabbed his hand to pry his fingers loose. He was in absolutely no mood to let her go.

"It's cold," he said bluntly. "And it's going to get a hell of a lot colder before morning. In thirty miles--if you make it thirty miles--you'll hit the mountains. Between here and there, there's just some bears and some mighty hungry wolves--"

"I watch Discovery," she snapped. "Wolves don't eat people."

He pulled her ominously closer. "A pack of hungry wolves, in the dead of winter when other game is scarce, will attack and eat any injured and weak idiot stupid enough to go slogging through the snow in the middle of the night. But if you don't want to worry about that, then fine, keep your mind on the hundreds of rotting mine shafts hiding under the snow, just waiting to help you break your leg or your neck. And if you're feeling really brave, find yourself one of the dozen or so miners still scattered between here and Keno. You might not get shot, but you still won't make it to town. Women aren't exactly plentiful in this part of the world."

Her shivering intensified and her teeth were now chattering. "I'll t-take my ch-ch-chances."

"Fine, you do that. And come spring when they find what's left of you—if they find anything left of you—who do you think they're going to come looking for? My truck was the last one in town. I'll have every Mounty in the territory crawling through my place, looking for little blonde hairs and asking questions. I didn't ask you up here; I sure as hell ain't going to jail because you want to commit a slow suicide!" When he spun her around, his hand developed a life of its own and delivered a sound swat to the seat of her jeans, propelling her towards the cabin. "Get your skinny ass inside before you freeze!"

In the next instant, he doubled over with her elbow in his gut. Then she took off running. Half his size and near to frozen with cold, yet she still had the nerve to try and knock the wind out of him. Spunk like that had to be admired.

Not tolerated, mind you. Just admired.

She made it seven whole steps before his hand clamped onto the back of her neck and put an end to her bid for escape. He slipped, and they both went down in the snow. The little tourist suddenly became a wild cat, kicking, clawing, swearing as capably as Luvy Belle ever had, and screaming fit to bring the forest down around his ears.

"Go on and do it then!" she yelled. "Do it! Show me what a big man you are! Hit me, tough guy! Go on! What are you waiting for? Hit me!"

Small as she was, Tom struggled to grab a hold of her flailing arms.

"Tough, macho, son-of-a-bitch!" She struck her fist against his chest. "Hit me, if you're going to! Do it and get it over with!"

Tom grabbed both her wrists and quickly pinned them tight against her chest. "Jesus, lady! Quit acting crazy!"

She turned her face away, her bruised lips peeling back in a grimace of misery an instant before all the fight suddenly went out of her and she burst into tears. She wasn't crazy, he realized. Just scared. She drew a deep breath, exhaling with a high-pitched, keening wail that was broken only by the choking sobs that forced their way from her chest.

Great. Now what was he supposed to do?

"I'm not going to hurt you," he rumbled. "I didn't want to scare you, just talk some damn sense into your head!"

She drew another deep breath, and the sobbing started all over again.

Tom stood up slowly, partially expecting for her to go nuts again the instant he let her go. But she only lay in the snow and cried, her tears freezing in her lashes, her teeth chattering and her lips turning blue again.

He looked first one way, then the other, and then back down at her. Bending, he grabbed the scruff of her coat and hauled her onto her feet, walking her back to the cabin where it was warmer.

Leaving her to snuffle and hiccup in the middle of the living room, he in front of the grey stone fireplace to pull kindling from the wood bin. The coals he had so carefully banked that morning were still glowing and hot, and within a few minutes he had a fire going.

"That's a b-big f-fireplace."

It was spoken so softly, Tom wasn't sure if he'd really heard her or only imagined it. After all, he'd spent thirteen years in this cabin, the last eight of which were spent by himself. But if he were going to begin hearing things, he finally decided, it probably would have started long before now. So he added two more logs to the flames and stood up.

"Take off your gloves."

Sniffing, she bowed her head and slowly fumbled to get the wet mittens off.

He shook his head when he took them from her red and trembling hands. He was tempted to add the useless things to the fire, but lay them on the stone ledge that served as a mantel instead. "Put your hands out."

When she only extended her shivering arms to the fire, he took her hands and laid them against the fireplace rock, which covered the entire wall.

"It's warm," she said in soft surprise.

"A fire's useless unless you can retain the heat. These stones can keep my place warm for hours after the fire goes out. Saves a lot of wood and me a lot of wood chopping."

Folding her arms across her chest, hugging herself for warmth, she stepped up to lean against the rocks. The ice in her lashes had melted and the droplets rolled down her cheeks, much like teardrops. And she was still shivering. That was a little concerning. He looked her over again. Don't get attached, he told himself firmly. To put distance between them, he took his coat off and hung it on the peg behind the door. She was a nuisance, not a puppy that had followed him home. There was no way in hell she was going to be staying, either. And he was fine with that. Right up until he turned around and noticed her back.

Her brief lie down in the snow had resulted in both her coat and pants, from shoulders to ankles, being soaked all the way through. Small wonder she was still shivering. Was she only wearing the one set of clothes? It a miracle that she hadn't frozen to death in the back of his trailer!

He stormed past her to his bedroom. The trunk he wanted was in the farthest corner, and he stood in front of it for a long time before raising the lid. The smallest stuff—the clothes that Justin had outgrown as his lanky teenaged body had grown accustomed to placer mining—were on the bottom. There were thermal long johns, flannel shirts, and the smallest of Justin's jeans, still too big for her and not in the best condition, but which were better than the wet pair she was wearing now.

He took them back out to the living room and dropped them at her feet. "Here."

"Th-thank y-you," she shivered out.

"Don't thank me. Just put them on before you catch pneumonia."

To give her some privacy, he descended the cellar stairs to finish putting away the dwindling mountain of supplies. He did his best to avert his eyes every time he ventured back up to grab another box, crate, or burlap sack. But the trap door did not face away from the living room and there was no helping catching the occasional glimpse of bare flesh. Which was probably why she seemed bent and determined to shuck her clothes in time to the up and down tromping of his boots on the stairs. Her soggy sneakers and socks were kicked off his first trip down. That ridiculously light jacket and her long-sleeved cotton shirt went on the second. When he came up for the flour, she was standing with her back to him, her hands at the waist of her jeans, her bra still in place and her head turned slightly as she listened for him.

He paused when he saw the small bruise on her back. He might have given her that when they fell in the snow, but the nasty blue-black one on her shoulder he knew for a fact wasn't his. The color of it against her pale skin was sickening, and the knot that clenched in his stomach came from an emotion he had no intention of examining any closer. He grabbed two sacks and hauled them downstairs.

By the time he surfaced again her bra and pants were both on the floor and she was standing in the orange glow of the fire, swimming in Justin's dark blue flannel shirt. Her back still to him, her head was bent as she struggled with the buttons.

"Check yourself carefully." He shouldered a sack of beans and headed back into the cellar.
"Infections can be lethal when you can't get to a doctor. I'll need to see the cuts, no matter how small."

Hopefully there would be just the one on her mouth. Already it was getting harder and harder to avert his eyes as he came up the stairs. He didn't think he'd be able to touch any other parts of her and still remain irritated and indifferent.

She was a woman, he told himself. He hadn't been this close to one of those since Luvy Belle had died, and then the association hadn't been sexual. So this was a natural reaction. He adjusted the front of his jeans. Uncomfortable as all get out, but perfectly natural.

"Um...m-mister m-mountain man?"

He stopped two steps from the bottom, but only half turned around. One more look at those shapely white legs of hers was going to kill him. Don't look, Tom, old boy. He looked. Aw, hell.

"What?" he bit out, almost angrily.

"My...m-my fingers won't work." She laughed, a soft, embarrassed sound. "I can't g-get the b-buttons in the holes."

Aw, hell.

He closed his eyes. Don't do it, man. You're not made of stone, regardless of how hard certain parts of him felt right now.

"M-mister mountain man?" her trembling voice called a little louder.

This was going to be the longest six months of his whole damn life.

Tom put the sack down on the stairs. With slow, trudging steps, he climbed back out of the cellar.

He thought it was modesty that kept her standing with her back to him. But as he drew closer, she tried to turn around and those shapely legs of hers wobbled. He quickly grabbed her elbow to keep her from falling. If anything she was shaking even harder than when he first brought her in.

"My hands w-won't w-work," she stuttered again.

"Sit down." He grabbed her arms when her legs gave out completely, and he lowered her gently to sit on the bearskin. The shirt fell open, and though he quickly jerked the two halves back together, it was too late. The image was burned into his mind. His hands shook slightly as he fumbled with the line of buttons.

"Am I g-going into shhhock?"

"No." He left her just long enough to grab his coat back off the wall peg and wrapped it around her shoulders. Tipping her face to the fire's light, he peeled back her eyelid to look into her good eye.
"You've just been cold too long. When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday. Before the f-f-fighting st-started."

"You got blood sugar problems?"

"Sssssometimes," she admitted softly.

"I'll get you something to eat."

"I think I'm g-going t-to throw up."

He barely got her out the front door and her head hanging over the side of the porch before her stomach started heaving, but there was nothing for her stomach to rebel. He held her up and even held her hair, at least as much of it as he could gather with one hand, until the dry spasms slowed and finally stopped. Then he helped her back inside where it was warm.

"Lady, there's no way you'd have walked out of here."

Sitting her on the bearskin in front of the fire, he went back down into the cellar to get two cans of peaches. He dug silverware and a can opener out of a drawer by the pump sink. Opening both, he gave her one.

"Just drink the juice first," he cautioned. "A sip at a time until we see what your stomach will do."

Thankfully, no sudden sprint for the door was needed. The syrup-sweetened juice, combined with the fire, made all the difference; her trembling was all but stopped within the first ten minutes.

Tom relaxed a little. He sat in the chair behind her, eating his peaches in silence and trying not to look at her. A part of him was almost hoping she would throw up again, anything to make her a little less appealing would have been helpful at this point. But she didn't. In fact, on her first sweet bite, she hummed with enjoyment, and the sound went right through him.

He'd been up here too long. That was his problem. It didn't matter that she had shapely legs or that the curve of her small breasts were just about right for a mouthful or that she wasn't a natural blonde, if that tuft of dark curls crown the apex of her thighs revealed. What mattered was that he remember she was an unwelcome, uninvited guest. It was irritating him no end that he suddenly seemed to keep forgetting. Especially now that the room felt so small with her in it. When she stretched her bare feet to the fire and wiggled her toes, it grew a whole lot warmer, too.

Tom turned in his seat to stare at the wall, the floor, he even glared at the ingredients on the back of his can. Apparently the 'ignore and it will go away' rule didn't work on women. Not only did she not go away, the cussed woman started talking.

"It's been a while since I've had canned peaches. I forgot how good they are."

His spoon dropped with a 'thunk' into the bottom of his empty can.

"I'm sorry for hitting you." She cleared her throat. "Maybe if you shaved you wouldn't seem so scary. I mean..." her voice faltered when he turned his fierce glare on her. "I mean, well...you look like a very scruffy, very cross Grizzly Adams."

"You're a woman all right," he growled. "You haven't been here one hour and you're already nagging. You got two seconds to finish eating."

She quickly finished the last few bites, gingerly wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, and handed him the spoon and empty can. "Sorry."

He snatched both from her and went back to the kitchen. It took four pumps before the sink spout gushed enough cold water for him to rinse the silverware. The cans he immediately took outside.

The wind had picked up and the snow was falling harder and faster than before. The cold was piercing, slicing right through his clothes as he strode across the yard to the loose crop of outbuildings to his right. He threw the cans into a half empty bear-proof bin, then leaned against it and waited for the cold to work its magic. Relief was a long time in coming, but the cold did, eventually, make the tent in the front of his jeans deflate. When he was more or less back to normal, Tom went back inside.

There was a God; she'd put the pants on and was rolling the hems up to fit her shorter legs. The added coverage didn't help though. The memory of what she looked like without them was too vivid, and here came the tent again.

He couldn't stay this close to her. Shutting and locking the door behind him, he went back to the kitchen and grabbed the metal first aid box from under the sink. Setting it on the counter, he popped the twin latches. "You cut anywhere other than your mouth?"

"No," she said.

Unwrapping a strip of sterilized gauze, he wet it with Iodine and put the kit away.

"Here." He dropped the gauze in her hand. "Hold that to it."

And then he went back to his bedroom. He and Justin had built the sturdy bunk bed during their first year here. The empty top bunk was the only other bed he had, but there was no way he was going to share it with her. Not if he wanted any sleep at all this winter. It was bad enough knowing she was in the living room, he couldn't imagine how it would feel if she were only a few feet above him.

Grabbing the spare pillow and two blankets from the closet, Tom carried them to the outer room and dumped them on the floor beside her. "Night."

He turned on his heel and marched back down to the relative solitude of his room. Two steps shy of the door, Tom heard her call, "My name is Nora."

He stopped where he was. Hands clenched at his sides, he slowly turned back around. She had stretched out on hands and knees so that she could watch him around the stone corner of the fireplace.

"Tom," he finally growled.

"Thanks for not letting me leave, Tom. You were right. I probably would have died."

Damn she looked good. Even with a black eye.

The silence broken only by the crackling of the fire, they stared at one another. With the utmost reluctance, Tom said, "I haven't spent this much time with anyone in eight years. I'll need a couple days to remember how to be sociable again."

"We've got six months." She smiled, the swollen side of her mouth making it look lopsided. "See you in the morning."

As she gathered the pillows and blankets onto the rug, Tom went into his bedroom and softly closed the door. He leaned back against it, closing his eyes.

Six months.

He wasn't going to last six days.

* * * * *

It was dark and the fire had burned down to little more than glowing orange and yellow embers when something woke Nora. Stretched out on the bearskin, cocooned in warm blankets, she stared sleepily into the fire and tried to remember where she was.

Outside the wind was howling. Trees creaked and moaned. And then she heard it again: breathing. Snuffling, really. A deep sniffing that was slowly moving along the cabin walls, and the sound of snow packing beneath the weight of something really big. Claws scraped softly, testing the sturdy log walls and then she heard another deep sniff as the animal pressed its nose right up against the cabin.

There was a sharp metallic click right behind her, and Nora jumped, rolling onto her back to find Tom, fully dressed, his coat zipped up to his chin, loading two more cartridges into his rifle. He turned his head, following the sound of the heavy footsteps moving toward the back of the cabin.

"Is it a bear?" she whispered. "What do we do?"

Without looking at her, Tom cocked the rifle and unlocked the front door. "Stay here."

The wind shrieked and swirling snowflakes spilled across the floor as he slipped outside and closed the door behind him.

Sitting up, clutching the blankets to her chin, Nora hardly dared to breath. She heard Tom walk off the porch, circling around the other side of the cabin in the opposite direction of the bear. The sniffing abruptly stopped. Both sets of footsteps moved away from the walls and Nora couldn't hear anymore. She hugged her legs, closing her eyes as she listened.

He was going to be killed. She tried to banish the thought, but it persisted, along with its brother discouragement: the knowledge that if Tom died, then so would she. She didn't know where she was. She didn't know how to get back to Keno or even in which direction to go to find it. Even if she waited for Spring, it wouldn't matter because she'd never make it alive. Even if she took Tom's truck, eventually she would run out of gas and, with her less than accurate navigating skills, probably end up more lost than when she'd started. The end result would be the same, and it was a frightening death to contemplate.

The mountain man might not be the best of company, but he was her best chance for survival.

She jumped when she heard the crack of the rifle report. She strained to listen. The minutes passed, and still Tom did not return. Did he get the bear, or did the bear get him? Maybe he needed help. How could she just sit here, wrapped in her blankets, knowing that at this very moment, Tom might be getting mauled?

She rolled out of bed and her shaking hands fumbled to pull her sneakers over her bare feet. Her coat was still a little damp, but she put it on anyway and then had to pull her sagging pants back up over her hips. If Tom still lived, she was going to ask him for a belt.

It was dark and the storm of ice and gusting wind was near blinding. She slipped once on the porch as she stepped down into the knee-deep snowdrifts.

"Tom!" she called.

There was no answer.

Shielding her eyes with her hand, she searched the snow for his tracks and, holding her drooping pants up with one hand, slogged around the cabin after him. She had forgotten her mittens and was soon pulling her hands into her coat sleeves to keep her fingers warm. Already her ankles stung where snow had fallen into her shoes and her legs felt almost numb from the cold.

"Tom!" she called again. She tried to swallow her fast-rising panic. Maybe the bear had dragged him off somewhere. "Tom, where are you?"

Driving snow and darkness devoured the landscape, hiding everything further than only a bare few feet in front of her. Afraid she might get lost if she got too far from the cabin, Nora reached out to touch the icy logs and followed it to the next corner. The cold and her panic soon had her running, stumbling awkwardly in the deep drifts as she rounded the side and ran right smack into the shaggy south end of a north bound bear.

Nora jumped, falling backwards in the snow as the huge grizzly spun around. It reared onto its haunches. And above the bear's angry bellow, she heard her own high-pitched scream of absolute terror.

Chapter Three

She was going to die. Lying on her back in a snow drift, too scared to move, Nora stared up at the grizzly, its teeth exposed in an angry bellow, raised threateningly on its back legs and so huge that its head nearly cleared the edge of the cabin roof a good ten feet above her. She was absolutely going to die, mauled by the same bear that had got Tom. The perfect end to a grossly imperfect day.

A sudden rifle blast came from almost directly behind her, and splatters of warm liquid hit Nora's face and froze as the grizzly jerked around, dropped to all fours, and ran away from her towards the other end of the cabin. But it only retreated a few steps, then turned again, rose onto its back legs and bawled in fury.

This time the rifle blast was much closer and Nora rolled onto her side to see Tom wading knee-deep in snow not more than four feet behind her, nearly completely obscured by a blizzard of churning and swirling white flakes, his dark clothes blending him into the surrounding night. But as he drew steadily closer, the icy cold around her was nothing compared to the look on his face.

