



Cabin Fever

By

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Chapter One

Haley had finally managed to land the promotion she'd been coveting for years. Today was the first day she would officially settle in her office. *You'd think that would be enough to put a burr up my ass and have me scrambling to prove myself to the powers-that-be at my company. Instead, I overslept for the first time in forever, hit snooze and drifted off to never land again instead of bailing out of the bed and dashing for the shower,* she thought in disgust.

She supposed she could blame it on celebrating, alone, into the wee hours. She'd decided to finish off that bottle of wine in her fridge. She rather thought the culprit was more likely the fact that she'd totally relaxed for the first time in ages, though.

Of course, it might also have been because her parents had decided to crash at her place for a few days while their apartment was being worked on. There hadn't been nearly enough wine in the bottle to drown out the sound of the headboard slamming rhythmically into the wall and her mother groaning 'Oh god, George! Oh god! Harder!'

Whichever the case, it wasn't going to look good if she was late. Dashing for the bathroom, she did a five minute shower, scrambled into her clothes while she was still damp enough she had to fight them to get them on and slung a little makeup in the general direction of her face. Grabbing a cold piece of dry toast and a travel cup full of scalding coffee, she made a mad dash for the bus stop and managed to wedge herself between the doors just as the driver tried to shut them. He glared at her. She sent him a weak smile, swiped her pass, and looked around hopefully for a place to sit.

As if! Trying to take it philosophically when she saw all the seats were taken, she shoved through the people at the front and found a pole to cling to between a bag lady and a twenty-something male that looked like he'd just finished up the cover for a men's magazine. He looked her over and sniffed.

Sure she'd made short work of the shower, but if he was implying that that god awful odor was wafting from her ...!

It was at that point that she discovered she'd mismatched buttons and button holes on her blouse. Gripping her cup in her teeth, she tried to stealthily realign the buttons, no mean feat with the bus jolting along the street, swaying like a ship on the high seas and braking every five fucking feet whether necessary or not.

She gave up after two, figuring she'd finish the rest when she wasn't in as much danger of wearing what was left of her coffee—which was most of it.

OK, also because the fucking bus driver decided to stop for a passenger chasing the bus and screaming for him to stop because when he did, she swung around the pole and sat down in the lap of a derelict. Bouncing up again in the hope that the five second rule applied and none of the bum's germs had leapt onto her, she braced her legs and resisted the urge to check the back of her skirt to see if she'd picked up anything disgusting from the guy's lap.

Thankfully, her stop hove into view just under twenty minutes later. She waited

until the bus had come to a stop before she began trying to shove her way to the door and yet, just as she reached it, the bus driver managed to brake again and sling her against the railing. She stumbled out as the doors began closing and turned to glare at the bus as it lumbered off. Releasing an irritated huff when she realized the bastard was probably completely oblivious to the foul words she'd flung after him, she glanced around for a place to settle her cup. Nothing magically appeared, but she finally found a handy ledge between the bus stop and her building and fixed her blouse, checking everything but the back of her skirt with her hands to make sure she was put together well enough to make it to the lady's room in the lobby of her office building without drawing stares.

Feeling a little more confident, she jogged the last half block to her building and went inside, ducking into the lady's room as she'd promised myself. To her relief, she didn't see anything clinging to—or crawling along—the back of her skirt, but the frontal view left a lot to be desired. Her hair didn't look as if it had seen a comb in a while and her make up looked as if she really *had* thrown it at her face—with a spatula. Digging a little frantically in her purse, she finally unearthed a comb and raked her hair into order then used a damp paper towel to remove enough sludge from her face that she didn't look like she was trying out for a job as a nightmare clown in a horror flick.

As she reached her floor at last and stepped off of the elevator, Mark, her best buddy and head secretary for the floor, greeted her with a broad grin. They'd been friends for years, had hit it off right away when they'd begun working together, and the bond had grown stronger from there until they'd moved from friendly acquaintances to buddies that shared a lot more personal information than either of them were willing to share with anyone else.

"Gooood Morning, your highness!" His grin widened as he stood. "Should I bow or salute?"

"You may curtsey, lowly one," she answered in her best queenly voice.

"Yes, exalted one," he said as he dipped into a deep curtsey.

"Congrats on the promotion, Haley. You've earned it."

"Thanks, Mark," she said, smiling back at him. "I just hope I can handle the pressure."

"How are you doing so far?" he asked.

"Well my mother and father showed up at my apartment Friday night for a surprise visit slash weekend stay-over. I had burnt toast and coffee sweetened with salt for breakfast this morning, and the bus driver tried to shut my ass in the door. Other than that everything's just fine."

"You poor thing," Mark said feigning sympathy, then frowned quizzically. "Why are your folks staying with you?"

She hesitated, struggling with embarrassment, and finally leaned closer. "Their waterbed ruptured under mysterious circumstances."

"Your parents have a water bed?" he asked, laughing.

"Yes, and ever since dad got his prescription for Viagra they've been screwing like teenagers," she retorted, rolling her eyes. "I had to listen to the headboard in the guestroom banging against the wall for two hours last night while my mother moaned, 'Oh god! Oh George! Oh god!' I think I'm scarred for life," she added, covering her eyes with one hand, trying to block the image from her mind.

Mark burst out laughing, then stopped abruptly when he realized everyone could

hear him across the whole floor.

"Go check out your new office and I'll bring you a fresh cup of coffee and your schedule," Mark said conspiratorially, still smiling. "It's the south-east corner office.

Wait until you get a look at your new assistant. He's a hunk. Find out if he's gay or straight, will you?"

When Haley reached her office she paused to admire her name freshly painted on the door. Just as she was about to go in, her boss, Mr. Boyd, and his assistant, Joy Akins, came around the corner. They were generally referred to as Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde around the office when they were out of earshot. Mark referred to Joy as Mr. Boyd's sexatary.

"Good Morning, Ms. Freeman. I hope you like your new office."

"I was just about to check it out Mr. Je.. uh ... Boyd," she stammered.

"Good. I sent your assistant in to wait for you. Bring him up to speed on the duties of his new position then both of you meet me in my office at ten."

"Yes, Mr. Boyd." she replied.

Joy took a step toward her and began looking her up and down with a false expression of concern.

"Ms. Freeman, are you feeling well today? You look swollen. Doesn't she look swollen, Harold? And that darkness under the eyes could be a sign of poor nutrition."