He fired a third time and this time the bear turned and lumbered around the side of the cabin, disappearing into the dark and the storm.

"You're alive!" Nora gasped, but her relief didn't last the length of her declaration.

Tom turned around and every ounce of fury that he'd focused on that bear was suddenly, squarely directed at her. He reached down, grabbed the front of her coat and hauled her roughly back onto her feet.

"Get inside," he snarled, the heat of his breath steaming the air between them and making him seem suddenly very dragonish.

Leaving her no chance to disobey, Tom dragged her to the front porch. As they rounded the front of the cabin, the dark bulk of the bear could be seen lying dead in the snow not more than twenty feet away. Already the storm was covering the carcass, but he barely paused to look at it.

He all but carried her up the stairs by the scruff of her coat, for the second time in as many days like an awkward sack of potatoes. When she slipped, he lifted her feet clean up off the porch and dragged her inside by the arm, slamming the door behind him. Whether Nora managed to jerk out of his grasp or he simply let her go, she wasn't sure, but Frank hadn't even looked that mad and he'd been beating her.

She rubbed her arm, swallowing hard as she tried to ignore how very much like him Tom suddenly seemed. "How was I supposed to know the bear was right there? You could have been mauled, you know! So I didn't stay put, so what? Jesus, Tom! You hurt my arm!"

"Forget your arm." Tom set the rifle by the door and in quick, angry jerks, unfastened the front of his bulky coat. Not even bothering to hang it up, he threw it on the floor and started rolling his shirt sleeves up over his bulky arms. "Start worrying about what else I'm going to hurt."

Now this really was shades of Frank. Her sore arm forgotten, Nora backed away until she felt the warm fireplace rocks at her back. She flattened herself against them, the heat searing through her wet clothes. "You stay right there! Don't come near me, Tom! I-I-I mean it!"

She quickly looked around for something to protect herself, but the sound of his heavy boots crossing that wood floor snapped her back around. She screamed, dropped to the ground and covered her head with her arms.

"You," he growled, "haven't got the sense God gave a cricket."

She screamed again when he grabbed her arm, roughly hauling her back to her feet. Hitting him was as effective as hitting a mountain side, but the returning blows that she expected didn't come. Instead, he sat down on the living room's only chair and, with one strong jerk, spilled her face-down right across his lap.

Startled, she stopped screaming. Gasping, she twisted her head back to stare at him. "What...what are you doing?!"

"Next time I tell you to stay put, lady, you're going to fall all over yourself obeying me." He didn't bother to unfasten her jeans, but took hold of the waistband and with one hard tug had the over-sized pants off her hips and all the way down to her knees, baring her bottom completely.

"Omigod!" Nora panicked, and at the top of her lungs shouted, "Rape! Help, somebody!"

As if there were anyone within miles to help her. Or even to hear her for that matter.

Tom only laughed, a harsh cough of a sound. "Don't flatter yourself."

And his huge broad hand crashed down across the summit of her right cheek, the echo of flesh striking flesh as loud as a thunderclap in the small cabin. The sharp impact jolted her over his knee, and once again Nora froze. Her mouth fell open and she sucked a startled breath deep into her lungs.

Up until that moment, she hadn't realized how cold she was from her lie down in the snow. But for one brief second, Nora could almost convince herself that she'd just sat down on a hornets' nest. Certainly it felt as if she had a dozen of the angry insects biting and stinging the entire area Tom's hand had covered, and sitting on a hornet's nest was vastly more believable than the idea of a twenty-eight year old woman being spanked as though she were little more than a naughty child.

Then the second hardy swat shocked her back into reality. She really was being treated as if she were a child by this hulking, arrogant, brute of a mountain man!

The third smack got her moving again.

"Stop it! You son of a--" His hand caught the particularly sensitive spot right above her left thigh with vindictive force, and Nora howled, "OW!"

She bucked frantically, twisting her hips as she fought to roll off his knee, but his free arm fastened around her waist like a steel band. She wasn't going anywhere until he allowed it.

"Let go of me! Stop it! You can't do this!" She kicked, beating and clawing at his thigh with both fists until she was sure his leg must be black and blue. She elbowed him sharply in the ribs, but he wasn't even fazed. But if anything he only spanked her harder, his broad hand slapping and smacking her squirming rump until the hornets covered every inch, biting on top of bites and stinging so badly that she couldn't have held still, even if she wanted to.

In desperation, she snapped her hand back to try and grab his, but he caught her by the wrist, transferred his hold of it to that inescapable steel band, and then started spanking all over again. He attacked her bottom until the chill was little more than a fond memory, a scalding fire having taken its place, and Nora gave up trying to get away. She lay over his lap, her teeth gritted against cries she couldn't quite bite back, her eyes squeezed tightly shut, and so mad that she felt on the verge of tears. She clenched her jaw tightly together, fighting hard to keep from crying. The blizzard outside would be raging at least this hard in hell before she gave him that kind of satisfaction!

And through it all, from the first swat to the last, Tom never said one word. What the hell was he doing? He watched in angry amazement as his hand descended again and again on her wriggling, squirming bottom, smooth, round, once pale but now rapidly turning red. Only the second bottom he'd ever paddled in his life--the first having belonged to a very bratty nine year old Justin. The two experiences hardly compared though. For one, it had occurred more than twenty years ago when Tom had been barely fifteen. For another, his younger brother had been hardly likely to prosecute.

Of course, Justin would never have run out to face a bear unarmed, either. And the image of Nora beneath the massive paws of that grizzly was enough to make Tom redouble his efforts. Ignoring his fiercely stinging palm, he paddled her backside until her stubbornly maintained silence dissolved into yelps and high-pitched squeals. Only when those upturned cheeks were a hot-cherry red and dark hints of bruising began to appear in spots along the surface of her fair skin, did Tom finally stop.

He unceremoniously dumped her on the floor and stood up, flexing his hand. "Now, when I tell you to stay put, what are you going to do?"

Scrambling onto her knees, she swallowed an acidic reply. Her hands flew back to frame her bottom, her flanks so hot that they all but sizzled. She twisted her head back to try and glimpse the damage, then glared at Tom again.

"You've wore my hand out," Tom growled, "but my belt's more than ready for round two, if that's what you're wanting."

"I stay here," Nora said flatly, but her expression never changed. If only looks could kill, then surely he was about to breathe his last.

Unfortunately, as he pulled his coat back on and headed outside again, he seemed disappointingly fit. "Thank you for your obedience."

"Choke on it!" she snarled, and rubbed her aching bottom as he closed the door behind him.

* * * * *

Squatting by the fireplace, Tom lay two thick slabs of meat on the grill. They popped and sizzled, and the mouth-watering aroma of freshly cooking steak filled the cabin. "How do you like yours done?"

It had taken him nearly six hours to gut, skin, and carve up that bear. Having worked through the remainder of the night, with the morning now well on its way to noon, Tom had thought a couple steaks would have been a nice peace offering on his part. Not that she hadn't earned that spanking, or that he was sorry for having dealt it. But his cabin was just too small for the oppressive silence anger created between two people. And anyway, one would think after six hours, Nora would have given up being mad at him.

But no. As prickly as a porcupine, she sat in the corner, her too big britches once more covering a bottom that he was certain must still be fairly tender. Her bruised mouth was tightly compressed and her one eye glared balefully at him.

He shook his head. Funny, how the cabin was starting to feel much as it had for the last eight winters: quiet and lonely. The picture wasn't exactly appealing.

He nudged the steaks until they were more centered over the flames and tried again. "You like your steak rare? Charred? Somewhere in between?"

When she still didn't answer, he stifled a sigh. "Look, when you get done pouting, let me know. I'll cook you something then."

Her nostrils flared, and she snarled, "I am not pouting. You hurt me!"

"No," he corrected, turning the meat. "That other guy hurt you. I just dusted your backside with a few well-placed pats."

"Pats? That was assault, buster! You had no right--"

"My house," he stated bluntly. "My rules. If you don't like it, too bad. Because that's what you get when you invite yourself to live with a stranger. And I'll tell you right now, lady," he poked in her direction with the fork he'd been using to turn the steaks. "The next time you ignore what I tell you and go charging outdoors in the dead of night, in the middle of a storm, unarmed, after a predatory bear that's looking to make a dainty blonde snack out of you, I'll do more than just redden those nether cheeks. I'll give you such a wallop, you won't sit for month of Sundays. You're stuck here for the winter, so I suggest you get used to it and quit provoking me. Now, you want salt and pepper or what?"

She gasped. "You're nuts if you think I'll ever let you do that to me again!"

"I don't recall your 'letting' me do it in the first place. But if you think you can stop me the next time, feel free to try."

Her anger abruptly gave way to shock. Her mouth snapped open and closed twice. "What if I don't want a next time?"

"Suits me fine, but that depends on you and how you want to act. You can hold that spanking against me, act the pouty princess until the thaw, making us both miserable and probably earning a heck of a lot more whippings like the one I just gave you. Or you can chalk this morning up to a learning

experience and behave yourself. Do that and I should have no more cause to turn you over my knee. You'll go back to Keno, safe, sound and sitting down."

She blinked at him, her anger rapidly fading. She looked at him for the longest time, the silence broken only by the pop and sizzle of the cooking steaks. As her eyes slid down to his hands, she touched her hip and gently rubbed. "I—I think I'd like to do that second one."

"As I said, it's your choice, but I'm glad to hear it." He waved a tin salt-shaker over his steak, lightly seasoning it, then looked at her. "Last chance: salt and pepper?"

"Is that the bear?"

"Yup." Patiently, he waited for her to make up her mind.

She rubbed her bottom again, and her shoulders drooped a little. Finally, crawling out of the corner, she knelt beside him to look at the meat cooking on the grill in the fireplace. "I've never had bear before."

"Some folks say it's a might gamey, but considering that the nearest grocery store is seventy miles south of here and that we've got ourselves a surplus of bear outside, by the time the thaw gets here, you'll probably be used to it."

She sighed. "Okay. Do mine then."

He seasoned her steak, then turned both slabs again. "How about if we make this a real meal. Why don't you go below and pick us out a couple cans of vegetables?"

"Sure." She climbed to her feet and headed for the trap door in the kitchen.

"Nora," he said, and halfway across the floor, she stopped and glanced back at him. "I'm not that other guy. My way may not be politically correct, but it won't leave you beat up and bloody either."

Her mouth twisted in a tight, almost sad smile. "Want to know something funny, Tom?"

"What?"

"That was my car. Instead of hiding in the back of your trailer, I could have taken my car and driven off and he'd be the stranded one here for the winter. You could have been cooking bear steaks for Frank right now." She shook her head again. "I don't know why I hid in your trailer. Maybe I thought he'd come looking for me, or show just a little bit of concern for what he'd done. I didn't think he was going to drive off and leave me."

"Nice guy."

"Yeah." Head down, she headed for the cellar. At the top of the stairs, she caught the low-riding waist of her jeans and heaved them back up her hips.

Tom poked the steaks, adjusting them on the grill, then stood up. On his way back to his bedroom, he called down into the cellar, "On the far shelf down there, I've got a rolled up leather pouch."

Though he couldn't see her, he heard her muffled voice call back, "Which one? I see three."

"Do you see one about the size of a loaf of bread?"

"Holy mackerel, this is heavy! What have you got in this thing? Rocks?"

"Not that one!" He sounded angrier than he meant to, and the urge to go charging down there after her nearly overwhelmed him. He stopped himself...barely. "Leave that one alone. Get the other one, the one with the tools in it."

"Oh, okay." And he heard her mutter under her breath, "...bite my head off...get your own damn bag..."

"I can hear you," he drawled.

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth when she poked her head around the corner, looked up at him sheepishly and said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to call you that."

Then she vanished again, and he was left to wonder what she might have called him. "Do you got it?"

"Yeah." She appeared at the bottom of the stairs, the rolled up tool bag tucked under one arm and a can in each hand. She held one up for him. "How well do mixed veggies go with bear steaks?"

"Works for me. Come on up." While she picked her way up the stairs, carefully trying to avoid tripping on the long hems of her pants, Tom walked back into the his bedroom and dug around until he found Justin's old belt.

She had opened both cans and was kneeling in front of the cupboards, searching for a pot to heat them in when he joined her in the kitchen.

"Here," he said. "Try this on."

Her eyes lit up when she saw the belt. "Hey, thanks!"

She slipped the length of brown leather through the loops, but the farthest hole barely cinched the waist of her jeans. Even with the belt buckled, the pants still threatened to fall off her hips. "Well. It was a nice gesture, anyway."

"Unbuckle it." Tom unfastened the ties that held the tool kit closed and unrolled it on the kitchen counter. Selecting an awl, he pulled half her belt from the loops, then overlapped the surplus length over the buckle. Lowering himself onto one knee before her, he marked the place with his fingers and pulled the length of leather out and away from her skin. "Hold still."

Nora watching as he worked the point of the awl into thick leather, making a series of three new holes. "It's hard to imagine you ever being small enough to fit into these clothes. What were you, twelve?"

He carefully punched through the last of the new notches and stood again.

"They weren't ever mine. Here, now try it."

Tugging her pants up one last time, Nora cinched the belt to the middle hole and buckled it again. She bounced experimentally up and down on her heels, then walked a few steps and bounced again.

"Looks like they'll stay up now," Tom said as he slid the awl back into the tool pouch and rolled it back up.

"Yeah," she smirked triumphantly. "I'd like to see you yank these off me now."

He turned around slowly. Leaning his hip against the counter, he folded his arms across his chest and asked, "Is that a challenge?"

All traces of humor vanished from her face. She held up her hands wardingly. "No! I was just kidding."

"Not only can I get them taken down," Tom said, with a smirk of his own. "But now I've got something besides my hand to spank you with. So, I'd be very careful if I were you."

"You can't spank me with my own belt. That's cheating!"

"No, that's improvising. Up here, you learn to thrive on improvisation or you generally don't last long. How about, instead of baiting me, you heat up the vegetables." He pointed to a lower cupboard.

"The pan's under there."

Leaving her grumbling behind him, he carried the tools back down the stairs and replaced them on the shelf. In spite of himself, he checked the much heavier gold pouch that Nora had initially picked up. The thick straps at the top had obviously not been touched, but he still shook his head at himself. This bag ought to have been safely stashed away yesterday, before she ever set foot inside the cabin. And certainly before he let her down into his cellar.

She was kneeling at the fireplace, stirring the cooking vegetables when he emerged from the cellar with the pouch in his arms. He lowered the trap door and headed for the bedroom. She glanced over her shoulder as he passed her, but didn't say anything. He placed the gold in the bottom of Justin's trunk, removing a few more items of clothes, then shut and padlocked it securely.

"Here." He brought the clothes out to her, setting the bundle down in the corner. "You can have these while you're here. Just a couple pairs of thermals, some shirts, socks, and an extra pair of jeans. We can cut the legs down to size so you're not tripping on them. I also got you Justin's old coat and his gloves. They won't fit as well, but they're better than what you've got and they'll keep you a good deal warmer if you go outside."

She looked at the pile. "Who was Justin?"

"My brother." He didn't look at her. "How's the steaks? They done yet?"

"Yes." She obligingly dropped the subject. "They're ready whenever you are."

He got two plates and silverware from the kitchen and she dished up the meal, giving him the largest steak and the lion's share of the mixed veggies.

"You don't eat enough," was all he said as he sat down on the rug across from her.

"I eat plenty," she said with mock indignation. "I'm just not a hulking giant with Arnold Schwarzenegger muscles bulging out all over the place."

"Who's Arnold Schwarzenegger?" he asked around a mouthful of steak.

"An actor," she gave him an odd look. "You really have been up here a while."

Shrugging with his eyebrows, he grunted and continued eating.

"Are you a miner, too?"

He looked at her, chewing slowly.

"I'm not going to steal from you, Tom. I'm not a thief."

He grunted again and looked back down at his plate. "I'm glad. I'd hate to think I saved you from the bear, only to have to kill you myself later on."

She laughed again, though her amusement lasted only until he looked at her again. "Oh, you were being serious."

"Just don't go digging for things you shouldn't be looking for."

She frowned. "I think I liked dinner better when we weren't talking to each other."

They made it almost all the way through the meal before the need for conversation again overcame her. "Do you want the rest of my steak?"

"You're not going to eat anymore?"

"No, I'm full."

He speared the left overs from her plate onto his. "No wonder you're just a stick. You don't eat anywhere near enough."

She snorted. "Frank thinks I need to diet."

"Yeah well, he's an idiot. What does he know about it?"

"He knew my butt was too big." Her elbows on her knees, Nora frowned into the fire.

"I happened to get a pretty good look at that butt. Seemed fine to me." Tom fixed her with an assessing look. "Why should you care what he thinks?"

She didn't look at him. "I'll bet you two-to-one he cleans out my apartment and my bank account, and sells my car before I get home. My mom's going to freak out when I don't call on Sunday. My boss was mad because I took some vacation time, so I'm pretty sure I'll lose my job." She sighed. "And after six months of not paying my bills, I'll have no home to go to and every bill collector in America is going to have my picture on their wanted posters."

"Hey," When Nora looked at him, her face awash in the orange-yellow light of the fire, Tom said, "I wouldn't have cooked for Frank. If it makes you feel better, I wouldn't even have stopped him from trying to walk out of here."

She smiled faintly, but shook her head. "He wouldn't have tried. Frank's too smart for that." She tipped her head thoughtfully. "He might have taken your car though, and I'm pretty sure he'd have dipped his hand into your bag of rocks."

"I'd have shot him."

"Really?"

"In a heart beat."

Before he could move, she was up on her knees and leaning toward him. He stiffened when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a hug. It was a friendly touch, but one that jolted through his

body and went straight to his groin before he even twitched a finger. Through two layers of clothes, he felt her small breasts grazing his chest. But worse, he could smell her. And damn if she didn't smell good.