"Thank you so much for your concern, Joy, but I feel just fine," Haley said with a forced smile. She hesitated and then tapped the end of her nose. "Uh ... Joy you have something ... on the end of ... let me see if I have a tissue."

Joy reddened, whirled on her heel, and started walking off, trying to casually brush away the imaginary something. Haley smiled with satisfaction as she turned and entered her office.

She halted with a jolt, the smile vanishing from her lips abruptly. The most gorgeous guy she'd ever seen was sprawled comfortably in front of the desk, the phone receiver to his ear. For a split second, she wondered if she had the wrong office and then everything connected abruptly.

Her new office.

Her new assistant.

Her desk.

Her phone.

Her satisfaction in getting one up on Joy crashed. Her displeasure must have been written on her face because he immediately said goodbye and stood.

"Hello, Ms. Freeman. I'm Chance Crossman, your assistant. You can call me Chance," he said with surprising aplomb all things considered, walking toward her with his hand outstretched.

Instead of shaking his hand, she motioned to a chair on the opposite side of her desk. It wasn't a pointed snub so much as it was the residual chaos churning inside of her, but she wasn't sorry when she realized it must have seemed that way. He probably wasn't used to getting snubbed by women. Ergo, it was probably something he needed once in a while to keep his ego in check. "Have a seat Mr. Crossman."

Moving around the desk to the chair he'd just vacated, Haley sat down. The phone rang almost the instant her butt settled. "Is there a button on my ass or what?" she muttered irritably, still completely unsettled by her first encounter with her 'assistant'.

Technically, she supposed he was, but she sure as hell hadn't had anything to do with his hiring—which she should have if he'd actually been her personal assistant. In actuality, he was the replacement for her former position, hired by the company, and to be trained by her while she was trying to learn her new duties.

Not that they wanted to put a lot of stress on her!

Thrusting it from her mind, she glanced at the phone as it rang again. She could see from the extension that it was Mark so she hit the button for the speaker phone. "Yes. Mark?"

"Your mother is on line two."

Resisting the urge to groan out loud, she merely responded, "Thanks Mark."

She picked up the receiver and pressed line two. "Hi, Mom."

"Dear, you know I've asked you to please call me Alice. Mom sounds so ... old."

"You didn't mind me calling you mom when I was a kid," Haley muttered, keenly aware that her new assistant could hear her side of the conversation.

"You weren't nearly thirty then, sweetheart. Anyway, did you take my glasses to work with you this morning?"

"Mom ... I mean Alice, why would I take your glasses?"

"I've looked all over your apartment, and I mean everywhere. I can't find them anywhere."

Not content to leave it at that, her mother decided to unload her trials thus far that morning in her search for her glasses. As she went over everywhere she'd looked in excruciating detail, including speculating on the possibility that someone had broken into the apartment and stolen them, Haley closed her mind to her mother's chatter and studied her new assistant.

He'd sunk back into the chair, as if deep in thought, and was staring out the window. His dark blonde hair was trimmed short and neat. His face was clean shaven, but she could see a slight five o'clock shadow along his square jaw and cleft chin. His eyes were an unusual golden hue.

Adonis popped into her head and, despite her appreciation, she felt her wary hackles rise. Any man that looked that good was dangerous.

Actually, she decided, he wasn't quite that 'pretty'. He had a rugged look about him that made her think that, if he put on a cowboy hat and denim pants, he'd make a convincing cowboy for an ad—a gorgeous one, she admitted, feeling her pulse quicken. Obviously, he worked out because she could see from the fit of his clothes that he was well built and that wasn't typical of these office types. She supposed he might have been one of those college jocks that had worked to maintain his build.

Good looking, and damned aware of it, to a degree that kept him working to stay that way. Not a flaw, per se, but something to keep in mind!

Her gaze drifted down his solid chest, down his flat stomach, and finally settled between his legs speculatively as it occurred to her to wonder if that 'attention to detail' extended to prowess in bed or if he expected the women to just cum from looking at him. A start went through her when she discovered he had a huge package—too huge, in fact, she decided skeptically. He must stuff socks in his pants or something.

As she stared at it, however, the bulge started growing and elongating, forming a ridge in his pants that was impossible to dismiss. His right leg suddenly swung up to rest on his left knee, blocking her view and bringing her out of her trance.

Haley's head jerked upwards. Chance was looking directly at her. He was smiling and his face was a little redder than it had been. Feeling her own face heat, she quickly swiveled her chair to the side, facing away from him.

It was then that she realized her mother had reached the end of her spiel. "Hard ... aaahh ... Mom ... aaahh. .. I mean Alice, are you wearing your apron?" She glanced out the corner of her eye to see if Chance seemed to notice her slip, turning redder when she saw his grin.

"Yes," Alice said.

"Does it have pockets?"

"Yes Oooh for goodness sake! How did they get in there? Thank you, sweetheart. Your father and I are going to a workshop on tantric sex after lunch so we won't be back till late. You should come with us to one of their evening classes, dear. You might meet some nice young man there."

"Wow! That sounds really tempting, but I think I'll pass," Haley said, rolling her eyes.

"OK, dear. I'll talk to you later. Goodbye. I love you"

"I love you, too, Mom ... I mean, Alice. Bye."

Haley turned resolutely to face Chance as she hung the phone up, deciding to simply pretend he hadn't caught her checking out his package with, she didn't doubt, a look of Zen meditation. "Now, Mr. Crossman," she said briskly, "Mr. Boyd has instructed me to give you an overview of what is to be expected from you here at"

Noticing abruptly that Chance was tapping his watch, she paused, feeling a return of the indignation she'd felt when she'd caught him at her desk. "Do you have somewhere you need to go, Mr. Crossman?" she asked shortly.

"Uuuuhm ... the meeting ... Mr. Boyd ... ten o'clock?"

"Oh Shit!" Haley exclaimed. Jumping up, she rushed to the door. "Don't just sit there, Mr. Crossman! Let's go!"

The husky chuckle that escaped him sent a hoard of goosebumps racing up her back and along her arms. "Right behind you," Chance said with a rogue's grin.

An involuntary shiver skated through her and irritation at her reaction along with it. She frowned, but decided to ignore it. Instead, as she and Chance strode quickly to Mr. Boyd's office, she rattled off everything that she was supposed to have told Chance in her office. When they arrived at Mr. Boyd's office Joy gave her a reproving look to point out that they were late and told them to go on in.

Haley was surprised when they entered the room to see a crowd of people in Boyd's office. Mr. Boyd peered through the crowd from behind his desk when they entered.

"Good! Everyone's here. OK, people, I called you all here to make an announcement. Our CEO, Daniel Forester, has told me to convey to you his appreciation for all the hard work you've done this quarter and has offered us the use of his ski cabin on Mt. Harris for the next two weekends. It's a luxury cabin, but there's only room for half of us at a time so half of us will go this weekend and the rest the following week. Ms. Akins and myself will be going this weekend. I put everybody else's name on a piece of paper and dropped them in this box. I'll pick out three more names for this week and everyone else can go next week. Sound fair? Good."

Haley noticed he didn't wait for anybody to respond to that—not that anybody

would've had the nerve. She supposed he'd counted on that, the creep!

He shook the box around for a minute and then reached in and picked out three folded pieces of paper.

"Marco Sanchez."

Haley's friend Mark let out a yelp and started bouncing in place.

"Chance Crossman."

"Aaand last but not least ... Haley Freeman."

Chance cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I just started today," he said pointedly. "I don't feel comfortable"

Haley stepped on his toe, sending him a silent warning with a faint shake of her head when he glanced at her in surprise. She pasted a bright smile on her face. "Mr. Forester meant to include you or your name wouldn't be in the hat. He'd be disappointed if you refused his offer."

Chance looked both disconcerted and irritated but he clamped his lips together and merely nodded.

As relieved as she was that she'd prevented her new assistant from making a fatal mistake and displeasing the big boss, Haley wondered almost immediately why she'd leapt to his defense. It wasn't her problem if he rubbed the boss the wrong way on his first day on the job.

She dismissed it with the reflection that she had to have 'an' assistant to train. It might as well be Chance Crossman, even if she could already see that it was going to be a royal pain to work with him. At least he wasn't hard on the eyes and he seemed swift on the uptake. As young as he was, she already knew he had some experience under his belt. It beat the hell out of having to train a complete novice.

As for the trip, Haley wasn't sure how she felt about going on a skiing trip herself—not that she had any intention of declining *any* perk, especially when it would certainly get back to the big boss that she'd snubbed his generous gift. He was inclined to view that sort of thing as an unwillingness to be a 'team player', and he viewed that *very* poorly.

She didn't know how to ski, though. She'd always thought she might like to learn, but she wasn't very good at standing up on firm, even ground—sports definitely wasn't her forte. She immediately had visions of smacking into a tree at high speeds and laying up in a hospital for weeks in traction.

I'll start on the kiddy slope, she told herself. How hard could it be?

Chapter Two

"I swear that man is like *catnip* to women!" Mark said bitchily. "The switchboard hasn't seen this much activity since it was installed!"

It was impossible to ignore the disappointment that settled in the pit of her stomach, but Haley gave it her best shot. "Who?"

Mark gave her a look over the forkful of salad he held poised at his lips. "Girlfriend! Don't give me that 'who', bullshit! Your feet don't fit no limb and you don't shit through feathers!"

Haley reddened in spite of all she could do. "Don't tell me you're still ranting about my new assistant," she retorted.

"Right! As if you didn't know! I am *so* disappointed in that boy! He had so much potential! Such lovely dimples! Such cute buns!"

"Do you think, maybe, we could have *one* conversation that didn't include him? You know the boss doesn't really approve of inner office dating," Haley pointed out irritably. It wasn't bad enough that she had trouble keeping her mind off of his cute dimples and tight buns already? Mark couldn't refrain from verbally drooling all over the guy every time they got together? "It's probably just as well."

"Right—except for him and his sexatary."

"That's just unsubstantiated gossip and the main reason the boss frowns on inner office dating. It's distracting."

"Looking who's getting prudish! Some of us don't wear blinders. Ms. Hyde keeps slipping and calling him Howard now and he had the gall to put the two of them at the top of the list for the outing. What do they have to do to convince you? Screw in the broom closet? Anyway, can you *believe* that bullshit?"

"Everybody's getting to go. What difference does it make?"

"Everybody *else* got the luck of the draw. Not that I was disappointed—at first—mind you. That was before I discovered Chance was as straight as an arrow—and then some. I've been fielding calls for him all week and, cross my heart, it's a different female every time! I hope you know that totally blows my fantasy weekend!"

Haley gave him a look. "I'd be a lot more sympathetic if *I'd* been looking at a fantasy weekend. I don't know why you're complaining anyway! You *have* a love life! I haven't been laid in an eon, and I'm beginning to think Fi-Fi might grow up before she sees any action again!"

Mark flicked a glance over her shoulder and snickered, and Haley whipped a glance around to see what he was looking at before she thought better of it.

Chance was standing right behind her, his lunch in one hand, his drink in the other. As she gaped at him, a dull red color crept into his cheeks. He looked like he was trying to decide whether to retreat and make it more obvious that he'd overheard the conversation—or at least *her*—or to continue as he'd started.

He cleared his throat. "Is that seat taken?"

Reddening, Haley sent Mark an 'I will kill you later for getting me in to this'

look. “Sure ... I mean, no. Actually, I’m done. I was just leaving.” Bolting from her seat, she snatched the remains of her lunch up and headed for the trash bin, abandoning the table to Mark and Chance.

Chance watched her retreat and turned to focus on his lunch, a deep frown furrowing his brows. “Is it me? Or was she just in a hurry?”

“Oh! She’s always in a hurry,” Mark said, waving his hand dismissively. “Knowing Haley, she probably just suddenly remembered something she’d forgotten.”

Some of the tension left Chance, but he met Mark’s gaze skeptically. “That wasn’t the impression I got.”

Mark shrugged, focusing on his salad uneasily. “What was the impression you got?”

“You mean, how much of the conversation did I catch?” Chance asked wryly, settling in the chair Haley had vacated.

Mark blushed. “How much *did* you catch?”

Chance frowned. “Something about a Fi-Fi. Friend of hers?”

Mark choked. “You might say that,” he responded in a slightly strangled voice when he’d managed to dislodge the food that had tried to go down the wrong way. “They’ve sort of lost touch.”

“Kid sister?”

Mark almost snorted his drink through his nose that time. He decided he’d had enough of his lunch. “What made you think that?”