"Thanks, Tom," she said as she let him go. "That's the sweetest thing anybody's ever said to me."

At this point, being sweet was the farthest thing from his mind. Lustful or even lecherous came a good deal closer to describing his current mind set, and he quickly stood up, heading for the door before she noticed just how fast the front of his jeans was filling out. "I'd best finish cutting up that bear before the meat freezes too hard to saw through."

"Need any help?" she asked.

He took his coat off the peg, but rather than put it on, he held it in front of him in a way that would hopefully hide his condition without raising her suspicions. He stomped out of the door.

"Tom?" she called. "Do you--"

"No." He quickly shut it between them.

The cold outside was a welcome distraction. The storm was still in good form and the wind, blinding him with snow, stabbed right through his shirt and thermals to his skin. He couldn't keep doing this until spring. Not without the risk of something vital getting frost bitten. He sighed, his breath barely fogging the air before the wind whipped it away. Hanging his head, he waited for the cold to work its magic once again.

Chapter Four

Those first two weeks felt like two years. It snowed for the first six days, broke for four, and then the storm returned with a vengeance. It dropped snow on them day and night without stopping. Sometimes soft, gentle, sparsely scattered flakes, and sometimes so hard that it made the blizzard from Nora's first night seem like nothing at all. Tom's cabin was kept from being completely buried by the sheer ferocity of the wind, which swept the snow into a nearly flat accumulation about three feet deep for as far as the eye could see.

Tom rigged up a series of ropes that led from the porch to the outhouse, another to the woodshed, another to the toolshed, and one more to the garbage bins. Running at about shoulder high, Tom said if she needed to go anywhere, she was to get him first and then hang on to that rope the entire time. Period. No matter what. He wasn't kidding. If he had to pull her frozen body out of a snowdrift because she'd let go, even for half a second, then she'd better hope the snow finished her off before he got her back to the cabin. He didn't say it was a spanking offense exactly, but it was all over in the look he'd given her. That look had been so fierce in fact that, before she could stop herself, her hands had ducked back to cover her jean-clad rump protectively.

He'd only nodded in stark, uncompromising, Tom-like fashion and said, "Damn straight."

The unvaried days quickly began to melt into one another. Nora was a little surprised at how quickly she lost track of the passing time. At night, they played solitaire and poker for toothpicks. During the day, Nora read through Tom's small cache of books—he had the complete works of Shakespeare, four or five Louis L'Amour adventures, several science fiction novels, and at least twenty instructional, hard cover books covering carpentry, plumbing, auto mechanics, mining, and wilderness survival. After two days of struggling with King Lear, Nora had turned to studying carpentry for relief. Thirteen days later, while she'd never so much as seen a router or picked up a skill saw, she couldn't wait to get home because, if she still had an apartment, by golly, she was going to build some cabinets.

In contrast, Tom spent most of his daylight hours chopping wood. Though they had yet to use as much as he seemed to think they needed, first thing every morning Tom restocked the kindling as well as the wood bin, chopped twice as many logs as what he brought into the cabin and stacked it in the woodshed, cleared the snow from the porch and around the necessary buildings, and generally came in around noon for breakfast.

For Nora, those lonely morning hours quickly became the safest time to attempt a bath. And when she finally got back to civilization, never, ever, ever again would she take indoor plumbing for granted.

She stood at the sink and worked the pump until the gushes of cold water filled two metal buckets. This, according to Tom, was a luxury that lasted only until bitter winter temperatures froze the ground deeper than his cellar, which is where his well pump was and where the pipes became vulnerable to ice up. Generally that didn't happen until late winter. But after that, they'd be scooping snow or, if there wasn't any, journeying two miles east to the nearest lake on an ice hunting expedition.

Carrying the buckets to the living room, Nora set one on the grill, added more wood to the fire and adjusted the position of the logs to allow for maximum heat. Waiting for the water to warm, she checked on Tom out one window—yes, there he was, chopping wood by the shed—then gathered up two towels, soap, washcloth, and a fresh shirt from the stack of things Tom had given her. The next time she went on vacation with an abusive boyfriend, not only would she insist they go someplace tropical and warm, but she was going to make darn sure that she took refuge where there was hot running water and a bathtub larger than a two-gallon bucket.

Of course, knowing her luck, she'd probably end up lost in a rainforest somewhere, taking up with an equally lost Doctor Livingston Wannabe, and spending six months battling her way through snake-, spider- and cannibal-infested jungles, bathing with crocodiles and fighting off mosquitoes the size of Cessna airplanes.

Nora smiled a little as she stared into the fire. That was almost a cheering thought. Kinda made her situation now seem not so bad.

When the water began to bubble, Nora moved the bearskin rug and spread a towel out on the wood floor in its place. Protecting her hands with gloves, she set the hot bucket down on one half of the towel and then put the second bucket to heat on the grill. She added another log to the fire, then checked to see where Tom was—still at the woodshed, swinging away—before removing her clothes. Leaving them in a pile on the floor, she pumped a glass of cold water and added just enough to the bucket to immerse her hands without burning them.

Kneeling on the floor, she dunked enough of her head to soak her hair. She used the shampoo sparingly, dunked again to rinse, then scooped out as much of the bubbles as she could, leaving a small mound of suds on the towel. Soaping the washcloth thoroughly, she then started in on the rest, scrubbing every inch of herself from the top on down. Nothing like bathing in a bucket for a girl to become aware of all the little nooks and crannies in need of regular washing. She rinsed the cloth frequently, and by the time she reached her feet, the water in the bucket was murky with soap. She picked it up and set it on the floor out of her way.

It was three steps to the warm, crackling fireplace where Nora put on her gloves again and lifted the second bucket out by its handle. Careful to keep from accidentally burning her legs, she straightened and turned around.

Murphy's Law ruled her life.

The front door opened and in stepped Tom, a bundle of chopped wood in his arms. He froze when he saw her.

Sheer reaction had her jerking up the bucket to cover her pubic area, but there just wasn't enough of it to hide the rest of her. And it was too late anyway. His eyes were definitely somewhat south of her face.

He made a half-strangled sound. "Aw, hell!"

It could have been the sudden gust of icy wind that billowed all around Tom and into the living room, but Nora suspected it probably had more to do with his dark eyes, locked as they were on her breasts, that made her nipples pucker into little pink tips and just stand right up as if to say, 'Howdy.'

She still sucked a quick breath when the cold air hit her. "Ah!"

His eyes leapt up to hers. "What?"

"Door!"

"Yes." He looked at her breasts again, then grabbed the door handle. "Uh...right!"

He backed outside and slammed it shut between them. She heard his armful of logs fall to the porch floor, and then a low, long, half-gargled groan, "Oh God, give me strength!"

She almost laughed, but quickly set the bucket on the towel. It was the fastest rinse down she'd ever given herself. The warm water felt almost scalding after being bathed in cold air, but she submersed her hands and the washcloth anyway and hastily scrubbed as much of the soap from her skin as could be expected in a bucket bathtub. Then, wet and dripping, she wrapped herself in the extra towel and scampered across the cold floor to open the door.

Bent over with his giant hands clutching each side of the threshold, Tom had hung his head and was slowly shaking it. He looked up at her, his dark, eyes flashing as he growled, "You want to drive me out of my mind, don't you? It was a goal before you ever came up here. Let's see how fast I can drive Tom stark, raving crazy!"

Nora danced on tip toes in the chilly air. "Hurry, hurry, hurry! I thought you wanted to come in, so come in already! Jeez, it's freezing out there!"

He stalked past her, and she quickly shut the door again.

He got only halfway across the floor before he rounded on her. "What are you doing?"

"Taking a bath." She pranced quickly past him to get the insulating towel between her bare feet and the ice cold floor. "I always take a bath at this time. You know I do; you always dump the dirty water afterwards."

"Why aren't you doing it in the back room?" he boomed, flinging one arm back as he gestured behind him at his bedroom. "Behind a closed door!"

"So you can accuse me of snooping for gold and shoot me?" she asked. "I don't think so. Besides, I didn't know you were going to come in this early. You never have before."

"You've been naked out here? All this time?"

She could almost hear his unspoken, 'And I haven't seen it before?'

"Everyday. What's the big deal? So you got flashed a peek of boob, so what?" She thought she sounded rather reasonable but, from the way he snapped his mouth open and shut like a landed fish, he obviously didn't agree.

"What's the big deal," he echoed flatly. His face became as dark as a thunder cloud, and through gritted teeth, he growled, "Cenjeya."

She blinked. "What?"

"A Gwich'in woman," Tom said, biting out short, brisk sentences. "Her husband was a tribal elder. Followed the old ways. While hunting one winter, Justin and I ran across Kassi lying in the snow, injured by the caribou he'd been trying to kill. We took him home. Hunted for his family while he healed. One night, he thanked me. With his wife. She was plump, pretty, warm. I was twenty. I'd been up here a couple years already. I was happy to get it." His eyes glittered darkly. "She was my first. She was also my last. That's the part you ought to be concerned about."

"Are you trying to make me afraid of you?"

"Lady, you don't know me from Adam! At the very least, you ought to be prudent and not strut around the place dressed in a towel."

"It's freezing out there! I thought you wanted to come in. I was trying to hurry."

He took two steps closer, looming over her. "And just for the record, I saw more than a flash peek of boob."

"Oh?"

"I've always wondered why you women shave it into funny little patches like that."

"Oh." She adjusted the fit of her towel, pulling it closer around her as she cleared her throat. "I thought the bucket was covering that part." She put her hands on her hips. "It doesn't matter anyway. If you were going to rape me, you'd have done it before now."

"Maybe I was waiting for those bruises to heal up first."

"Oh, well, congratulations then. You've got to be the only rapist in the world who cares about the comfort of his victim."

"Quit provoking me."

"I'm not trying to provoke you," she protested. "I just think you're being silly about this. You're an adult; I'm an adult, and I—"

He grabbed the front of her towel where she'd folded it between the soft mounds of her small breasts and yanked her to him. It came off in his hand as she fell against his chest, but she never got a chance to complain. His hard mouth slanted down over hers and he kissed her so fiercely that every thought in her head suddenly just...disappeared, whisked off into nothing like the smoke being sucked up the chimney.

That's what fifteen days trapped in a snowbound cabin could do. He ravaged her mouth hungrily, consuming her with a passion that hit all the right buttons for a man whose entire love life consisted of one night and another man's wife.

He grabbed her bottom with both hands, and Nora squeaked as she was lifted right off the floor. She quickly grabbed his shoulders, afraid she might fall, but he pulled her tight against his body, very deliberately pressing her naked groin to the stiff bulge in the front of his jeans. She gasped when he ground his hips into hers, and he took advantage of the moment to invade her mouth.

Oh yeah, he knew how to kiss all right. She didn't even mind the beard.

He knew how to hold her, too, and the tips of his fingers barely brushed against the intimate folds between her thighs. His hips moved, mock thrusting as though their bodies were already joined. The angle hit her perfectly, each bump of his groin catching her clit just right, and her entire body turned molten and hot and throbbed to the tempo he set.

He lifted his head, breathing deep and hard. "Okay, that backfired."

Nora licked her lips, her eyes locked on his mouth. She didn't wait for him to kiss her again. She wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles behind him. Cupping his face between her hands, her soft lips captured his so she could taste and explore him in return.

She barely felt him move, but the rounded lumps of the cabin's log wall were suddenly at her back, with Tom pressed just as hard to the front of her. He broke the kiss long enough to look down. "Where the hell did my rug go?"

"I moved it," Nora said breathlessly, kissing and sucking at the shell of his ear.

"You got a problem with bunk beds?"

"Mm," she murmured huskily. "I get to be on top."

He grabbed her bottom again, jostling her higher up on his hips as he carried her to his bedroom. "Lady, you'll have to wait your turn."

* * * * *

The battle for who got to be on top waged until supper time when hunger and other bodily necessities finally forced them out of bed. By then the wind had picked up and it shrieked through the few trees and out across the flat open stretches of valley surrounding the cabin. It was difficult to tell if it was still snowing or if the swirling white flakes that blinded them the instant they opened the front door were being swept up from the three-foot-deep blanket of it already on the ground. On their way to the outhouse, Tom turned Nora around and sent her back inside the cabin.

"Okay," he said, closing the door. "It's honey bucket time."

"Honey bucket?" she asked.

He went down into the cellar. What he emerged with had as much to do with honey as gooseberries had to do with geese. He handed her a roll of toilet paper and put a plain, white, plastic five gallon bucket down by the door. There was a suspicious toilet-seat-like hole cut into the lid.

She looked at it for a long time, then glared at Tom. "Tell me that's not what I think that's for."

He hardly seemed thrilled himself. "It's a temporary measure. The handle loops through a hook in the wall to keep the wind from blowing the bucket off the porch, so it can stay outside until we need to use it."

"Uh uh," Nora told him. "I'm content with the outhouse, thank you very much."

He shook his head. "No. It's too dangerous. Right now you can't see two inches in front of your face out there."

"You've got ropes--"

"We'll use the bucket," Tom interrupted firmly, "until the storm eases up. Got it?"

"I knew the minute we got out of bed something would happen to kill the mood," she grumbled, but when he lowered his head, glaring at her with that firm set in his mouth, she relented. "I got it, okay? I got it."

He turned his back and let her use the bucket first. When he was finished with it himself, he put it outside on the porch. They froze their hands washing in the pump sink and then set about to making dinner: pancakes and scrambled eggs, fresh from the box, just add water.

"I can't believe you got so big eating food like this," Nora said as she swallowed her last mouthful of egg.

"I didn't," Tom said. He took her empty plate and set it on the floor. "I got this big watching you eat."

They went back to bed after that.

It was sometime between sunrise and sunset when Nora woke up really needing to use the—she made a face—honey bucket. She rolled over, burying her face against Tom's shoulder, but the feeling refused to go away. Growling, she gave in and got out of bed.

Quietly, she closed the bedroom door so a sudden gust of cold air wouldn't wake Tom. The living room was dark, lit only by the soft glowing embers of a few stubborn coals. Out of habit, Nora paused to add some kindling strips and a log to help keep their only source of heat going until morning. And the thought occurred, as she donned the heavy coat Tom had given her, that he'd probably never know if she used the disgusting—and, she was pretty darn sure, unsanitary—honey bucket or if she went all the way out to the outhouse. He was, after all, sound asleep. If she warmed herself by the fire afterward, he'd probably never even know she'd gotten out of bed.

How dangerous could it possibly be, anyway? He had a rope tied from the porch to the outhouse. So long as she held on to it, she could hardly get lost.

She bit her lower lip, then glanced back over her shoulder at the closed bedroom door. She had clothes scattered all over the living room so she didn't even have to go back for her long johns and jeans. She felt the slightest tickle of apprehension as she picked up her belt. She turned the thick leather over in her hands and almost changed her mind, but a low, reassuring snore from the bedroom sort of set her mind at ease. What Tom didn't know, wouldn't hurt her, she thought. She just had to stay quiet.

But her hands still shook a little as she buttoned herself into her skirt and coat and she nearly changed her mind again. She wasn't normally such a coward, and that more than anything else helped steel Nora's resolve. She pulled her shoes on and opened the front door. Ice and wind blasted against her, nearly jerking the door out of her hand. It was like being slapped in the face with a hundred sharp needles and Nora ducked her head, holding an arm up automatically to shield herself as she pushed her way outside. It took considerable straining just to get the door closed behind her again and, for a second there, the honey bucket almost seemed like a good idea.

Nora fought her way through the wind to the edge of the porch, feeling her way along the cabin wall because she couldn't see anything but a battery of snowflakes coming at her. She couldn't even see the end of the porch when she came to it and nearly fell off. Clinging to the corner of the cabin, she waved one hand blindly in the air, searching for the outhouse's guiding rope. Already the cold had pierced her clothes and she was starting to shake by the time she found it. She let out a sigh of relief, but the instant she grabbed hold of the line, the heavily ice-laden rope broke at the knot and the wind whipped it right out of her hand.

Nora fell back against the wall, her heart in her throat. This was insane! What was she doing, she thought an instant before Tom's arms wrapped around her from behind. The storm practically threw them back into the cabin, and Tom all but slammed the door with the strength it took for him to get it closed again.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he boomed.

"I know!" she shouted back, frightened both by his anger as well as at how closely she'd come to making a lethal mistake. "I know! I know! I had to go to the bathroom and I didn't want to use the bucket and I ignored you and..ohmigod, Tom! What if I'd been out there when the rope broke like that!"

"That's right! What if you'd been out there? And what if I hadn't heard you walking around in shoes and come out to see what you were up to?"

She flopped down on the floor, covering her mouth with both hands, her eyes as wide as saucers as the realization of what could have happened hit her.

Tom didn't say anything more. His chest heaved and his hands clenched, but he didn't say a word. He didn't trust himself to keep his temper if he'd tried. After a moment, he again waged a brief battle with the door and the winter elements to snag the bucket from its hook on the porch and brought it inside.

"You do what you have to," he snapped when he got the door closed again. He set the bucket on the floor next to her. "But don't bother pulling your pants back up. In fact, you can just take them all the way off at this point."

She looked up at him, stricken. "Are you—are you going to—"

"Damn right I am."

"But I'm sorry, Tom! You were right, and I'm sorry! Can't we just let it go at that?"

His hand clenched again. "If you don't have to go after all, then we can get started on the hiding you've got coming."

Her trembling, as she took her pants down, had very little to do with cold anymore. She flushed miserably. "Do you have to watch me?"

"Since you do some stupid, boneheaded things when I'm not watching, yes, apparently I do."

His angry eyes didn't leave her the entire time she relieved herself, the only time he looked away being the few minutes it took to return the bucket to its outside hook.

"Get the thermals off, too," he said, as she removed her jeans and lay them on the floor. Tom held out his hand. "Give me your belt."