Chance shrugged. “I heard something about ‘growing up’.”

Glad he’d had the forethought to push his salad away, Mark struggled with his amusement for a moment and finally managed to master it. “Curious about the boss?”

Chance flushed slightly.

If Haley didn’t think that was just adorable, the woman was dead from the waist down and that was all there was to it!

“Anything wrong with that?”

“Did I say there was?”

Nodding, Chance focused on making short work of his lunch. “The two of you friends?”

“Best buds,” Mark responded promptly.

“She seeing anybody?”

Mark lifted his brows and studied Chance in silence to cover his shock. Not that Haley wasn’t a damned fine looking woman, but she certainly wasn’t flashy and he would never have figured a man like Chance would notice her—aside from the fact that Haley must be at least five years older than Chance.

Not that Chance was baby faced. Far from it! He had a sexy rugged cowboy look about him. He *seemed* mature, but everything about him added up to ‘young’. He hadn’t managed to get a look at the employee files, so he couldn’t say for sure, but it was clear as bell that Chance was a real go-getter. He was young or he wouldn’t be Haley’s assistant. He would’ve had her job.

He might still get it if she didn’t watch herself.

“Not at the moment. You thinking about applying for that position, too?”

Chance fixed him with a hard look that made his heart go pitter-patter.

Ooooh! Dangerous!

“You have an objection?”

Now that he'd gotten the impression that Chance wasn't nearly as easy going as he'd seemed, Mark wasn't too keen on opening his trap. On the other hand, Haley *was* his best bud! *Somebody* had to look out for that cream puff!

He shrugged uneasily. “She's got way too much experience to fall for a player,” he lied. “You'd be wasting your time.”

Chance's lips tightened. He shoved his chair out. Leaning down as if to grab up his trash, he planted his hands on the top of the table instead and fixed Mark with a look that gave him heart palpitations ... and not necessarily in a good way. “I'm not a player,” he growled, “and if that gets back to her, I'll know where it came from.”

“Could've fooled me,” Mark murmured daringly when he thought Chance might be out of earshot.

Chance paused. Except for that fractional hesitation, though, he didn't give any indication that he'd heard the comment.

Shaky from the encounter, Mark debated whether to rush back to the office and try to warn Haley that the Godfather of all players had her in his sites or wait for a better opportunity.

A safer one, anyway. He sure as hell didn't want Chance to catch him at it!

Deciding against it, he sipped his drink and thought it over.

It occurred to him after a moment that Chance's reaction was damned strange for a player. Generally, they were proud of their conquests—not pissed off about anybody calling them one.

Something was really weird here.

Unless ...?

Maybe he'd just been pissed off because he'd thought *he* would ruin his plans?

It was possible, he decided, but somehow it still didn't sit right.

If he wasn't a player, though, why was it women called him constantly?

Ok, he didn't have any trouble figuring that one out. The man was scrumptious! There was no getting around that!

Maybe it was significant that Chance didn't actually seem to encourage all that adoration or happy about the calls? He'd figured it was annoyance because he couldn't scrape them loose once he'd favored them with his oh-so-delicious charms, and maybe anxiety that it could cost him the job. And maybe that *was* it, except not in the sense of a player who'd moved on to the next conquest, but in the sense of ‘just not interested’?

He could see it. Not that he'd run across too many men like Chance, but he could easily imagine what it must be like to be like catnip and having all kinds of kitties he wasn't interested in pursuing him. *One* here and there was bad enough!

He shuddered at the memory of his last nasty encounter with a stalker.

Poor darling! It must be just awful for him!

And Haley certainly wasn't immune, no matter how hard she'd been trying to convince him and herself. He wasn't buying all that bullshit she'd been laying on him like she hadn't noticed Chance was a damned fine looking man!

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing for her? At least she'd get laid!

Shrugging inwardly, he finally got up to head back to work. It wasn't as if he could do anything to stop it, he reasoned. If the magic was there, it was. He wasn't a magician!

Maybe he'd just caution Haley to consider it in the light of an exciting adventure? Nobody got the opportunity for an encounter with a guy like Chance very often. It wasn't the sort of thing any red blooded person should pass up ... as long as they kept their head and realized it was just going to be a fling.

They only had another day and a half, max, before the big weekend, and things were shaping up for Haley to have a fantasy weekend, anyway. Maybe he'd just give her a heads up that Chance was interested, make sure she knew the score, and then he'd give her a little push in the right direction?

Knowing Haley, she was going to need a push!

* * * *

"This must be the place Daniel mentioned!" Harold Boyd exclaimed, slamming on the brakes and whirling into the gas station/convenience store when they were already almost past the point of being able to turn into the driveway. Haley's seat belt locked. Her lips tightened with irritation.

"Daniel said the cabin was well stocked—plenty of everything—except mixers for the booze. It probably wouldn't hurt to stock up on snackages, too," he added cheerfully, pulling up to the front of the store and then abruptly veering away again to park at the line of pumps just about the time everyone sat forward to get out. "Might as well top off the tank while we're at it. Who's pumping?"

Haley focused on trying to unfasten her seatbelt—which was still locked.

"I'll pump," Chance volunteered.

"Good man!" Boyd said cheerfully, climbing out.

By the time Haley managed to get loose and crawl across the seat to the door—she'd been wedged into the center between Chance and Mark—everyone else had bailed out and headed inside with the exception of Chance. His phone rang just as he shoved the nozzle into the tank.

It caught Haley's attention, although she'd been determined to pretend she was completely unaware of him. "No cell phones at the gas tank," she said, pointing at the sign when he glanced at her.

Nodding, he set the lever to automatically fill and moved around to the other side.

She was too far away by the time he answered to catch the name of the caller, but she didn't doubt it was a female.

She rolled her eyes as she pulled the door of the convenience store open and went in. "People and their phones," she muttered under her breath.

After glancing around the nearly empty store, she spied the sign for the lady's room and made a beeline for it.

Chance's damned phone had been vibrating almost since they'd left the office right after lunch to head out for their 'fun filled' weekend getaway. It was hard not to notice when he was wedged hip to hip with her in the damned back seat even if he hadn't dragged it out to check the caller every time.

She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry that he'd finally shoved it into his other pocket.

Either the guy had one seriously psycho stalker, or his apartment had a damned revolving door! She didn't for one minute believe it was anything but social calls. Of course, he hadn't returned the calls because he didn't have any privacy and apparently, he'd also decided against trying to text for the same reason. It was possible it was the

same woman every time, but she wasn't laying any bets on it.