Feeling very small, Nora picked her pants back up and pulled the belt from the loops. She cringed as she held it out to him, halfway expecting him to snatch it from her fingers and start swinging into her right away.

Instead, he hung it by the buckle on one of the coat pegs, then snapped at a spot on the floor in front of it. "Stand."

Like a puppy under a rolled up newspaper, she crept past him to face the wall. Hands clutched before her, she stared at her belt with watery eyes.

"Don't move from this spot," he told her. "I have to calm down first."

She swallowed hard as he stormed back to his bedroom and shut the door. Drawing a shaky breath, she listened as he paced the floor, the steady tromping of his boots nerve-wrackingly loud every time he approached the door. But it was a long time before the pacing stopped.

Nora succumbed to the first of what would become a deluge of tears. She sniffed and quickly wiped it away so he wouldn't see her crying. But it was still several long minutes before he came back out to the living room, and with each passing second it was getting harder and harder for her to keep from falling apart.

Finally, the bedroom door opened. Tom walked out and sat down in his chair. "Come here."

She surreptitiously wiped away a second tear, then reached up with a badly shaking hand to get the belt from its peg.

"Leave it," he said flatly.

A tiny flutter of hope twitched to life inside her. But when she turned around, the determined look on his face promptly killed it. He held out his hand and, head down, Nora reluctantly walked over to take it. He pulled her to his side. From here, his lap looked very capable and his hand surrounding hers felt very hard. Then she thought about how much harder it was going to feel in a minute, when it came crashing down on a certain aspect of her bare anatomy and a chilly panic shivered down her spine into her legs.

"I don't like this," he said.

"Me, either," she quavered.

"How do we avoid it?"

"I need to do what you tell me to." She could have been reading the script of a 'bad girl' movie for all the ease in which those words fell from her mouth. Another shiver of panic raced through her as she realized the moment she dreaded was rushing up on her with all the speed and force of a freight train.

"Over my knees," he told her.

"I can't," Nora said, swallowing a near hysterical sob. "My legs won't move."

A fleeting sympathy touched his eyes, but that determined look never wavered. He took hold of her upper arm with one hand and his other wrapped around her waist. "It's all right, Nora. I've got you."

She tumbled gracelessly down across his thighs, grabbing onto his leg with both hands as he heaved her almost all the way over, jostling her bottom so it was well centered before him. He flipped up her shirt tail, baring her from the waist down.

"I shouldn't have left you waiting that long," he said. "That was my fault. I'm sorry."

And then he spanked her. She didn't know if it truly was worse now than the first time she'd found herself in this position, or if it only felt that way because this time she knew what to expect and she knew his hard-as-steel palm wasn't going to stop until her backside felt paddled raw. It didn't matter anyway. It was happening and Tom was putting the strength of his arm into the task. Within only a few hardy swats, Nora's heels came kicking up and she was writhing in a vain effort to twist her hips far enough to get her bottom out of reach.

Before it was over, she was howling louder than the wind outside, her nose and eyes were both red, and tears streamed down her cheeks as she sobbed, "I'm sorry, Tom!" over and over.

The spanking stopped. His hand came to rest on the back of her thigh. He held her in place, gently rubbing her back and shoulders until her crying eased into groans and sniffles.

"Stand up," he told her.

As she did, her hands ducked behind her to frantically rub at the burning hurt. Tom took hold of her arm, leading her back to the wall. He took the belt down and wrapped the buckled end around his palm twice.

"Bend over and put your hands flat against the wall. If you keep them there, I'll only give you ten."

Though her sobs returned full force, Nora did as he told her. From the first stroke to the last, she kept her hands in place. But she screeched each time he struck her, rising onto tiptoes and stamping her feet in a frantic, age-old dance of suffering.

Tom lay the belt into her hard, letting the last fifteen inches or so catch the seat of her buttocks, hugging them tight together as the end wrapped around and flicked her hip. It raised nasty welts and he knew there'd be bruises where the end of it snapped into her, but he gave her all ten licks before turning and flinging the belt across the living room. He had her in his arms before it even hit the far wall.

He picked her up, carrying her into the back room and laying her on his bed. She rolled instantly onto her stomach, groaning as she reached back. Unable to bear touching the blistered skin, her hands framed her hips. Her pale fingers stood out in sharp contrast around the angry red summit of her bottom.

Lying down on his side next to her, Tom stroked her back and kissed her tear-dampened cheek. She wasn't a puppy, he reminded himself. He couldn't keep her. If he could get her through the winter alive, then as soon as the mountains were passable, the best thing for her would be to get her back to Keno so she could go home. Back to civilization and the rules of survival that she was familiar with. She didn't belong up here any more than Justin had.

The last thing he wanted was for her death to be his fault, too.

Chapter Five

It wasn't yet dawn when Tom gently shook Nora awake.

"I want to show you something," he told her as he urged her out of bed.

Helping her into his clothes, he then put a cup of hot coffee in her hands, grabbed a quilt from the bed and hustled her, rubbing her eyes and yawning, out onto the front porch. All sleepiness vanished, however, when she saw the rippling glow of the Northern Lights streaking the sky swirling waves of bright green, red, yellow, orange and blue, rippled and melded together, mingling with the twinkling stars, dancing together in streams.

"Oh," she breathed.

Tom stood behind her. "Welcome to Aurora Borealis country."

He wrapped them both in the quilt so he could hold her while they watched the swirling display. The morning was crisp and calm, and they steamed the chilly air like dragons. The wind had finally stilled. No more snow was falling, though the hip high accumulation on the ground sparkled, reflecting the colors in the sky above.

"I've never seen anything like this." Nora caught her breath, watching with wide eyes. "Oh Tom, it's so beautiful!"

"Yes, it is," he agreed, but he wasn't watching the sky. He had angled his head so he could see her face instead.

Six weeks of being trapped in a two-room cabin, no place to go and surrounded by snow and sub-zero temperatures, could either bring two people close together or make them hate each other's guts. For Tom, at least, it had gone head and shoulders beyond the former. It was coming up on December, and the mountains would likely be passable by April. As hard as it would be to let her go, he needed to start confronting the coming fact.

He traced her features with his eyes, wanting to commit each soft detail to memory. He was going to miss the hell out of her.

Not wanting to think about it, he pulled her closer, tighter, burying his face in the side of her neck. They stayed on the porch, locked together while the sun came up, concealing the Aurora Borealis with light and painting both the snow and the sky a blushing shade of pink. It was the same color that stained her cheeks when, within the warm folds of his quilt, his hands slipped under the hem of her shirt, roving up to cup her bare breasts. Her lips parted slightly as he fondled them, gently plucking and tweaking the tips until they stiffened for him.

Never in his wildest dreams did he ever think he'd have someone like her up here. He kissed the side of her neck, and both were careful to keep the folds of the quilt pulled close around them.

* * * * *

The day spawned into a nice, sunny, and relatively warm day. By ten a.m., it had already reached three degrees, and any time the temperature rose above zero, it was a cause for celebration. So for breakfast, instead of bear steaks with green beans and boiled potatoes, Nora made bear steaks with carrots and chopped potatoes fried in bacon fat. Variety was, after all, the spice of life.

As the smell of cooking permeated the cabin, Nora began to feel a little queasy. She got a glass of water from the sink to sip on and tried to ignore the feeling, but as the bacon in particular sizzled and popped in the pan, her mouth began to water. . .and not because she was hungry or because it smelled good.

She barely made it out onto the porch before her stomach rebelled. Nora hung over the porch rail she and Tom had duly christened only that morning, gagging and dry heaving into the snow. As the spasms gradually eased, panting and swallowing convulsively, Nora pushed herself back off the rail. She

wiped at her mouth with the back of her wrist. She'd felt sick every morning for the last week, but this was the first time that she'd thrown up.

She ran her hands down over her flat stomach, not at all happy about the niggling doubt that was beginning to tickle at the back of her mind. The likelihood of this being just a weird form of early morning flu was starting to lose its credibility, though she wasn't ready to yet abandon all hope.

"You okay?"

Nora jumped a little guiltily, turning to find Tom, his arms full of split wood for the fire, standing not twenty feet from the porch. Despite the snow, she hadn't heard him coming.

She nodded shakily and tried to smile. "Must be coming down with the stomach flu. . .or something."

As Tom came up onto the porch, he took one glove off and shifted the bundle of wood to his other arm. He lay his bare hand on her forehead. "You do feel warm. Maybe you should go back to bed."

Her conscience twinged as she brushed his hand from her forehead. "I'll be fine. It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I knew we should have gone back to bed instead of--"

"Tom!" Nora tried to swallow her rising exasperation. "It's fine. Really."

"Go back to bed. There's no sense in making whatever you've got worse than it has to be. I'll finish the cooking--"

"Would you stop babying me!" Nora snapped. "I do the cooking; you do everything else. That's the way we've been doing things, and that's the way we're going to keep doing things. I'm not going to shirk my only chore over some silly little stomach flu!"

"It's not shirking if--"

"Oh shut up!" Suddenly irritated, she turned and stomped back into the cabin.

After a minute, he followed. He dumped the wood in the bin by the fireplace and knelt down to reach for the fork to turn the bacon and potatoes. Nora got there ahead of him, snatching the utensil from his hand and shouldering him out of the way. He looked at her, his dark eyes unreadable, and didn't say a word.

Nora managed to turn half the bacon before the smell sent her scrambling for the porch again. She leaned against the outer wall of the cabin, gasping for air and fighting hard to keep from retching. It was a long time before her stomach settled, and when she finally ventured back inside, Tom had already removed their breakfast from the grill.

Standing in the doorway, she watched him work for a time in silence. She shouldn't have snapped at him. He hadn't deserved it, but when she opened her mouth to apologize, Tom growled, "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're bitchy because you're not feeling well. But I suggest you get to bed right now, little girl, before I follow my instincts and dust your britches but good."

And Nora was suddenly irritated all over again. "Stop treating me like I'm a child!"

"Then stop acting like one!"

"Just because I don't agree with your tyrannical dictatorship--"

Tom threw down the fork and stood up, squaring his massive shoulders against. "Now you hold it right there, lady."

She felt tears threaten, and though she knew she was being unreasonable, that made her even madder. "No! I'm an American! Americans say whatever the hell they want to! Especially to presumptuous, pig-headed, arrogant mountain men!"

His look darkened. He grabbed her arm and hauled her down the short hall to his bedroom. "You've got five seconds to shuck those clothes off and get your fanny into bed."

"You can't make me!" she shouted back at him, and burst into tears because he could too make her and judging from that look on his face, he probably would.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he growled.

I'm pregnant, her mind shouted back at him. But Nora only shook her head, throwing her hands up in the air. "I-I don't know! Just leave me alone!"

Instead, he grabbed the front of her coat and began to undress her. Despite her flailing hands as she slapped at his, he pulled her coat off her shoulders and stripped it from her arms. Flinging it aside, he reached for her pants next.

"No!" Nora wailed, but he was undeterred.

He unbuckled the belt he'd given her. Though she expected him to yank it free and sharply apply it where the thick leather was bound to do her the most good, instead Tom merely unzipped her jeans and tugged them off her hips.

Shoulders drooping, Nora just stood there and cried, "Please don't spank me, Tom. I don't want a spanking. I'm sorry for what I said. Please."

"Sit," he told her.

She flopped down onto the edge of the bed, burying her head in her hands as he worked her pants and shoes all the way off her legs. "Please," she wept. "Don't spank me!"

"Lie down," he told her.

Gasping and sniffing, defeated, she rolled onto her stomach. With a mournful cry, she clutched his pillow and hugged it close to her chest. Weeping into it, she covered her panty-clad bottom with her other hand. She knew Tom wouldn't let her keep it there, but there was simply no other way for her to protest what she knew she had coming.

Shaking his head, Tom covered her with the blankets and stalked from the room, closing the door behind him. She was left unspanked and alone. But instead of better, now Nora felt even worse. She'd been mean and shrewish, snapping at Tom for no good reason. Like a child, just as he'd said. She fully deserved to be taken across the knee for behaving so badly. She deserved to have her bottom slapped long and hard, except Tom was obviously so mad that he didn't even want to touch her, much less to spank her.

Sobbing as though her heart were breaking, she pulled his pillow over her head and cried until her head ached and she felt completely drained of tears. After an hour, she crawled out of his bed and climbed up into the top bunk. She rolled onto her side, facing the wall so she wouldn't have to look at him when he came back in.

She didn't deserve a nice man like Tom. What had he done but feed and clothe and care for her when there had literally been no one else to turn to? And how had she repaid him? By biting his head off for no reason at all.

She'd only been in the upper bunk a few minutes when Tom opened the door and came back in.

"Broth," he said. "Compliments of the tyrannical dictator."

He made her sit up and handed her the steaming hot tin cup. He waited by the bed, hands on hips while she drank it all.

"You need to pee?" he asked bluntly.

Nora shook her head no.

"Then lay down and go to sleep." He headed for the door again. "I'll be back to check on you periodically, and I'd better not find you out of bed!"

The door was shut firmly behind him and Nora lay back down. Her lower lip quivered. He must really be as mad as she thought. He hadn't said a word about her being in the top bunk instead of in his.

She covered her face with the pillow and started crying all over again.

* * * * *

Tom brought Nora alternating cups of water and broth throughout the day. At noon he made her scrambled eggs and at one brought the honey bucket in so she wouldn't have to endure the cold walk out to the outhouse. The rest of the time he spent in his shop building with the generator running long enough for him to work his scroll saw and sander. It took two hours before he created his "helping hand."

It was a foot long from end to end, made from a plank of pine with the oval-shaped business end the length and width of his open hand. The handle he sized to fit his palm and wrapped it in leather to create a comfortable grip. On the back, he carved in small neat letters, "Naughty Nora's."

The staining and varnishing took the longest, and he spent several hours by the heat of his old barrel stove, alternating between painting and sanding and stoking the fire to keep the temperature in his shop above freezing.

When he took Nora some water at about four, she was finally asleep. Her eyes looked puffy and red. So did her nose. So did her cheeks for that matter, and he felt her forehead. She was definitely running a low-grade fever. He listened to her breathe for several long minutes. Her nose sounded a little stuffy, but it didn't sound as if whatever she had was settling down in her lungs. He grunted, reassured that it probably was just a bout of the flu. And either that or cabin fever was bound to make a person a little grumpier than normal. But still. . .

He woke her up to drink, then tucked the blankets back around her while she fell almost instantly back to sleep again. He took a moment to brush her hair back from her eyes, then sighed. He wondered if she was planning to sleep in Justin's old bunk all night. Well, he'd give her her space, if that's what she wanted. But tomorrow, if she wasn't right back in that bottom bunk next to him, he knew exactly how to put a stop to this stubborn little hissy-fit she was trying to pitch.

* * * * *

The next morning she was slightly worse, congested, with a cough, but it made her feel a little better to think maybe she really was just sick.

Tom spent most of the day inside so he could make sure she got the fluids she needed. He had to help her down from the top bunk and she sat on the honey bucket the whole time shivering, teeth chatter, wrapped tightly in a thick blanket. When he would have put her back in his bed, she refused to go and instead reached for the top bunk. Irritated, he planted a hand on her bottom and tossed her up, then stomped outside to get rid of the honey bucket.

Her breakfast didn't stay down, and though her fever broke just before noon, neither did her lunch. By dinner though her appetite had returned, she'd stopped shivering, and her color was back to normal.

"Feeling like dinner?" he asked her, and Nora nodded.

He made stew and brought her a cup, and they both sat on their individual bunks and ate in relative silence. Most of hers was still broth, but it had bits of potato and what looked to be freeze-dried peas, carrots and onions floating in it. She spooned up a small piece of meat.

"Bear?" she asked.

"Bear," he confirmed.

Ah, variety.

"I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I'd kill for some Kentucky Fried Chicken. With mashed potatoes and gravy. Corn on the cob."

"Cheese cake," Tom added. "I haven't had cheesecake in twenty years. Keep meaning to ask Hank to get me some, but I can never remember when I'm down there."

"You should try one of mine. Mom likes it best when I make it with raspberries. I swirl the fruit right in the mixture. When I get back home, I'll send you one."

That ended the conversation and they ate the rest in silence.

Tom had halfway been harboring a small hope that she'd taken to that top bunk because she didn't want him to get sick, too. But that hope was dashed when, as he was getting ready for bed, Nora rolled over to face the wall. Alone in his bunk, the only light in the room being the orange glow from the fire in the living room, he lay on his back with his hands folded behind his head, glaring at the bottom of her bed and wondering how long he should put up with her snit.

Abruptly he rolled onto his side, punched his pillow and folded his arms across his chest. If she didn't want to come to him willingly, he wasn't about to force her. He'd never raped a woman, and he wasn't about to start with Nora.

He closed his eyes, but sleep tended to be illusive when a body was angry. He was still very much awake when he heard the pattern of her breathing change.

She sniffed softly, and Tom slowly opened his eyes. He turned his head slightly to one side, listening. There it was again, another soft snuffle and a breathy, muffled gasp.

"Are you crying?" he asked.

There was a small pause before, in a watery tone, she said, "No."

He rolled back onto his back. "Nora? Did you just lie to me?"

She sniffed harder, whispering, "Yes."

"You want to come back down here with me?"

There was a long pause and he heard her swallow, trying hard to keep from sounding like she was crying as she asked, "Are you still mad at me?"

He kicked the blankets back and got out of bed. His arms were up over the top bunk before he'd even fully straightened, and he snagged her around the waist. "Get down here, woman!"

When she was back in his bed where she belonged, wrapped snugly in his blankets as well as his arms, spooned up to him with her back against his chest and her luscious bottom nestled against his groin, he said, "I haven't yet been so irritated with you that I didn't want you sleeping beside me."

"But I was mean to you."

Eyes closed, he said, "And in the morning I'm going to show you why you won't ever talk like that without consequence again."

She rolled her head to look back at him. "Are you going to spank me?"

"No." His arm tightened around her waist, holding her just a little closer, liking the feel of her next to him. "But I will if there's a repeat of that nonsense."

Nora was quiet for a moment. "Why didn't you the other day?"

"Because you were sick." He kissed her cheek. "I'm not an ogre."

"Tom?"

"What?"

"I need you to spank me."

Tom opened his eyes.

"I won't feel better about saying what I did until you do."

He propped himself up on one elbow, looking at her in the semi-darkness. "You want a spanking?"

She shook her head, softly admitting, "No, but I need you to."

He looked at her for a moment, partially hidden in the bunk bed's shadows but her face stained orange from the fire's glow, before patting her hip. "All right." He sat up in bed, swinging his legs over the side and scooting out far enough so he wouldn't crack his head on the bottom of the top bunk. He patted his thigh. "Come on, Nora. Let's go."

She lay as he'd left her, breathing quickly, her fingers fidgeting with one another as she worked up the nerve to go to him. Climbing out of bed, she nervously wiped her suddenly sweaty palms on the front of her shirt as she approached his lap. With a soft trepiditious moan, she leaned over to grip his left thigh and lay herself carefully across his knees. He cupped her hip with one hand and caught the inside of her thigh with the other. With a single jostling pull, he shifted her bottom to the center of his lap.

"Oh!" She grabbed his shin for balance, whimpering when she felt the hem of her shirt being folded up into the small of her back. She deserved this, she told herself, a good hard spanking for the way she'd behaved. But she still kicked her feet when he plucked at the elastic of her panties and drew them down over her bottom, baring the pale, smooth cheeks, easily seen in the darkness, for the firm application

of his hand. She closed her eyes when she felt the implement of her punishment settle lightly on her left buttock.

"Nora," he began, and the tone of his voice alone was enough to make her shiver. "You know why you're getting this spanking. Wintering in a small cabin isn't easy for anyone, particularly when you're sharing space with another person. But there was no call for the disrespect you showed me. You're a guest in my house and a stranger to the conditions in which I live. It's my responsibility to look out for your well-being. A cold can become bronchitis or pneumonia very quickly if it's not watched and taken care of. You know we can't get to a doctor, and I don't want to spend my winter trying to nurse you back to health, or my spring digging your grave. It all comes back to our number one rule: when I tell you to do something, you do it."

Nora bit her bottom lip. "And I didn't."

"And you didn't," he affirmed. "But you were also sick and people don't always act like themselves when they're sick. So that's why I'm going to go easy on you and not use the paddle I made yesterday."

Her eyes widened and she twisted her head back to look at him. "P-paddle?"

"That's right. That's what I was going to show you tomorrow. After the way you snapped at me, I figured it's only a matter of time before I'll need to put it to good use. But for tonight," he lightly patted her hip with his hand. "Tonight I think this will work just fine. Are you ready?"

She swallowed hard, then nodded.

"Give me your hand."

Nora obediently put her right one back and he took hold of her wrist. It had been over a month since her last trip across his knee, but she hadn't forgotten just how solid and hard his hand felt when it came crashing down on her bare bottom. Since her last spanking, it hadn't softened any, either. The first sharp swat jolted Nora's entire body and her legs kicked up. The hand he held shot open, then clenched back in a tight fist again. She panted twice, then held her breath and braced herself for the rest.

"Relax your bottom," he told her, and waited patiently for both cheeks to ease back into round softness. "Remember, you asked for this."

"I plead insanity," she whimpered. The place he'd struck already stung, and she knew it would feel a whole lot worse before it was over.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked mildly.

Nora nodded, but then shook her head. "Please don't give me the choice, Tom. I-I'll lose my nerve."

"All right." His hand gently rubbed the spot he'd spanked, easing the sting before cruelly laying a rapid barrage of hardy smacks that darted from cheek to cheek, unerringly swatting the lowest curve of her bottom just above her thighs over and over again.

Nora cried out at the third resounding crack of his palm on her tender skin, but then managed to hold herself quiet until the end, when a strangled groan squeezed itself through her gritted teeth. Already his hand was igniting a slow burning sensation, the pink flush easily seen in the dying fire's light where he spanked her, and she was grateful when he stopped. Gasping, she blinked her eyes rapidly to keep her tears from falling. Was it over?

"Relax your bottom," he told her.

Relax her. . .? She half-sobbed, wiggling on his lap as though trying to roll over, but his arm tightened around her waist and his grip on her wrist grew firm. "I can't!"

"You can and you will. Relax them now."

Again he waited until she obeyed and his palm began another rapid-fire assault on the blushing mounds that bounced and juddered with each swat. Only this time he didn't stop after only fifteen. His open palm rose and fell in a strong, tireless rhythm that turned the sting into an ache and the burn into a raging bonfire.

Her efforts at taking all this with some semblance of bravery and silence broke with a frantic, "Oh please! Ow! Owie! Stop, Tom, stop! I-I can't do this--"

Mercifully, his warm hand came to rest on the red-hot surface of her bottom. He rubbed gently. "I'm going easy on you, honey."

Nora lost the battle to her tears. Her gasps turned to loud sobs mid-breath. "It hurts so--so much!"

"It's supposed to."

"You're killing me!" she wept.

"I'm spanking you," Tom corrected. He gave her bottom a final, gentle rub. "Let's finish this up."

As the cabin bedroom filled with the sharp report of hand meeting bare flesh, the sound mingled with Nora's frantic wails. The hand he wasn't holding gripped his leg for comfort as she kicked and flailed. She tried to roll off his knee, but he held her easily and his broad palm never once missed its target.

The second she drooped limply over his thighs in accepting submission, it was over. No final fury of harder than normal slaps. No last minute lecture. His hand just stopped and he let her slid from his knees.

Nora immediately launched herself into his arms, crawling back on his lap to cling to him one-armed, even as she clutched at her red-hot bottom. "I'm s-s-sorry!"

"I know." He rocked her as she cried, her face buried against his chest. Now and then he kissed her forehead, and eventually her sobs eased into hiccups and breathy gasps. "Feel better?"

She sniffled. "If I ever ask you to do that again, assume I'm crazy and don't really mean it." She gingerly touched her burning, throbbing backside with gentle fingertips. "Do I have any bottom left at all? Oh, it feels like you've smacked it clean off me!"

He chuckled. "It's still there. Trust me."

She wiped the lingering tears from her face with the back of her wrist, then sniffed again and glanced up at him in the darkness through her damp lashes. She cleared her throat. "Tom?"

"Hm?"

"Did I wear you out?"

"Do you need more spanking?" He took hold of her arm as if to draw her back face-down across his lap.

"No!" Nora grabbed his hand, and he stopped. "No! I just meant. . .I-I want you to. . .I mean if you're not too tired. . .you could hold me and maybe. . .if you wanted to. . .we could--"

"Fool around?" he suggested.

"Make love," she finished. "If you're not too tired."

Tom smiled. He held up the blankets for her in silent invitation. "Being a tyrannical dictator does have its benefits, doesn't it?"

Chapter Six

Though her fever was gone and for the most part she felt better, mad dash runs to the outhouse became near-daily occurrences. Christmas almost came and went without notice, except that for dinner Tom shot three white winter rabbits, which they ate grilled with a couple baked potatoes and, after two months of bear, it was a delicious change of menu.

He also presented her with a gift: a cradle, which he'd built from scratch. It was beautiful, the perfect bed for a newborn, with thin, flat bars and bowed slats beneath the feet for rocking. He'd carved a doe and fawn venturing from a woodland setting near the top of the headboard, and Nora ran her fingers lightly over the true-to-life picture. It was the first time either of them had openly acknowledged what had by now become painfully obvious. It wasn't just the stomach flu. Nora was pregnant.

"I didn't get you anything," she finally said softly, trying not to cry.

"You make me a cheesecake," Tom said. "And we'll call it good."

He put the cradle in the corner of the bedroom, and then they had dinner. It wasn't until he stoked the fire for the night, blew out the lamp, and climbed into bed behind her, pulling her back to spoon up against him, that they talked.

"Are you going to have it here, you think?" he asked.

Nora shook her head no. "I'm due in July or August, I think."

"Is it mine?"

"Would you let me stay if I said yes?" she asked, staring straight ahead at the wall.

After a moment, Tom said, "No. As soon as the mountains clear, you're going home."

"Then there's no reason to talk about it." She closed her eyes, determined to sleep. And though he held her all night, she felt very much apart and alone.

* * * * *

Nora woke the next morning in the bunk by herself. She listened but couldn't hear the now familiar sound of his axe busily splitting logs outside, nor could she hear him moving around in the cabin.

The bed creaked a little as she rolled over and from the front room she heard Tom call, "Wait a minute. Don't sit up yet. Just lay back and I'll be there in a minute."

Not wanting to get up anyway, knowing she'd only be sick when she did, Nora obediently lay back on the pillows and waited for him. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms and yawned. A moment later, the heavy tramp of his boots crossed the outer room's floor and he came down the short hall to the bedroom door.

At first Nora couldn't tell what it was he carried in his hand. Bread? Brown and white like a tortilla, it was as thick as a pancake, but more spongy looking than a pita.

He sat down on the edge of the bottom bunk, half facing her as he tore a piece off and held it out to her. "Here. Try some of this."

"What is it?" She took the piece, turning it over in her fingers.

"Flat bread," he said. He gestured for her to try it. "Go on. Mostly it's made of flour. Tastes a little bland, but it might help with the morning sickness."

Fully anticipating having to run for the porch, Nora put the bread in her mouth. There was almost no smell to it, and he was right, it did taste bland, but her stomach didn't instantly rebel.

Tom broke off another small piece, though he waited a moment or two before giving it to her. Slowly, he said, "I remember when my mother was pregnant with Justin. Seemed like she was sick from start to finish all day long. She used to say if she let her stomach get too empty, that's when it was the

worst. So she kept crackers by her bed and would take a couple every morning just before she got up." He turned his head to look at her. "How's your stomach feel?"

"A little queasy," Nora admitted. "But I don't feel like I'm about to throw up, so I guess I'm fine."

Bracing his forearms on his knees, Tom fed her one small piece at a time, giving her stomach plenty of time to settle down in between bites. "Justin was thirteen when mom died and I dragged him up here. I had an uncle in Ontario would have taken him, but he was my brother. I thought the responsibility was mine. We didn't have much money, but the country up here was so beautiful. It just called to me. And of course, the fact that they were pulling silver and gold from the ground like it wouldn't ever stop didn't hurt, either." The corners of his mouth turned ruefully upwards. "It sure beat flipping burgers."

Nora smiled a little and curled onto her side as she listened to him.

"I put every penny we had into forty acres of half-frozen ground, a couple of shovels and some camping equipment. The first few years, we used to bet each other what would get us that winter: the freezing temperatures or starvation. Morbid, I know, but that poor tent had more patches than a devoted boy scout's merit sash and you should have seen us trying to hunt." Tom whistled as he shook his head once.

"That bad?" she asked, half laughing.

"Whatever you're imagining, double it. Yeah, we were that bad. But we were also stubborn and we stuck it out for three years before we accidentally stumbled onto a neighboring mine. The miner happened to be home at the time. You think I'm cranky." Tom smiled and chuckled. "Luvy Belle was the absolute roughest, toughest, crotchetyest old miner up here; I swear she just about killed the both of us. She also had a heart of pure as sunshine gold, and took pity on us. She showed us what to do, where to dig." He handed Nora another piece of the flat bread and said, "How's your stomach now?"

"I'm okay," Nora said.

"I love mining," Tom continued softly, staring at his hands. "I love the peace and quiet up here, and the hard work that wears a body out. Maybe Justin liked it, too. I'm not really sure." He shook his head, half shrugging his massive shoulders. "But he was also a kid. He always used to talk about girls, cars, and what he was going to do when we struck it rich. He wanted to go to Texas. He had this thing about cowboys. He wanted to be one so badly, if he could have found a way to keep a horse alive through the winter, we'd've had one."

She cushioned her head on her arm and smiled at his back. "Davy Crockett, Clint Eastwood, and John Wayne."

Tom flashed her a quick grin. "I haven't been up here so long that I don't know who they are. And yes, that was Justin. For eight years, all he ever talked about was roping, bronco busting, and cow punching. I never have been able to figure out why anyone would want to punch a cow. Poor dumb creatures. Sounds cruel to me."

When Nora laughed, he shook his head again. Then his smile slowly faded and his expression sobered. "Then one morning I wake up and his bunk's already empty. The house was so quiet I assumed he was either out doing chores or hunting up breakfast. I guess he'd got up in the night and gone out to the bathroom." Tom got quiet, picking at what was left of the flat bread in his hands before handing the remainder to her and brushing the crumbs from his fingers. "The parts of him the bear didn't eat, I found half buried under leaves and snow. Wouldn't have happened had he been in Ontario. He'd be on some ranch in Texas right now, riding horses or showing off in a rodeo, if I'd let him grow up in Ontario."

He said it flatly, painstakingly emotionless, though every muscle in his body seemed to tense as he spoke.

"Oh no, Tom." Morning sickness forgotten, Nora rolled onto her knees. She reached for him, wrapping her arms around his chest and holding him as close as she could. "It's not your fault. It's not."

He didn't soften, and he didn't look at her. "When the ground thaws, I'll go back to mining. For as long as there's daylight, I'll dig, and at night, I'll live in a tent with bare bones necessities until the

season ends and the ground freezes again. I won't come back to the cabin until the first snow falls. I wish you could stay with me, Nora. But I can't leave you here by yourself, and a mining camp is dangerous enough for an adult. For a baby--" He shook his head. "You don't belong up here any more than Justin did. I'm sending you home where you'll be safe."

She hugged him tightly. "Because it happened to Justin, that doesn't mean it'll happen to me."

"Damn straight. I won't let it." He stood up, and she had no choice but to let him go. "When the thaw comes, I'm driving you back to Keno. I'll set up an account for you and the baby. I'll put money in it every year, I promise. Maybe you could send me some pictures now and then, so I'll know you guys are okay..."

"Tom..."

"I've got work to do. The wood won't cut itself." He headed for the door.

"Wait," Nora followed. But dressed in only a shirt, when he threw open the front door, the cold sent her scrambling for the fireplace and the protective warmth of the bear skin rug between her prancing bare feet and the suddenly icy wooden floor.

Without looking back, he quietly closed the door, and her shoulders sagged in defeat.

* * * * *

New Year's Eve was crowned by two events. The first was the neon green and yellow lights of the Aurora Borealis, which more than made up for a lack of fireworks, champagne and confetti at midnight. Funny how quickly she was getting used to life in the middle of nowhere.

Warmly wrapped in a blanket and Tom's strong arms, she stood on the front porch, gazing up at the lights through the softly falling snow and her own fogging breath. How many more of these magnificent displays would she witness before she had to leave, she wondered. And she watched the rippling lights until the cold had permeated every inch of her, wanting commit every detail to memory. Even those details that had absolutely nothing at all to do with the Northern Lights: the strength of Tom's arms, the beating of his heart strong against her back, the masculine smell of him, unadulterated by aftershave or cologne, enhanced by the natural leather of his coat, one he'd made himself. She wished he could just hold her like this forever, but when her legs began to shake and her teeth to chatter, he made her go inside.

The second event was significantly less grand. Once more, Tom pulled out his leather working tools. He punched two more holes in Justin's old belt: one notch to suit her current needs, and one notch to grow into.

Apparently, that was all the encouragement her stomach needed, because within two weeks, she'd outgrown both holes and no longer needed help holding her jeans up. By the end of January, however, she was back in the belt, this time to keep Tom's pants up around her hips now that she couldn't get Justin's fastened over the girth of her ever-expanding belly.

"Gotta grow sometime," was the only comment Tom made, while Nora crossed her fingers, pleading a mental mantra of, "Please let there be only one! Please let there be only one!"

The second week of February saw its first relatively warm day since the fall. By afternoon, the temperatures had climbed high enough to start the snow melting. Icieles wept along the edge of the cabin's roof, and Nora wasn't far behind them. The melting snow was just one more reminder that her time with Tom growing shorter by the day.

She walked a few steps down off the porch, bending to scoop up a gloveful of snow. She loosely packed it between her hands as she strolled over to where Tom was chopping wood by the outbuildings. Though it didn't seem that warm to her, he'd removed his coat and his shirt was unbuttoned down the front, showing the white thermals underneath.

She stopped about thirty feet behind him, thinking. She supposed she probably ought to. With the snow melting, the opportunity wasn't going to be open to her for very much longer.

She waited quietly while he swung his axe, splitting the log he'd set up on the block. And as he tossed the two halves on top of the pile he'd built, she said, "Hey, Tom?"

"Yeah?" He straightened, turning to her expectantly.

And she hit him square in the chest with the loosely packed snowball. Having grown up the only girl in a neighborhood of eleven kids, she'd gotten real good at throwing snowballs. Good to see she hadn't lost the knack.

Tom looked down at his chest in surprise, then up at her. Neither one of them moved.

"The devil made me do it," Nora said solemnly.

He arched a dark brow. "That so?" When she nodded, he said, "Well, I know a sure-fire remedy for those pesky demonic influences."

When he bent down to pick up a freshly cut strip of kindling--about a foot long, two inches wide and menacingly flat--Nora turned and ran for the cabin. She shrieked when he caught her. One of her over-sized gloves flew from her hand as he lifted her off the snowy ground and twirling her in the air, landing three playful swats to the seat of her jeans. Though they weren't hard enough to hurt, that first smack stiffened Nora in his arms and she shouted.

"What happened?" Tom put her down immediately and his hand went to her belly. "Did I hurt you?"

She stared up at him, nervous and unsmiling. "Are--are you mad at me? I was trying to be cute, not make you angry."