When she emerged from the restroom, she discovered Boyd and his bimbo—sexatary, as Mark referred to her—were already heading out the door, loaded down with bags.

Mark was standing at the counter, a mound of chips and bakery products in front of him.

Well! They could damned well wait! If she was going to be stuck in a cabin miles from nowhere for the entire weekend, with nothing to do, she had to have some chocolate, at least!

Spying some daiquiri mixes as she passed the cooler, she stopped and grabbed a couple and then headed for the candy isle.

Mark was still standing at the front counter when she'd grabbed a couple of candy bars and headed to the front. Frowning when she saw the clerk hadn't even rung up his purchases yet, she looked around for the counter help and found both of them hovering in one corner behind the counter, snickering.

* * * *

"Hi babe!" Chance murmured when he answered the phone. "Sorry I didn't take the call before, but we were in a dead zone."

"I thought I was going to have to finish without you," Cheryl purred huskily.

"Hang on a minute and let me turn the volume up. There's too much road noise out here. I can't hear you. What was that again?"

"I said I thought I was going to have to finish without you," she repeated, a pout in her voice. Chance threw a glance around to make sure Haley was no longer within hearing range and cleared his throat. "Finish what?"

"Pleasuring myself."

Chance felt a flash of heat—mostly embarrassment. Cheryl was a really wild one and he wasn't sure from one moment to the next whether he liked some of the kink she came up with. Actually, he *was* sure that he didn't particularly care for most of it. He was basically a steak and potatoes man—he didn't need weird to get off. It wasn't as if they'd been seeing each other long enough for the 'new' to have worn off and boredom to set in, after all—at least not as far as the sex went. Otherwise, he'd been bored stiff twenty minutes into their first date.

Aside from that, he couldn't prevent a prickle of annoyance. He'd fucked her until his damned dick was sore just the night before—spent all night fucking her and hadn't gotten more than a couple of hours sleep. That wasn't enough to hold her until he could get back? Jesus! The woman was insatiable!

He uttered a non-committal grunt when he realized she was waiting for a response. "Starting without me, huh?" he added on inspiration, glancing around to make sure no one had gotten close enough to hear.

"Well ... I have to, don't I? You aren't here."

Chance expelled an irritated breath. "I told you this was business"

She made a tscking noise. "Have I complained? I'm just lying here in my bed, all by myself ... naked ... thinking about you, baby," she purred. "Why don't you talk dirty to me? Mmm? Then I can imagine you're here."

Chance cleared his throat as an image of her filled his mind. He felt his interest stir—or at least his cock—but he'd never been much for 'dirty' talk. He didn't talk dirty

when he was *with* her so he was damned if he could see how that was going to help her little fantasy. In point of fact, he found it difficult to talk at all when he was having sex, and phone sex—which he realized immediately was what she was angling for—well that was akin to trying to beat off with somebody’s else’s hand—more frustrating than fulfilling.

“I ... uh ...,” he said, stalling for time while he tried to think up something she’d consider ‘dirty’ talk. “What are you wearing?”

She chuckled huskily. “Nothing at all.”

He swallowed convulsively and cast an uncomfortable glance around, searching for inspiration. “So ... what are you doing?”

“Playing with my nipples and stroking my clit.”

“Yeah ... well keep doing that,” Chance responded absently when he noticed the pump had stopped. “Except harder.”

Holding the phone at arm’s length, he reached around to take the nozzle out of the tank and pushed it back into the holder. “You still ... uh ... working on that nasty thing?” he asked when he’d put the phone to his ear again.

“It isn’t nasty!” she snapped indignantly.

Chance blinked. What the hell was her idea of dirty? “I said tasty thing,” he lied.

“Oh.” She drew the word out into a moan. “I’m imagining you licking my clit—sucking on it.”

Chance discovered his imagination failed him—particularly since he hadn’t gone down on her. They were still working on all of the positions she’d always wanted to try. “Does that make you hot?”

“Yeah.”

“You about to come?” he asked uneasily when he glanced toward the store and discovered Boyd and his assistant were on their way out.

“Yes!”

“That’s my girl! Keep working at it. Look ... uh ... I have to go now. I’ll call you later. You can tell me how everything turned out, ok?” Flipping his phone closed before she had time to respond, he frowned at it while he turned it off and then shoved it in his pocket.

“I’m just going to grab a couple of things while we’re here,” he said to Boyd when he neared the pump.

Boyd frowned. “Well ...make it quick. I want to get to the cabin.”

Swallowing his irritation, Chance nodded and strode briskly to the store. Haley and Mark were standing at the counter with their purchases as he stepped inside. Both of them had frozen looks on their faces that he couldn’t quite interpret.

“Harold! Stop it! Somebody will see!”

Chance’s head swiveled automatically toward the voice, which he discovered was coming from a speaker behind the counter. He glanced from the speaker to the pumps outside where Harold and Joy were packing their purchases into the back of the van. He’d already strode toward the back of the store when it hit him like a ton of bricks and brought him to an abrupt halt.

The speaker on the pumps was on and he could clearly hear Joy and Harold playing at slap and tickle.

Heat rose in his face, flashed through him so that he was so hot moisture popped

from his pores. His collar abruptly felt way too tight.

Had they heard him?

The frozen looks were telling, he realized.

Had they heard Cheryl?

Jesus! He'd had the fucking volume wide open!

He didn't hold out much hope that they hadn't heard the entire fucking conversation. He didn't know if it was a relief that he developed a sudden case of amnesia and couldn't remember, specifically, anything they'd said, or if he was *more* embarrassed thinking about things he *might* have said.

He dawdled while he made his selections, trying to recover enough to have some chance of successfully carrying off 'I'm completely unaware of the fact that you just listened to me having phone sex with my soon to be *ex*--kinky, weird, nympho-maniac girlfriend'.

Thankfully, Haley and Mark left shortly.

The two clerks behind the counter were smirking when he plunked his choices on the counter. He narrowed his eyes balefully at both of them. Sending him hunted looks, they decided to try to pretend they hadn't been fucking hovering over the damned speaker, snickering, when he'd come in.

"Thanks!" he growled, snatching up his bag when he'd gotten his change and stalking out of the convenience store.