His dark brows came crashing down over his eyes. "I'm not angry. Why do you think I'm angry?"

She looked down at the kindling plank in his hand, and in a small voice, said, "But you spanked me."

"It doesn't always have to be for punishment, does it?"

She couldn't imagine anyone suffering through one for the fun of it. Her expression must have said as much because Tom's eyes began to smolder and his mouth turned up in a slow smile. Drawing her gently to him, he let the kindling drop to the snow. He cupped her bottom in both hands, squeezing and lifting her up by the plump curves as he kissed her face, his lips caressing each cheek, the tip of her nose, her lips.

"Maybe we should experiment," he said huskily. He lay a single, warm swat to the center of her right buttock, jolting her hips and bringing them into contact with his.

Though too light to hurt, Nora still gasped, particularly when he moved his hips into the cradle of hers suggestively.

"Did that hurt?" he asked, softly rubbing the place he'd so gently spanked.

She bit her bottom lip, smiling in spite of her earlier unease. She shook her head no, and he swatted her again, only marginally harder, his long fingers following the curve of her bottom to lightly slap between her thighs. The jolt had her grabbing his shoulders. She closed her eyes, unable to keep from shivering at the sensation that overwhelmed her.

His smile turned knowing. "How about that?"

Her legs began to shake in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. "No," she quavered.

"Go in the house," he told her, laying another jolting swat over the last. "Take off all your clothes. I'll be up as soon as I put the axe away."

"All my clothes?" she asked dubiously.

"All of them."

"I'm not taking all my clothes off, Tom." It was bad enough she had to see her Buddha belly, she didn't want him looking at it, too.

"Yes, you will," he said, punctuating each word with a slightly harder than the last swat, his fingers catching her just right and quickly turning her gasps into soft pants. "You can do what I tell you

and we'll have some fun. Or you can get a sore bottom first, then do what I tell you and then have our fun on an already tender little tush. See how that works? I say 'jump' and you say...?"

"How high," she sighed.

"Good girl," he murmured against her lips.

Why, oh why did she have to feel his kisses all the way to her toes? Nora melted in his embrace, feeling almost boneless as he caressed her through her jeans. Boneless and quivering and melting in the snow as she decided that he could spank her like this all day long, if that's what he wanted.

But as she slipped her arms around his shoulders, she suddenly felt his body stiffen. He broke the kiss, raising his head to look at the woods to the west.

All but writhing against him, her body thrumming with the desire his touch evoked, Nora caressed his face and wished that she were taller so she could reclaim his mouth on her own. "Tom?"

He held up a hand, shushing her. He turned his head slowly, listening, and though she couldn't hear anything beyond the soft breeze, the creak of snow-laden trees and the muted call of a hunting owl, the cold look that crept over Tom's features effectively killed the coiling desire inside her.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Why are you looking like that?"

Tom grabbed her arm and hurried with her to the nearest of the three outbuildings. Nora didn't fight him as he pushed her none too gently to her side on the floor underneath his work bench. He threw a half-cured pelt over the top of her--the bear that had nearly killed her four months ago. The hide was cold, stiff, and it stunk, and Nora immediately tried to throw it back off.

"Ugh!"

Tom tucked the pelt forcibly back around her, pushing her down as he said, "Stay down and be quiet!"

His footsteps retreated out of the building just as her ears picked up the whine of an engine. If she didn't know better, Nora would almost have thought the sound to be that of a motorcycle.

* * * * *

Tom stomped from the outbuilding. Where the hell was his gun? He made a quick grab for the door, not stopping as he swung it closed behind him. The latch didn't catch and the door bounced open again, but the snowmobile had already cleared the line of trees, heading straight for his cabin. Tom barely reached the rifle that was leaning against the side of another building not far from the chopping block.

There were only three miners that Tom knew of who'd opted to throw their hard earned money away on such a luxury vehicle. Two were known claim jumpers and thieves, and to receive a mid-winter visit from them generally meant they'd run out of something and wanted yours without the inconvenience of having to go all the way to town. Either man Tom would have shot on sight and not thought twice about. But the rider of the vehicle speeding its way to him, he recognized as Will Keaton, a relatively new miner who'd only been working his land for the last seven years or so.

Tom walked a short distance from Nora's hiding place, not wanting the man anywhere near her. He took aim with the rifle, but didn't hoist it to his shoulder. He'd be neighborly and hold his fire until he found out what the hell Will wanted.

Slowing the snowmobile, Will coasted to a stop a good ten yards from Tom. He was a grizzled old man, older than Tom with a thick blonde bush of a beard that was streaked with grey and hung mid-way down his chest. When he'd first come to Keno, the rumor had been that he was running from U.S. authorities. That in and of itself was nothing special, since half the miners up here were likely running from something. But as Will pulled his coat hood back off his shaggy head and shook flecks of ice and snow from his beard, Tom kept his rifle steadily trained on him.

"You gonna shoot me, Tom?" he asked, making no effort to get off the snowmobile.

"Depends on what you're here after."

Will grinned and shook his head. "Don't want nothin' from you, son. This here's a social call."

"You always bring a firearm to make your social calls?" Tom growled, looking pointedly at the scoop rifle slung across the other man's back.

"There's scarier things than you up here," Will said, then chuckled faintly. "Though not by much, I'll wager."

Tom frowned. "Say your piece and get the hell off my land."

"Fair enough. I was just comin' by to tell you about the excitin' winter we've all had."

"That so?" His gun didn't waver.

"Yes, sir." Will nodded, removing his glove just long enough to flick snow from his ear. "Seems we got us a missin' tourist. Been all over the news, not that you've seen it, I know. Some American woman that was visitin' Keno with her boyfriend a couple months back. She up and disappeared, and next thing U.S. authorities knew, that young fella of her's was drawin' money off her bank account, pawnin' everythin' of value in her place o' residence and tryin' to sell her car."

A faint muffled protest came from the outbuilding and Tom's mouth tightened. The important thing was Will didn't seem to have heard it. Or at least, he made no indication if he had.

"Boyfriend says he left her alive," the older man continued, still smiling, his piercing blue eyes locked on Tom's face. "But no one in Keno saw the girl after he left, and when he stopped for gas in Elsa, he was alone. Mounties figure he musta done her somewhere along the six mile stretch between towns. They found blood and hair on the bumper of her car and in the hotel room where they stayed. Forensics. Scary stuff that. Did you know they can now find spilled blood even after it's been washed up?"

"Scary," Tom echoed flatly.

"Anyway," Will continued blithely. "The boyfriend's bein' charged, but the interestin' thing—" he held up a mittened finger, "—the interestin' thing is the missin' woman's worried mama. She's put up a reward for any information leadin' to her darlin' daughter's recovery."

"So?" Tom growled, raising the rifle a little. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Twenty grand. Cash." Will smiled again. "Ain't that somthin'?"

"That's a lot of money," Tom acknowledged.

"Damn straight." Will leaned back on the snowmobile, his blue gaze casually sweeping from Tom to the cabin as he said, "Laws been crawlin' all over the place, lookin' for her remains."

"My place isn't on the way to Elsa. He didn't chuck her body in my front yard, if that's what you're looking for."

"Naw, course not." Will laughed and his eyes swept back to Tom. "I'm just passin' the news along. Folks say you was in town same day they was leavin'. You didn't happen to see somethin', did you? They got her picture plastered up everywhere." He whistled. "Right fine looker, that woman."

"My sociable limit's been reached," Tom said. "Feel free to leave."

"One more question, then." Will scratched his chin through his beard. "When you come to town, you didn't happen to pick you up a little more than groceries, did you? Maybe you got you a winter guest, tucked up here all nice and comfortable? Can hardly blame a guy for that. Regular little trouser itcher, that one."

Tom took the safety off, cocking the rifle and raising it to his shoulder. "Good bye, Will."

The older man's smile hardly faded. "Suit yourself then." He pulled his hood back over his head and drew the cords, tightening the fabric close around his face. Just before he turned the key to start the engine, he called out, "Where's your third hand?"

When Will pointed, Tom looked down at Nora's glove, lying plain as could be on top of the snow not six feet from the front porch steps.

Aw, hell.

"Bye, Tom." Will grinned. Turning his snowmobile, he headed back for the trees, and Tom followed him with the Winchester until the woods had swallowed him up. And though he couldn't see the man, he didn't lower the rifle until the whine of the snowmobile's engine was a distant, distant sound.

He released a pent in breath, lowering the Winchester and swearing at the same time. He grabbed the glove out of the snow and stalked back towards the outbuilding.

Nora threw off the hide, crying, "Twenty thousand dollars?! My mom can't afford twenty thousand dollars!"

"Get in the cabin," Tom told her, staring uneasily in the direction the other man had gone. But Nora wasn't paying attention. "She must have sold everything she owned to come up with that!"

"Get in the house, Nora," Tom snapped again.

"I've got to talk to her!" She grabbed the front of his coat in her urgency. "Why did I have to hide? Who was that man? Why didn't you want him to know I was here?"

Gritting his teeth, Tom took hold of her arm and hustled her all the way back to the cabin. "You remember the miners I told you about, the ones that might not let you get to Keno in one piece? Well, that was one of them. Get inside." He propelled her up the porch steps, flung open the door and pushed her into the living room. "From now on, you're grounded."

"Grounded?" Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "I'm sorry, do I look twelve to you? You can't ground me!"

As if she had someplace to go.

He shut the door on her objection, but as he retreated back off the porch, Nora came charging back outside.

"You arrogant, stubborn, pig-headed mountain man!" Nora shouted after him. "You can't tell me what to do! This is important! He had a snowmobile! He could have taken me into town!"

"And bilked your mother out of twenty grand you say she doesn't have," he snapped back over his shoulder.

"What do you care? You don't want me here! You can't wait to get rid of me so you can go back to your precious mine--"

He rounded on her like a wounded bear, his face dark, his eyes flashing angrily as he stalked rapidly towards her. The change in him was frightening. Fleeing back into the cabin, Nora slammed the door and pressed herself flat against it. As though that could stop him. Twenty men pressed up against this door probably couldn't stop him, and her fervent prayer that he wouldn't keep coming exploded into a shouted, near-hysterical four-letter word when she heard his boots stomp back up the steps.

She had to hide!

She searched the near barren room with wide eyes, her gaze falling on the as yet unchristened 'Naughty Nora's' paddle hanging on a coat hook on the wall next to her. She grabbed it off the hook, panicking as his hard footfalls pounded across the porch. He wasn't stopping. He was coming straight for her.

She darted for the fireplace but lost her nerve just one quick toss away from throwing the paddle into it. She spun to face the door just as he stalked inside, helpless to do anything else but hide the paddle ineffectively behind her back. He didn't stop at the door and she all but burst into tears as he stalked right up to her.

"I'm sorry," she quavered, her bottom crawling with dread.

He grabbed her shoulders and yanked her up against him. He kissed her, hard, his mouth conquering hers with bruising intensity.

"Jump," he snarled as he drew back.

"How high?" she squeaked tearfully.

"You remember that." He let go of her and headed for the door, pausing just once in the threshold. He stared at the wall, then glared back at her over his shoulder. "Lady, you've got five seconds to put that paddle back where it belongs. Five...Four..."

Nora darted to the pegs. Her hands fumbled clumsily with the paddle until she got it hung back on its empty hook, but the second she let go, she watched in dismay as Tom promptly took it down again. Before she could move, he had her tucked under his arm and bent over his hip.

Nora grabbed his leg. "But I put it back! No, Tom! Please, no no no!"

She shouted out at the first crisp smack that walloped across the seat of her jeans. On two, she burst into tears, and it was all over six more later.

"Don't you ever try to hide this from me again," he growled.

"N-no, I won't! I promise I won't!" While Nora held her bottom with both hands, sobbing and stomping her feet, Tom replaced the paddle on its hook. He gave her one more stern look and left, shutting the door hard between them.

Nora had her jeans down within seconds. She craned her head, pulling her coat and shirt up out of the way, trying to see the damage. She was blistered, she just knew she was!

Wilting against the wall, she clutched a blazing hot bottom cheek in each hand and tried to stop crying. How grounded, she wondered, was 'grounded' when she had no place to go?

Chapter Seven

Apparently 'grounded' in mountain man terms meant more than just a loss of television and phone privileges. Because of Will, Nora was now forbidden to go outside, not even to go to the bathroom or to stand on the porch, without Tom right by her side. And wherever he went, his Winchester rifle went with him, loaded and cocked, carried slung over one arm like a mother cradled her infant, from the moment he opened the front door and preceded Nora out into the snow, until the earliest possible second when he safely shut her back up inside. With the front door locked.

Always locked.

Whether Tom was inside or not, and most assuredly, one hundred percent, make damn good and sure it was locked when he was outside, without excuse or exception, under pain of extreme paddling, as she discovered the very first time she accidentally forgot. That spanking had been right up there on par with her episode with the bear. Only this time he used the paddle instead of his hand.

Being pregnant hadn't spared her one bit, either, although he did give it some consideration. When he took her over his lap, he spread his knees wide enough apart for her belly to fit comfortably between and his arm around her waist had been as much for extra back support as it had been to hold her in place while he totally, thoroughly, resoundingly blistered her backside. She had literally been unable to sit for two days; the bruises had lasted for ten. But from that moment on, she followed him to the door, locked it behind him, and didn't unlock it again until he pounded to be let in.

She was in Hell. A snow-bound, backwoods, Canadian version of a pre-electric dark age, and she hated it.

She couldn't wait for the spring thaw to finally get here.

She couldn't wait to go home.

And all she had to do was keep telling herself that, and maybe by the time the mountain pass became traversable, she'd believe it. Because as it stood right now, despite the snow and the cold and the remote location, despite the spankings and the corner time, and even despite the arrogant, stubborn, unsociable, hard-headed, pig-headed, bull-headed...there just weren't enough heads on enough cantankerous animals to describe him--badger! That was a good one--ornery old badger of a mountain man, every time she thought about going home, she found herself in tears.

"It's just hormones," she told Tom, when he woke up one night to discover her crying. "Shut up. Go away. Leave me alone."

He shut up, but that was about as accommodating as he intended to be. Because instead of going away and leaving her alone, he spooned up against her back, enveloped her in his arms and held her close all night. She felt like a whale trying to be hugged by a sea lion. Well, okay, he was a mighty big sea lion, and in comparison she was a pretty small whale. A small and somewhat desirable whale, apparently. There was nothing quite like waking up in the morning to the feel of him sliding into her from behind, his hand caressing from her breasts to her belly, his hot mouth nibbling the shell of her ear and whispering how much he wanted her.

If only they could just stay in bed all the time. Snow could fall deep enough to cover the eaves of the roof and the world could stop turning. Then it would be just the two of them, alone in the Yukon. She'd miss her mother, but at least she'd never have to leave Tom.

But like her mood, her attitude on that seemed to change frequently. And those changes usually happened about the time that she had to use the bathroom. This sudden and, she thought, needless requirement of his that she submit to an armed escort to and from the outhouse was really beginning to grate on her. At first she tried to be accepting. Tom said jump, she said how high. That was just the way it was up here.

But as one week dragged into two and Tom showed absolutely no signs of putting an end to the escorts, her irritation began to get the best of her. And it didn't help any that every few minutes now it seemed she had to go to the bathroom. What was worse, Tom spent the majority of his mornings outside. Since she was forbidden to leave the house, even for just the second or two that it would take to poke her head out the door and call his name, Tom developed a system, directing her to hang a red bandana out the West-facing window and wait for him to notice. So what should have been a quick jaunt to the outhouse and back, quickly became, to Nora, a major fiasco.

"I don't see why I can't just dart out and dart back," she said in exasperation one morning. She was six months along, but already her stomach was huge and struggling to put her socks and shoes on was as challenging as any Olympic event. She could all but hear the voice of the announcer ringing in her ears as she struggled to bend herself in half: "And it's the American contender, Naughty Nora, on the bearskin rug! She's managed to hook the top of her kneesock with her big toe and is fighting to get the other four into the hole; can she do it? She's grunting, she's straining, she's turning red in the face and...NO! Nora's flat on her back, panting and wheezing! She can't even find her feet!"

"Here." Kneeling before her, Tom took the sock from her fingers, bunching the cotton tubing in his hand before gently working it over her foot. "You can't because I said so, and that's all the reason you need."

"I need more reason than that, Tom," she grumbled, glaring up at the ceiling while he got her second sock on and reached for her shoes.

"Not unless I say you do."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

"That's a self-serving excuse."

He tied her sneakers. "It certainly is."

"When does it get to be because I say so?" she huffed.

"It doesn't."

"Because you say so?"

"Exactly."

"Only a man can come up with reasoning like that."

He took hold of her hands and pulled her up on her feet, then helped her into her coat. "Ready?"

"Desperately ready," she grumbled back. "I'm going to pee my pants if you don't hurry up."

He got his gun and unlocked the front door.

The icicles were gone, the last having fully melted some days ago and the temperatures were rising daily. Already this morning the air felt like it was in the mid to upper thirties, the sky was blue and cloudless, and a constant drip-drip-dripping could be seen all along the roof's edge. The snow on the ground was still a good foot and a half deep in places, but spots of grass could be seen in the path that Tom had cleared from the porch steps to the outhouse on the right and to the three outbuildings to their left.

Because she was so irritated, Nora broke formation and stomped down the steps in front of Tom. Eyes on the ground so she wouldn't accidentally lose her footing, she waddled down the right hand path away from the house.

"This mutinous attitude of yours is starting to get old," Tom warned from behind her. "I suggest you abandon it by the outhouse before you come back."

Nora paused to glare back over her shoulder at him. 'You can't make me,' was on the tip of her tongue, but she managed to bite that back. She wasn't stupid. She knew very well he could make her, and the current method of choice was hanging on its peg just inside the door. Though once called 'Naughty Nora's', it had since been renamed. Now known as 'Arch Nemesis,' but Nora fully intended to rename it

yet again just before she left for the states. It would then be 'Kindling,' and she was going to enjoy watching it burn.

Just the thought of reducing Arch Nemesis to a blackened lump of charred wood was enough to bring a small smile to her lips. She turned to continue her trek to the outhouse when she heard a quick firecracker-like pop behind her. Only a few steps from the porch, Tom jerked, back arching, and Nora spun in time to see his knees sagging as he staggered one step closer to her. Then his rifle slipped from his hands and his head cracked against the porch steps as he fell backwards into the snow.

"Ohmigod, Tom!" Nora ran back to him, her legs collapsing out from under her in shock when she saw his blood both on the porch where he'd hit in his head and slowly discoloring the snow around his left shoulder. She scrambled on hands and knees back to his side. "Ohmigod!"

There was a bloody hole in his coat just below his shoulder, near his arm and he wasn't moving.

"Tom?" She touched his chest lightly, then looked up, eyes wide, scanning back along the tree line. But the danger was much closer. A brown lump separated itself from the split logs stacked up along the wall of the woodshed as Will stood up. He held his rifle at his waist, loose by ready to fire as he started walking towards her.

Nora looked down at Tom, his face growing paler as his blood spilled into the snow around his shoulder and now around his head as well, a scarlet-colored halo that was rapidly melting the snow. Was he breathing? She couldn't tell, and she panicked.

"Go away!" she shouted, but Will kept coming, steadily closing the gap, and her head snapped down as she desperately looked around her.

Tom's rifle lay where he'd dropped it, half fallen in snow, and Nora dived for it, her extended belly making her awkward as she came up on her knees and pointed it at him. She'd never held a gun before in her life. Her hands--her whole body--shook, and the figure of the armed man coming at her blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't you come any closer!"

Will stopped less than twenty feet away. He didn't lower his rifle. "You've chunked out some from the picture they been showin' on the news."

Now what? Her mind raced. Nora took a quick swipe at her eyes with the back of one mitten, but she still couldn't see straight and she grabbed hold of Tom's rifle with both hands again. More frightened than she had ever been in her life, she knelt in the cold snow at Tom's feet, panting as though she'd run a minute-mile and watched in desperation as Will gestured at her with the end of his own gun.

"You know," Will said, and he smiled conversationally, as though he hadn't just shot a man. "Folks already think you're dead. Don't make no never mind to me how you want to play this out. If'n you put down the gun and say what I tell you to, I'll take you home. Collect my reward." His teeth flashed white against his cold-weather-tanned face. "Or you can be stupid, and you can try and take a shot. Shakin' as you are, you'll more 'n likely miss, and I'll kill you n' your baby as dead as, well..." Will looked down at Tom and flashed his teeth in another smile. "Him."

Her eyes flicked down to the gun he still held low at his waist, still pointed at her and Tom.

"Like I said, folks already think you're dead. I can jus' leave you lyin' in the snow. Let the critters scatter you about another month or so. All I need's your skull and they can pretty much say it's you by your teeth, which is about all what'll be left in one piece once the wolves and bears get done with you." Will nodded at her, and though still smiling, it didn't seem quite as cordial as before. "Your choice, lady."

Nora pulled the trigger.

The recoil from the Winchester knocked her flat on her back in the snow and for a moment she lay there stunned, blinking up at the blue sky, panting and sobbing both, the sudden noise having started her baby into a flurry of kicking within her. She half-expected him to shoot her now, too, but there was no third rifle report. Just a murder of crows screaming in warning as they abandoned the treetops and took flight for safer and quieter surroundings.

Nora lifted her head and rolled onto her side, clumps of snow falling from her hair as she rose awkwardly. Will lay sprawled in his back, his rifle a short distance from his right hand. Bullets weren't any harder to aim than snowballs, and she'd hit him square in the chest. One leg twitched and he flexed his right hand, making a long, wet rattling sound as he exhaled. Bloody bubbles popped up around his mouth and drops of it began to trickle from the corners of her lips, sideways down his cheeks before disappearing into the hood of his coat.

Nora made herself look away. She crawled back to Tom, her shaking hands waging war with her mittens until she could get them off and feel for his pulse. There it was. Slow, but strong.

What now?

She looked over at Will even as she struggled to her feet. Grabbing Tom under his arms, she slowly and laborious dragged him back up the porch steps. She was panting, her back aching and her limbs shaking by the time she heaved him back through the front door.

She went back outside to get Tom's Winchester, which she'd left in the snow, then crept towards Will. He still lay where she'd dropped him, his eyes wide and staring up at the sky, blood crusting around his lips, no longer making any noises. She'd killed him. She'd killed a man. Her stomach clenched and she turned her face away. She made a wide circle around the body to get his rifle and she took both into the house. Then she locked the door. Just in case.

"Tom?" She knelt down beside him, touching his ashen face. She felt for his pulse again, still good. Why didn't he wake up? Had he hit his head hard enough to have a concussion? She peeled back one eyelid, but had absolutely no idea what she was looking for. She wasn't a doctor, and a sudden rise in frustration almost had her in tears again. She dug the first-aid kit out from under the kitchen counter instead, and came back to pull him out of his coat and shirt.

When she saw the actual damage, she didn't know whether to be sick to her stomach or relieved that it wasn't worse. A long bloody gash showed where the bullet skimmed his ribs from back to front, before puncturing through the upper biceps of his left arm and leaving a small entrance wound at the back and a larger, ripped wound about the size of a quarter towards the front. The holes were bleeding worse than his ribs, and she quickly applied pressure to stop the flow.

It was while she was struggling to raise his arm above his heart, using the sleeve of his thermals as a bandage to try to slow the bleeding that Tom opened his eyes. She was so focused on trying to stop his blood loss, Nora didn't notice until he said, "My head's killing me."

Her head snapped up. "Tom! Are you okay?"

A corner of his mouth turned upwards and, emphasizing softly, he repeated, "My head is killing me, Nora."

"Do you," the clenching in her stomach suddenly intensified, and she had to swallow hard before continuing. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Not a damn thing."

"I shot...I shot..." Her throat closed up, refusing to let her say it. Her hands shook, and she couldn't see through the sudden flow of tears.

"S'all right," Tom slurred softly. "We'll talk about it later. Can you help me get the bandages on?"

Sniffing, wiping at her eyes and frequently clearing her throat, Nora did her best to clean and bandage the wounds on his arm and ribs. He hissed a breath through his teeth when she turned her attention to the cut that crowned the growing knot forming on his head. She bandaged it, as well, but had a feeling it really needed stitches. The prospect of having to do that made her stomach queasy, but having been immediately submerged in snow had almost stopped the bleeding entirely and so she gave him two aspirin and wrapped his head instead.

Covering him with blankets that she took from their bed, she then added a log to the fire and carefully stoked the flames to keep him from getting cold.

As she put her coat and her mittens back on, she asked, "Are you going to be okay for a while?"

His eyes were beginning to drift closed and he slurred a sluggish, "Where y' goin'?"

"To the bathroom," she quavered, kneeling down to take his pulse again. "Before I wet my pants."

She had to get him to a doctor.

Walking back outside, she couldn't help but glance back over at Will as she stepped down off the porch. Hollywood was horribly betraying. Unlike in the movies, where the bad guy sometimes needed repeated killing before he actually stayed dead, real life was much more fragile and cold. Will's body still lay where she'd left it, sprawled on its back with wide-open eyes staring sightlessly up at the sky. It hadn't moved an inch.

She turned her back and hurried on to the outhouse. The last few steps she ran and barely got the door open and her head over the seat before she threw up.

Instead of going back into the cabin, Nora veered away from the porch steps and made herself walk the short distance out to the body. She took a deep breath as she crouched down slowly beside him. Pulling one mitten from her hand, she touched two trembling fingers to his throat. A dried stream of blood flecked off his skin as she pressed, but there was no pulse.

She blinked rapidly, making a face as she slid her hands down the front of his coat and began to feel inside the pockets. Sunglasses, gum, used handkerchief. Ugh.

She turned her face away and switched from his coat to his jeans. She slid her hand into first his right, then his left pockets, stopping when she found the keys to the snowmobile. She glanced back once at the cabin, then began to follow Will's tracks back through the snow, behind the woodshed, and then towards the not-so-distant tree line.

It took almost an hour and a half to find the snowmobile where Will had left it, parked behind a tree a good four or five miles from Tom's cabin. And because she'd never ridden much less driven one before, it took another twenty minutes to drive it slowly back to the cabin.

Tom was asleep on the floor when she came inside and it was as difficult trying to wake him as it was trying to get him back on his feet. Clumsy and uncoordinated, he leaned on her heavily as they both staggered outside.

"Get a rope," he told her. He sank down to sit on the steps as he mumbled, "I don' think...can hang on...by self."

Nora found a length of rope in the toolshed, as well as a number of tall, red, five-gallon gas cans. She went to grab one on her way back out, but it was empty. She tried several; they were all empty.

Frustration rising, Nora turned in a full circle, her mittened hands flopping limply at her sides like a single flap of a despairing bird's wings. Then her eyes fell on the set of huge fifty gallon insulated drums lined up against the back wall. Experimentally, she tried to rock one, but it didn't budge and Nora immediately began the arduous fight to get the tightly-screwed cap on the top of the drum lid off. The instant she succeeded, the smell of gasoline stung her nose and she quickly capped the drum again.

Snatching a coiled length of hose from the wall, she grabbed one of the five-gallon cans and uncapped it. She inserted as much of the hose into the drum as she could. Covering the other opening with her hand to create a vacuum, she then withdrew the hose and removed her hand as she got it close to the gas can. Fuel poured from the end like water from an open kitchen faucet, dousing both her mittens and one shoe before she managed to get the hose into the mouth of the receptacle.

She ended up syphoning enough gas to fill four cans before pinching off the flow and recapping the drum. Then draping the rope over her shoulder, Nora picked up one heavy can in each hand and waddled back to Tom and the waiting snowmobile.

Sitting on the porch, leaning heavily against a support post, Tom opened his eyes as she drew near. He looked at the gas cans. "Good idea. Where we goin'?"

"I have to get you to a doctor."

"No doctor," he said tiredly, and closed his eyes again. "Stay."

It took just over one can to fill the snowmobile's tank, which overflowed and flooded gas down the side of it. Leaving the empty cans in the yard, Nora went back to get the other two. Those she tied together on the back of the metal cargo grate behind the seat, and hoped to God that her knots were good enough to keep them there.

"It's getting late," Tom said, looking up at the sky as she heaved him back onto his feet. He stumbled two unsteady steps forward, then stopped. "We should stay here."

"We're going to Keno," she said as she helped him get his leg over the back of the snowmobile. "Can you tell me how to get there?"

"South to the mountains, then hang a little West."

"South, then West," Nora repeated. She looked up at the sky, wondering which direction was South.

"Bank the fire."

"What?"

"Bank the fire," Tom said. When he looked at her, it was clear to see he was struggling hard to focus himself. To sit up, too. And his eyes looked funny. But at least he was talking better. "And bring the rifles."

Nora made a worried sound, barely catching him as he sagged forward on the seat of the snowmobile. "My head hurts."

"Hold still," she whispered. "I'll be right back."

She went inside and banked the fire as quickly as she could. She gathered both rifles, safetied them and then, on impulse, stole Arch Nemesis from its wall peg. There wasn't time to get her things or even to take one last farewell look before closing the door. Had she but known when she awoke earlier that morning that the best months of her life, as well as her time with Tom, were destined to end that day, she'd have never gotten out of bed.

* * * * *

Tom fell in and out of consciousness throughout most of the trip. The only reason he stayed on the back of the snowmobile was because Nora tied each of his thighs to hers and wrapped his arms around her waist before tying his wrists in front of her there. They ran out of gas midway through the mountains, which were more like rough hills and steep canyons than real mountains, and Nora was grateful that she'd brought the two extra gas cans with them. But then it got dark, with no town or even a lone house in sight, and Nora got scared.

Hours of unprotected exposure to the cold had burned her face and chapped her lips to the point that they split and bled. Her throat felt scratched raw from breathing the chilly air for so long, and it was getting harder and harder to wake Tom to ask for directions. They had less than an eighth of a tank of gas left when Nora topped a slight hill and saw the distant, winking lights of civilization. She broke down and cried she was so relieved, but that changed quickly to fear when she couldn't get Tom awake at all to share the sight with him.

She coasted into Keno on fumes, stopping at the first building she came to. When she untied Tom's hands and tried to stand up, she found herself unable to do more than merely slow his assent when he sagged off the snowmobile with her and crumpled to the sanded and well-plowed street.

The building looked more like a store than a home, but there was a light burning in the backroom and volume-dampened, muffled music and voices that sounded as though they came from a television or radio could be heard as she ran up the steps. She pounded on the door with both fists, warbling a scratchy, "Help!" that barely sounded like her own voice.

But the music and voices were instantly silenced and a few seconds later, the store lit up completely as a man taller even than Tom, all belly, beard and bush grey eyebrows, stepped out of the back room.

"My--my friend's been hurt," she croaked when he opened the door.

But when the big man looked past her into the street, he all but shoved her out of the way. "Jesus, that's Tom."

The nearest doctor was in Elsa, but the big man didn't send for him. He just tucked Nora out of the way while he cleaned, stitched and re-banded the head and gun shot wounds himself. She watched Hank check Tom's eyes and his pulse, then wrap him in layers of blankets and left him sleeping on a sunken sofa between a giant moose and two elk heads.

"He'll be okay," he told Nora as he wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, too. His eyes held hers steadily. "He's got a bump on the noggin' an' a few bruises, them holes'll patch up and he'll be none the worse fer wear."

"Okay," she said softly.

"Don't worry about him, he'll pull through," the big man grumbled and shrugged into a huge winter coat. He brought in the rifles and, embarrassingly enough, the Naughty Nora's paddle which she'd left on the snowmobile. The firearms he stashed under the payout counter; the paddle he looked at for a moment before handing to her. "He does right good work with his hands, that boy."

But that was all he said, and Nora was a little relieved that she wasn't going to be made to go into any kind of explanation.

"Stay in the back," Hank told her. "Away from them winders. An' keep the T.V. turnt down. I don't want nobody seein' you til I get back."

"Okay," she agreed, and he turned out all the lights in the store, rotating the sign in the window to closed before locking the door and shutting it behind him.

Nora hung back in the shadows, shrouded in her blanket, watching as the big man quietly pushed the snowmobile around the side of the building and out of sight. A few minutes later, a beat-up jeep chugged out of an adjoined garage and headed out of town, back the way she and Tom had come.

The only lights being those shining in the windows from the few other buildings that were sparsely situated around the Mercantile, Nora sat down on a stool behind the convenience counter. Hugging Arch Nemesis to her chest, she shivered a little in the dark. Her eyes fell on an old rotary dial phone that was tucked on a shelf below the cash register.

Reaching down, she lifted it up onto the counter and picked up the receiver. She listened to the dial tone for the longest time before hooking her finger into the plastic plate and calling home.

"Hi, Mom," she said softly, bowing her head as she cradled the receiver to her ear. "Yes, it's me...Yes, I'm all right...Please don't cry, Mom...I'm okay, really, and--and I'm coming home...No, I can't tell you where I am...No, I really am okay...Mom...Mom, I need you to promise you won't tell anyone you've heard from me for a day or so, okay?...No, I mean it, Mom. It's important. You have to promise...It's a long story, but I'll tell you everything just as soon as I get home."

Chapter Eight

The drive from Keno to Seattle was eighteen hundred and three miles in length and took five days. The trip was made infinitely more interesting by the vehicle in which they were carried—a fifty-year old Chevy pickup with more rust than paint. It predated power-steering, and quite possibly predated trilobites, with only am radio reception and no antennae.

Tom insisted on driving, despite the discomfort that caused his arm and his stitched ribs. The sagging front seat did horrible things to Nora's back, although the handful of pillows that Hank sent with them did help relieve the discomfort some. But physically, as well as emotionally, the trip left her feeling brittle. To make matters worse, for the duration of the journey, barely a word was spoken between them. And what little conversation did occur, consisted almost entirely of Tom saying:

"Rest stop ahead. Do you need to go?"

And Nora replying, "Yes."

Or...

"You hungry?"

"No."

Or...

"I'm getting kind of tired. How about if we stop for the night at the next hotel?"

"Okay."

As if by some unspoken agreement, they even slept in separate beds. Nora made it through the first night without bursting into tears. She was very proud of herself for that. She didn't cry the second night, either, although she did come close to breaking down several times. And the next day her bottom lip was swollen and raw, she'd bitten it so often during the night to stop its traitorous wobbling.

On night three, she quietly fell apart and spent a half hour in the bathroom, sobbing into a towel so he wouldn't hear her. It didn't work; Tom was nothing if not observant.

"Your eyes are red," he pointed out when she finally emerged.

Nora crawled into bed. "It's nothing."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Nora--"

"You made your decision," she said woodenly. "You seem pretty comfortable with it. Either that, or I'm real easy to leave."

Tom sat up in his own bed, but Nora rolled onto her side, putting her back to him as she faced the wall.

"What the hell makes you think this is easy for me?" he demanded.

Her bottom lip began to wobble again, but Nora bit it until it stopped. When she could do so without crying, she said, "Good night, Tom."

One minute stretched into two, and then Tom got up. He stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door. She pretended to be asleep when he finally came out again, and she was still awake long after he began to snore.

They spoke even less the next day, and by day five, with only fifty miles left to go before she was home, it was all Nora could do to keep from crying in the truck. They pulled in for gas at a stand-alone station out in the middle of nowhere and Tom bought some Kleenex, along with a little bottle of orange juice and a cup of coffee for himself.

"I told you why this had to happen," he said as he pulled back onto south-bound Highway I-5. "It isn't any easier for me."