Mark and Haley were standing outside the van squabbling over something when he reached it. They fell instantly silent—a good indication that he was the subject under discussion. Striding around the vehicle, he climbed in, pitched his bag over the back of the seat and yanked his seatbelt so hard the fucking thing locked. He was still working at trying to get it on when Haley and Mark finally climbed in.

Mark slid to the middle.

Chance stiffened, but decided to pointedly ignore both of them.

Chapter Three

They'd been on the road again for nearly ten minutes before Haley finally got over her discomfort enough to realize Chance had not only been embarrassed to discover they'd overheard his phone sex with his girlfriend, he'd seemed distinctly uncomfortable with the entire situation *before* he'd found out he was on the speaker. Almost reluctantly, she considered the possibility that she'd misjudged him.

Maybe he wasn't a total pervert after all?

Of course, even if he wasn't that didn't change the fact that he was a player.

Not that that mattered, really. It wasn't as if he'd made a play for her, or that she would give him the time of day if he did. *She* wasn't in any danger.

She sighed irritably.

She'd been telling herself that since he'd started work. Eventually, she was going to have to admit, to herself, at least, that she *was* in danger or she wouldn't be trying so hard to convince herself she wasn't.

Ok—so there was no getting around the fact that her heart tripped over itself any time she caught those beautiful golden eyes of his trained on her speculatively. And she felt uncomfortably warm and jittery if she allowed herself to study his oh-so-glorious physique for more than half a second—especially his buns and his nice chest and his big, strong arms, and that impressive package—Ok, all of him. And his smile made her stomach feel weightless and her lungs feel as if they'd collapsed.

She *still* wasn't in any danger because, for one, he wasn't likely to give her the time of day and, for another, she was not an idiot that was desperate for a man.

Maybe she was just a *little* desperate and that accounted for her heightened libido?

That was it, she decided.

She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd told Mark it had been so long she'd begun to wonder if Fi-Fi would grow up. She'd been so focused on getting that damned promotion, she hadn't had a date in a year, at least—long enough she'd had to think hard to remember the last time and she still couldn't remember the guy's name—Bill or something like that. Maybe Tom?

Boyd abruptly stood the van on its nose, jerking her from her musings as the seatbelt locked up again, and Haley looked around, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Holy shit!” Harold exclaimed. “Nude skiing!”

Haley felt a jolt of shock run through her. “Where?” she exclaimed before she'd thought better of it, whipping her head around in an effort to see the nude skiers.

Boyd twisted around in his seat and glanced at her. “Right there! Can't you see the sign?”

Haley stared at the sign uncomprehendingly for several moments.

Mt. Harris nudist colony—Nude skiing—Visitors welcome!

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” she exclaimed, wondering what kind of maniac

would want to go skiing—on ice!—in the buff!

“Hey! Why don’t we take a little tour ... as long as we’re here anyway? We could just take off our tops and cruise through and have a look.”

Haley gaped at the back of Boyd’s head and then glanced at Joy, whom he’d addressed the question to.

Joy grinned at him. “I’m game!”

“Well, I’m not!” Haley snapped, having finally found her voice.

Boyd glared at her in the rearview mirror and then twisted around to look at Chance and Mark speculatively. “What about you two?”

Mark snickered. “Never tried it myself.”

“Sorry,” Chance said coldly. “Not interested.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Boyd snapped. “I’m not talking about trying it ... not right now, anyway. We could just peel down to the waist. Nobody would know we weren’t as naked as everybody else! It would be fun! Where’s your sense of adventure? We could get a look at some tits!”

Joy glared at him.

“Sorry, not interested,” Haley said sarcastically. “I brought my own.”

“Oh for god’s sake, Haley!” Mark said testily. “I’m not going to look at your tits and Boyd can’t see them from up there.”

Haley gave him a drop dead look. She didn’t look at Chance, although it took a strenuous effort not to. “I am not stripping!” she said emphatically. “It’s too damned cold for one thing.”

“So I’ll turn up the heat!” Boyd offered. “It isn’t like we’re going to get out or anything.”

“I said no and I meant it!” Haley said tightly. “Just take me to the cabin and drop me off. It can’t be much further. We’ve been driving for hours.”

Boyd studied her sullenly in the rearview mirror. “I thought you were a team player, Freeman.”

“This has nothing to do with work!” Haley shot back at him, although his evoking the company mantra sent a flicker of uneasiness through her.

He seemed to consider for several moments whether to pursue it, turned to study the entrance to the nudist colony again longingly, and then appeared to dismiss it. “The cabin is just the other side of the mountain ... the next peak over,” he muttered under his breath.

Finally, he took his foot off of the break and placed it on the gas again. The van fishtailed when he shot forward. Joy uttered a squawk and grabbed for the dash. Haley’s heart leapt into her throat. She clawed at the door in search of a grip to brace herself, but the prick eased off on the gas and managed to get the vehicle under control again. Fortunately, the incident seemed to bring him out of his anger to focus on his driving, however, and, gripping the steering wheel with both hands, he drove more carefully up the narrow highway.

Silence in the wake of the argument and the near accident held everyone while he negotiated the steep climb and the dip on the other side. Not that anyone had felt terribly talkative before any of that, but no one was really able to concentrate on anything else until Boyd finally pulled off the main road and onto a narrow switchback drive that climbed toward a peak and finally leveled off at the rear of the cabin that seemed perched

on the edge of a precipice. Weak with relief, Haley baled out of the SUV and onto solid ground gratefully.

There was about a foot of snow on the ground and at least three inches of new fallen snow on the walkway, which had clearly been cleaned fairly recently. Grabbing their belongings, everyone trudged up the walk and climbed the stairs that led up to the broad deck that appeared to run the entire length of the rear of the cabin.

The interior felt like an icebox, making it clear that no one had been in the cabin for hours, or maybe days or weeks. It was still far more comfortable inside without the cutting wind. Shivering, Haley set her bags down and looked around.

Boyd dropped his own bags near the door and stalked off, flipping lights on as he headed for the thermostat. The heat kicked on, but the air blowing from the vents felt like arctic wind for the first ten minutes or so.

As reluctant as Haley was to go back outside, when she saw Chance and Mark head back out for their own bags of supplies, she decided she might as well get it over with while she was already cold. Chance flicked a piercing glance at her when she reached the back of the SUV.

"I think I'll see if I can find a shovel and clean the walk off before anybody gets hurt."

Haley glanced at him and then looked up at the sky. Fluffy white flakes of snow were drifting down here and there. "It'll probably be covered again by morning and I, for one, have no intention of poking my nose out again today," she said dryly.

Chance studied the sky and finally shrugged without comment, but he followed her and Mark back inside. Joy and Boyd had disappeared by the time they returned. Hearing a muffled giggle from upstairs, Haley surmised they'd picked their room. When she'd dropped her bags of supplies on the counter in the kitchen, she went back to the great room, grabbed her two suitcases and headed up the stairs to grab a bedroom for herself. "I hope there's plenty of hot water. I need to thaw out," she said to no one in particular.

Mark snorted. "I'll be surprised if there's any hot water at all for a while."

There were noises that Haley didn't want to decipher coming from the bedroom at the front of the cabin when they reached the upper landing. She made a beeline for the first door at the top of the landing. Chance and Mark, directly behind her with their own suitcases, glanced at each other and made a dash for the next bedroom. Chance won. Scowling, Mark stood in the hallway for a moment and finally headed to the next bedroom.

Haley was amused, briefly. Obviously neither Chance nor Mark was anymore anxious to take the room next to the wrestling match than she was. She was less amused when she'd dropped her bags by the door and headed into the bathroom and came face to face with Chance, who'd just stuck his head in the door on the opposite side.

They gaped at one another in surprise for a moment. Muttering an excuse, Chance backed out and shut the door on his side.

"Well! That's just great!" Haley muttered irritably. It wasn't a hotel. She should've known the bedrooms probably shared a bath! She stood indecisively for several moments, considering whether to move to another room, but she wasn't any more keen about the idea of sharing a bath with Mark and she was sure the next two bedrooms were laid out similarly. Besides, she'd be only one wall away from Jekyll and Hyde!

Shrugging off her pique, she moved to the shower and turned the water on. Leaving it to warm up, she returned to her room and dragged her suitcases over to the bed, removed a comfortable change of clothes and headed back to check the water. There was enough warm water to make her hopeful and she switched from faucet to shower.

* * * *

Chance's belly clenched as if someone had punched him in the gut as he came face to face with Haley. As keenly aware as he already was of sharing the same roof with her in an informal setting, it hadn't seemed particularly intimate to be occupying the room next to hers. The discovery that they would also be sharing a bath and that it connected their rooms threw him for a loop.

Muttering an apology, he backed out and closed the door, staring at nothing in particular while he strained to catch the sounds beyond the flimsy barricade. He didn't actually realize he was until he heard the faint rustle of clothing as she undressed and then the sounds indicating she'd climbed into the shower.

His imagination went wild then. The image that rose in his mind made him instantly hard.

Deciding it wasn't the best of ideas to stay in the room and indulge those fantasies about his boss, he strode from the room and down the stairs. The sounds emanating from the master bedroom had quieted to an occasional, rhythmic creak of the bed, but it didn't take much imagination to figure out what Boyd and Joy were up to.

The sun was already little more than a blinding spotlight just above the western mountain peak when he stepped outside onto the rear deck. A gust of arctic air immediately struck him, clearing his head and dispelling the heat. He shivered at the sudden drop of internal temperature, glanced around a little vaguely and headed to the larger of the two outbuildings behind the cabin. It was a garage, he discovered and empty of vehicles or tools except for the snow blower in one corner.

He studied it for a moment and finally left again, heading for the tiny building on the opposite side of the yard, which seemed to promise maintenance equipment. A huge, dark shape seemed to leap at him as he opened the door. It made his heart thud uncomfortably until he realized it was an enormous snowsuit hung on a nail near the door and it had been the sucking motion of the door being opened that had made it seem to leap at him. Feeling his face heat, he glared at the thing for a moment and finally grasped the shoulders with both hands to study it. "Good god! The man must be a monster! Or maybe it's bigfoot's snowsuit?" he muttered derisively.

Dismissing it after a moment, he turned to survey the small building. It was cluttered and disorganized, but he found the snow shovel he'd been looking for and headed out to clear the walkway. The snow blower might've been faster, but he was in no mood to deal with the noise. In any case, he'd been cooped up in the SUV for hours. He was stiff—some parts more so than others. He needed something to loosen up and he figured it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to work off his excess energy either if he was to have any hope of sleeping.

He had a bad feeling that the exercise was going to prove fruitless in that respect, but he set to work shoveling, beginning at the steps and working his way back toward the SUV. A few scattered flakes of snow were still drifting down but, contrary to what Haley had suggested, he doubted there was enough falling to make his efforts completely

useless.

In any case, he needed the diversion.

Not that any damned diversions he'd tried since he'd started to work with Haley had been particularly successful.

He had mixed feelings about his new job to say the least. There hadn't been any doubts in his mind *before* he'd started work. The Forester Company might not be the biggest advertising firm in the business, but it was a step in the right direction as far as he could see. His objective from the time he'd graduated was to shoot for the top, make his mark before thirty, and then hang on, whatever it took. Youth was more valued than anything else in the business world and, if you were going to make it, you had to do it before thirty or risk never reaching your goals at all once the bigwigs stopped looking at you as young and full of fresh, innovative ideas.

He hadn't counted on Haley, but she presented him with a hell of a dilemma.

She was ambitious. There wasn't going to be any such thing as friendly rivalry if he stepped on her, or over her, on his way to the top.

Beyond that, she was a hell of a distraction—one he couldn't really afford at the moment, certainly not before he'd attained his goal, even if not for the fact that she was standing between him and his goal.

She was what he'd been looking for without ever consciously acknowledging that he was searching. It had hit him like a ton of bricks, though, the minute his mind started down the track toward conquest.

Of all the women he'd pursued and been pursued by, it was a hell of a thing to find the one he'd been looking for at a time when he should be completely focused on his career. All he could say was that Fate was a sick, twisted bastard!

He'd be a hell of a lot better off if he could just ignore the draw, but he'd begun to seriously doubt that he'd be able to within the first day of working with her—maybe the first five minutes!

If it had just been a physical attraction, he thought he could've ignored it. He didn't have any trouble attracting women—although he wasn't really keen on the type of females that seemed drawn to him—and it was for damned sure his latest psycho girlfriend didn't leave him any room for getting needy. In point of fact, he was beginning to think she was going to suck him dry and leave nothing but a dried out husk if he didn't shake her pretty soon.