Nora stared out the window, ignoring both the Kleenex and the juice. "It doesn't seem all that hard, either."

Tom sprayed gravel, he pulled off the highway onto the soft shoulder so fast. He shut off the engine and got out without a word, slamming the driver's door. A car whizzed past them as he stalked around the front of the truck.

In retrospect, she probably should have tried to lock the door. That look on his face made her stomach clench and her hands itch to cover her backside. Especially when he yanked open the passenger door and grabbed the front of her coat, snapping, "Out."

"No!" she snapped back and grabbed his wrist in both hands, but she couldn't pry his fingers loose. "You don't have the right to spank me any more! You gave up that right when you gave up me!"

"You think so?" He pulled her out of the truck, then turned and bent her over the seat. "I've had about enough of this."

Another car whizzed past them, rocking the truck with the speed of its passing.

"I said no!" Nora shouted, reaching back to slap at his hand, but he only grabbed her wrist.

He tucked her under his left arm and took firm hold of her wrist in his left hand.

"You can't do this! I won't let you!" To her shame, she burst into angry tears. "Damn it, Tom! I mean it! Stop it! Stop right now!"

He wrestled with the fastenings of her jeans, eventually yanking them down despite her shrieks and kicks. "You can let me or not let me all you want to. It's what you deserve that I respond to. Right now, you deserve one hell of a tanning!"

"You son of a--"

The flat of his hand cracked down hard across the center of her right buttock. Nora pushed against the seat and then against him. She tried to twist and buck, kicking and screaming like she hadn't done since the very first time he'd taken her across his knee. It was no more effective now that it had been back then. And in the end, he paddled her backside, mindless to the cars speeding past them on the road, until the smarting pain in her bottom had overwhelmed the pain in her heart and Nora just stopped fighting him.

He only lay a handful of smacks more across the base of her scarlet cheeks, then stopped. He let go of her, backing up a step and rubbing at his hand. "Now, you can rant and rave and kick and shout all you want," he said. "But you're still going home, where you belong."

Nora pushed slowly to her feet, weeping as she pulled her pants back up her legs and over her throbbing bottom.

"This is harder for me than you will ever understand," Tom told her angrily. "You think I don't want you? God damn, woman! I love you!"

"That's bull shit, and you know it!" Nora snapped through her tears. She held the seat of her bottom in her hands and glared at him. "Men don't leave the women they love!"

He grabbed the front of her coat again, and for a moment Nora thought for sure he was going to put her back over the seat.

"I would rather leave you," Tom growled, "and leave you alive, then to risk waking up one morning only to discover I have to start digging your grave. I can't survive losing you the way I lost my brother."

"I'm not Justin!"

His jaw clenched and he let go of the front of her coat. "Get in the truck."

With tears on her face, Nora shook her head once. "Coward. You don't even want to take a chance that we might actually be happy together."

"Get in the car!" He turned and stalked back around to the driver's side.

The thought of suffering even one more minute in the stifling, smothering, heart-breaking silence and anger that reigned in the cab of Hank's truck, was unbearable. With shaking hands, Nora shut the passenger door. Without looking back, she started walking.

Behind her, she heard Tom swear. "Nora," he called after her, his tone a mix of anger and tired resignation. "Get in the truck, Nora. Come on."

Nora half-turned as she heard the fast approach of another car. She stuck out her thumb.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Tom yelled.

The car slowed to a stop beside her, and the passenger window rolled down. "Do you need a ride, honey?" one of the two elderly ladies on the front seat asked.

"Please," Nora said. She didn't even bother to wipe the tears from her face. She just climbed into the backseat.

"Nora!" Tom swore again.

She shut the door and totally fell apart when the little car pulled back onto the road and Tom was left behind.

One of the women passed a small box of tissues back to her, and they drove for the next five miles without talking.

"Where are you heading, honey?" the matronly lady driving the car asked.

When Nora could finally pull herself together, she said, "Seattle."

"Wonderful! You're right on our way. We'll pass right through the city in the next hour or so."

"When are you due?" the other put in, peeking back at her in the make-up mirror attached to her sun visor. "You look on the verge of popping any day now."

In spite of her tears, Nora half-smiled. "Not for another couple months."

"Is that nice gentleman back there the proud papa?"

Nora shook her head.

"He must want to be," the lady driver said with a shake of her grey head.

Nora's lip wobbled and she blinked rapidly. "No," she said in a soft, broken whisper. "He—he doesn't care for the job."

The passenger snorted in disbelief.

"You sure about that?" the driver gently asked, taking her turn now to peek at Nora in the rearview mirror. "He's working awfully hard at not caring."

Nora blinked twice, then turned to look behind them via the rear window.

"If he gets that old truck any closer," the woman passenger said, "he's going to be up our tail pipe and sitting in the backseat alongside you."

Tom was the angriest she'd ever seen him. He glared at her, his eyes fairly crackling as he mouthed 'Pull over...Now!' and pointed stiffly to the side of the road.

"He sure doesn't look that happy to be free of you. Does he, Delia?"

The driver shook her head emphatically. "No, honey. He sure doesn't. When my Charles was alive, oh if he'd given me a look like that, I'd be running off to hide the wooden spoons. He was one of those truly authoritative men. Isn't that right, Myra?"

"Oh my, yes. My brother knew how to be firm when he had to be. But he was always fair, you can't say that he wasn't. He got that from Daddy, you know. Of course, it was a different world back then."

"It certainly was," Delia sighed. "Much more comfortable and far less scary back then, than it is now. It pays to have a man to curl up next to, knowing he'll protect and defend you."

When the car didn't pull immediately over, Tom's look darkened even more. He gripped that steering wheel with one hand and pointed with utmost authority to the side of the road. The 'NOW!' his mouth formed was in all likelihood said quite vocally and at an impressive volume inside the cab of that pickup.

Nora turned around on her seat. She folded her hands in her lap in an effort to stop their shaking. "Seattle's another fifteen miles ahead," Driver Delia said. "Should we keep going?"

Myra whistled. "That boy looks fit to be tied. Maybe we should make him follow us long enough for him to calm down."

"No," Nora said softly. "No, um...I guess you'd better pull over."

"Are you sure?" Delia looked at her carefully in the rear view mirror. "He's not going to hurt you, is he?"

"I swing a mean tire-iron," Myra added.

Nora turned and looked back over her shoulder at the blackly scowling Tom. "No. He would never really hurt me."

That certainty wavered though as Delia and Myra let her out on the road side. When she climbed back into the truck with Tom, he was all but seething. Her stomach tightened into a hard knot, and Nora couldn't help but glance at the glove box where Nemesis currently resided. She half expected Tom to reach for it, but he didn't. Instead, he cranked the wheel and drove back out into traffic.

Maybe to look for a more private place to pull off and tan her properly. Nora sat clutching the door handle so tightly that her fingers began to ache. But fifteen miles later, Tom still hadn't pulled off the road and they crossed into the city limits.

"Where are we going?" he asked tersely.

"Mercer Island," Nora said, then bit her bottom lip. "Are--are you going to spank me?"

"You left me sitting on the side of the road." Tom glared at her. "What the hell were you thinking? Do you have so little respect for yourself that you'd get into the back of some stranger's car, or has hitchhiking suddenly become a helluva lot safer since I moved to Keno? I haven't been out of society that long, lady. Anybody could have picked you up. You put your life in danger, never mind your baby's life!"

"I hate being stuck in this truck with you," Nora said thickly. "Your anger is painful."

"So's yours!" he snapped back.

She looked at him, but then quickly averted her face towards the window. She covered her mouth with her hand to hide the grimace of misery as her tears started again. The rest of the ride to Nora's mother's house was made in that by now familiar, heavy, stifling silence, broken only by Nora's softly spoken, "That's the one."

Tom pulled up to the curb in front of the small, single story house. There was a tan Pontiac in the driveway, so her mother was home. Probably pacing the living room and glancing out the windows every few minutes, watching and waiting for her.

Nora swallowed a measure of guilt for just sitting there in the passenger seat, not wanting to get out right away, despite the long misery of the trip. She picked at her fingers. "Do you want to come in?"

Tom sat stiffly gripping the steering wheel. "It's all I can do right now not to yank you over my lap and blister your butt."

"You could meet my mother," Nora continued softly. "I know she's going to want to meet you."

He turned to glare at her. "Did you hear what I just told you?"

"You should probably rest before starting back, too. If you strain your arm too much, you won't be in any shape to mine when you get home."

"I mean it, Nora. I'll bare your butt--"

"Seems silly, your staying in a hotel tonight anyway." She looked down at her hands, tightly clenched in her lap. "Not when there's plenty of room for you here."

"--pin you down--"

"In my room," she said even more quietly.

"--you'll be sitting on pillows for the next three weeks."

"With me." She couldn't bring herself to look at him. "If you still want to, that is."

And they both fell silent.

Tom drew a shaky breath. "I love you, Nora."

"I love you, too." Nora reached over to take one of his larger hands in hers. "Please let me hold you one more night before you go."

* * * * *

Eileen Thomas burst into tears when Tom and Nora came into the house. She hugged Nora fiercely, putting a hand on her stomach as she laughed and sobbed, "You're so huge!" Then she grabbed hold of Tom, sobbing, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Tom winced, strangling a groan, and Nora grabbed her mother. "Ribbs, mom. Watch his ribs!"

"Oh!" Eileen jumped back, covering her mouth with her hands. "I forgot! Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry!"

"No, no," Tom panted, hugging his side. "I'm fine."

"Tylenol!" Eileen said. She made an abrupt about-face and bustled off down the hall to the bathroom.

Hand pressed to his side, Tom hobbled into the living room and sank down at one end of the long white and pink floral-patterned sofa.

"Are you all right?" Nora asked.

He nodded, then gingerly rubbed his arm, too. When she lingered in the doorway, Tom patted the sofa cushion beside him. "Come here."

Instead of sitting down beside him, careful to put her weight against his good shoulder, Nora crawled into his lap.

"I'm sorry I'm so rotten to you," she whispered against his neck.

"A regular little pain in the ass," he agreed without rancor. He patted her hip. "But we're going to fix that, aren't we?"

She nodded even as she snuggled down in his embrace. She closed her eyes, shutting out that tiny voice, whispering that this was going to be her last time in his arms, in the back of her mind.

When Eileen came back with the Tylenol, Nora very reluctantly sat up. "Mom, is there a store nearby? I promised Tom I'd bake him a cheesecake."

Eileen looked from one to the other, and then back to her daughter. Then she smiled. "It's okay, honey. You just sit back and relax. I'll go."

"You don't mind?"

Eileen looked at Tom again, then shook her head. She bent down to hug Nora tightly. "You two talk out whatever it is you need to. I don't mind."

Tom continued to hold Nora on the couch until after Eileen gathered her purse and her keys and closed the front door behind her. They heard the old Pontiac's engine chug to life, the sound retreating as the car backed out of the driveway and drove off down the residential street.

Tom patted her hip. "Is the paddle still in the glove box of the truck?"

Slowly, she nodded against his shoulder.

"Where do you think we'll be for the night?"

"My old room down the hall."

"Wait for me there, then. I want your bottom bare, nose in a corner and hands behind your head." He helped her back up onto her feet. "You know this is going to be a hard one?"

"Yes," Nora said and headed down the hall. At that moment, knowing this would be the last spanking she'd ever receive from him, she wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

At least, that's how she felt until he came into the bedroom with that paddle in his hand and then her knees began to shake. He enfolded her in his arms and they stood in the corner together, neither one saying a word for the longest time. Finally, he took her hand in his and led her to the neatly made bed.

He took her across his knees, holding her carefully with her belly positioned between his splayed knees to provide her with the maximum in back-support.

"Give me your hand," he said. And when she shakily offered her right arm back for him to grip, he added, "Get a pillow. We don't want to bother the neighbors, and you're going to need something to scream and cry into."

Calmly, without anger, Tom set her bottom on fire. Twice he stopped to remind her to scream into the pillow if she had to, and to rub her back and help her calm a little before continuing. Before he was done, not an inch of her buttocks nor the tops of her thighs had escaped its full measure with the paddle.

It was, without doubt, the worst spanking she'd ever taken from him. But afterward, as he held her and rocked her while she straddled his lap, Nora couldn't remember the last time that she'd felt so comforted. So cherished.

"I'm sorry," she wept into his shoulder.

"So am I," Tom whispered against her neck, and with a start she realized he was crying, too. And holding her so tightly, as though he could melt her into himself if only he could hold her close enough. She wished they could have stayed like that forever.

* * * * *

Nora awoke alone the next morning. She knew without looking that both Hank's truck and Tom were gone. He must have left early; his side of the bed was cold. The only part of him that she had to cling to was the yellow tulip he'd picked from her mother's garden and left on the pillow beside her, the smell of him that lingered in the sheets, and the memory of how he'd touched her last night. Both the bad, which had her wincing and groaning out loud as she rolled onto her back and her bottom came into contact with the mattress; and the good, although she knew it was only her imagination that left her body tingling as if still sensitive to his touch on her skin, her breasts, her thighs.

Wrapping herself in one of her mother's old bathrobes, Nora carried the tulip down the hall to the kitchen to put it in a vase of water. Her mother was already awake, standing in front of the closed refrigerator.

"He left you a note," Eileen said. "He's going to open an account for you and the baby when he gets back to Keno. He says to remember he loves you. I think he was crying. The ink's run in a couple places."

On her way to the sink, Nora avoided getting close enough to the fridge to read the note. She didn't think she could without bawling again, and she'd done enough of that in the last week. She turned the faucet on. "Do you have a vase?"

Eileen opened a cupboard and pulled down an empty one-quart mayonnaise jar. She set it on the counter by the sink. "Nora, honey. Look at me. What are you doing still here?"

"He doesn't want me with him, mom." Nora tried hard to keep her voice steady as she filled the mayonnaise jar with water.

"Bunkus," Eileen said gently. She reached up to caress an unbrushed lock of blonde hair away from Nora's eyes. "That was not a happy man that left here this morning."

"Mom." Her voice no louder than a whisper, Nora put the flower in the jar. "Please..."

"All right, all right." Eileen rubbed her back. "How about some breakfast? What do you want?"

"Anything," Nora sniffled, hugging tulip and vase to her chest. She managed a small smile, saying, "So long as it isn't eggs or bear meat."

Her mother laughed. "How does french toast with syrup and sausage sound?" Nora nodded and Eileen rubbed her back again. "Go get dressed. I'll do the cooking."

Shuffling back down the hall to her room, Nora set the jar on the night-side table. She flopped down to sit on the edge of the mattress and just looked at it. When her eyes began to water, she picked up Tom's pillow and hugged it, burying her face in the downy, feathery softness and breathing in his lingering scent.

There was a knock at her bedroom door.

She raised her head from the pillow to call, "I'll be there in a minute, mom."

She had to quit doing this. She was tired of crying. She wiped her eyes and stood up. Pulling herself together, she bent back the Louvre closet doors to display a selection of ancient maternity clothes her mother had hastily dug out of storage the night before. As she shifted through the clothes, Nora heard the bedroom door creak open. She turned, but it wasn't her mother leaning with one shoulder propped against the threshold.

Hands in his pockets, Tom hung his head. "I can't do it," he said, and he raised his head to look at her, his mouth and eyes full of apology.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe. "Can't do what?"

"Just thinking about having to go back to that empty cabin alone." He shook his head. "I can't do it. You may be a pain in the ass, Nora. But you're my pain in the ass, and I've gotten awful used to having you with me."

Nora slowly turned around to face him. "Oh?"

"As I was heading back to the highway, it occurred to me that maybe we could just stay down here until after the baby's born. Then I'll go back up and salvage what's left of the season. I could hire this contractor fellow I know out of Elsa to build us a house down by the mine site. Maybe, if I do well this year, we can even put in a septic system, indoor plumbing, two bedrooms, the works." Tom cleared his throat. "I'm not a nice man, Nora. I don't like people. You pretty much said it, I don't have a lot in the way of manners. I'm stubborn and arrogant, and I'll understand if you say no--"

"Yes," Nora said instantly.

"Hold on. You haven't heard--"

"Yes," she said again.

His apologetic look turned instantly disgruntled. "Now listen here, woman. I haven't even asked the question yet." He cleared his throat. "Nora, would you shack up with me--"

A wooden spoon flashed out from beyond the opposite side of the door frame and soundly thwacked the seat of his jeans.

Tom jumped. "Hey!"

Eileen caught him again.

"Ow! Damn that hurts!" Tom dodged the third swat and ducked into the room with Nora.

"Shack up?" Eileen echoed, her eyebrows first arching, then dropping into a flat, angry line over her flashing eyes. Rolling up her sleeve, she marched into the room after him, wooden spoon in hand. "What kind of girl do you think she is?"

"Mom, please," Nora said, laughing and crying at the same time. "Don't beat up my boyfriend." Tom took a sideways step behind Nora, tucking himself well out of Eileen's reach, and Nora turned around to cup his face in her hands. "I'd love to shack up with you."

Eileen squawked indignantly, but Tom caught the head of the spoon in his hand before she could lay an outraged smack upon her daughter's rump as well. He promptly pulled Nora backwards into the closet and shut the Louvre doors on his soon-to-be mother-in-law.

"It's the best I can do," Tom growled at the doors. "The Reverend only comes up to go skiing every three years or so. He's not due back for another two."

"I'll place some calls," Eileen growled back, and she turned and bustled out of the room.

"We're Catholic," Nora explained. "Getting pregnant is bad enough, but shacking up is a major no-no."

"She still doesn't get to spank you," Tom said, frowning at the doors.

"That's your job," Nora said as she moved into his embrace.

The corners of his mouth turned upwards and he dropped the spoon. "Damn straight, it is."

Bending down, he caught her bottom in both hands and lifted her up into his possessive kiss.

"Don't you ever forget it again," she warned, smiling against his mouth.

"Not a chance."

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