Haley was pretty, but it was 'girl next door' pretty, wholesome good looks—which definitely appealed to him, particularly since he'd been around her enough that he'd begun to think it wasn't just a façade—she really was a down-to-earth kind of gal. Nothing freaky or weird about Haley—and that was the root of the problem. He was in no danger of thinking 'permanent' about any of the women he had such a knack at attracting. Some of them were downright scary and most of them were the type he couldn't get rid of fast enough.

Haley was the kind of woman he could easily imagine waking up next to and being glad he had.

Not something he should be thinking about unless he could come up with a solution for the big problem.

Actually, not even then, he amended. He had goals. Despite the fierce competition in his field, he thought he had a good shot at achieving them as long as he

kept his focus. Domestic bliss wasn't the sort of thing that kept a man sharp and on his toes. He got comfortable, and as soon as he did he got to thinking he was in the right place.

Even if he considered looking around for another job that had as much potential as this one for attaining his goals, Haley was still going to be a problem for him. Removing himself so that she wasn't in his line of sight might eliminate the potential of making an enemy of her when that was the last thing he wanted. He had bad feeling, though, that it wasn't going to oust her from his mind, or the growing sense that he was ready, more than ready, to give up the dating scene and settle down to the mating routine. The minute he started mentally reviewing other possibilities, it popped into his mind that she might not wait for him to get into a position where he felt like it would be safe to settle down.

He was damned surprised that she was single now. He thought the odds were against that remaining the case. From what he'd been able to determine, she was breathing hard on thirty. However ambitious she was, she was bound to get the nesting urge the minute it occurred to her that she was running out of time if she wanted to fill a nest.

He'd be a hell of a lot better off to forget her. Career goals aside, he wanted kids—just not now—but he could afford to wait and Haley couldn't—not long—and that made things even more complicated.

Realizing that he'd been shoveling until it was growing dark, he stopped to survey the job, saw he'd cleared the walk nearly to the shed where he'd gotten the shovel, and decided he'd had enough. Returning the shovel, he closed up the shed and stomped back to the cabin, no closer to a decision than he had been when he'd gone out to shovel snow.

There was one perk, however. He'd finally managed to get rid of his raging hard-on and he was tired enough he thought that, once he'd eaten, he could sleep.

Chapter Four

The heat had warmed the cabin by the time he went in that it was a sharp contrast that made Chance instantly aware he was half frozen from his stint outside. After stomping the snow off his shoes at the door, he headed upstairs to change and shower. Haley, he was certain, had had plenty of time to finish up and leave the bathroom open.

She'd done more than that, he discovered, jolting to a halt when he stepped into the bathroom. She'd left her door ajar. She was sprawled crossways on the bed, obviously asleep.

And she hadn't dressed.

It took his mind about two seconds to descend into total chaos. He wasn't certain how long he stood stock still in the middle of the bathroom, staring at the heart-shaped ass turned up to him, but it was long enough to get the blood pumping through him with a vengeance.

His eyes narrowed on what he could see of her face when he finally came around enough to look, but he didn't see any sign that she was feigning.

Still, what could he make of the open door?

Invitation?

His heart leapt into overtime at the thought, but it had no sooner formed than it occurred to him that it was possible she just hadn't considered the fact that the bathroom was connected to his room—as in habit.

She hadn't given him any reason to suppose she might invite him to partake, and she also hadn't given him the impression that she was a tease.

She had definitely given off vibes of absentmindedness, though—as in nearly hopeless. Most of his duties, thus far, had revolved around searching for notes she'd left herself and then promptly misplaced.

Irritation flickered through him. If she didn't want to invite him, she damned well needed to keep in mind that he was right next door!

Making no attempt to be quiet, he stepped to the door on her side of the bathroom, grabbed the knob and shut it firmly.

* * * *

The shower had warmed and relaxed her to the point that Haley decided to indulge a little further and sprawled on her bed for a nap. She didn't bother with the clothes she'd dragged out, mostly because she was so weak and washed out it was all she could do to make it to the bed. It was a couple of hours, she figured, before supper and it wasn't as if there was anything pressing to do—or even entertaining. Dragging the cover haphazardly across her as she began to cool down from the shower, she snuggled against the pillow she'd snagged, drowsed lazily for a few minutes and then dropped off the cliff of consciousness.

The closing of a door close by jerked her awake some time later and she lifted her head, looking around hazily at the darkened, unfamiliar room and trying to figure out what door she'd heard. The sound of the shower coming on answered the question and

she twisted around on the bed to stare at the panel.

It hit her then, as she stared down her naked backside, that she'd left the damned door ajar!

And it had to be Chance in the shower!

"Shit!" she muttered under her breath, embarrassed and unsettled, and irritated that she was.

It was dark in the room, hardly pitch black but still gloomy enough she was able to comfort herself with the thought that he couldn't have seen much even if she had thrown the cover off in her sleep. Of course, she supposed her white, white ass had shown like a beacon, but he probably hadn't even looked. He'd probably just grabbed the doorknob and pulled the door shut.

She didn't believe that for a moment, but she also didn't believe he'd stood in the door and examined her, however flagrantly she'd exposed herself. He'd probably seen plenty of younger asses. She couldn't imagine he was that hot to look at hers.

It disturbed her more that he might have gotten the idea that she'd deliberately tried to 'entice' him.

Well, she decided as she climbed up and began to pull on the clothes she'd ignored earlier, she'd just pretend she had no idea that he might have caught a glimpse of her and he'd get the message.

Her hair had dried while she was asleep, she discovered with a good bit of dismay. Combing the tangles out didn't help. She still had bed head. Seeing no hope for it when her hair was sticking out at weird angles to her head, she slicked it back as well as she could and secured it to the back of her neck with a scrungy.

Worn jeans, a sloppy loose t-shirt, no makeup, and her hair in a ponytail!

That ought to wow him, she thought in disgust when she'd examined her reflection! If that didn't convince him she wasn't trolling for dick, she didn't think anything could.

She discovered when she got downstairs that Mark was sprawled on the couch, flipping through the channels on the huge wall mounted TV screen, a look of utter boredom on his face.

He glanced at her and did a double take. "Wow!"

"Don't start!" Haley said irritably. "I fell asleep with my hair wet."

"You look like a teenager."

"Right!" Haley said dryly. "You mean like I'm trying to look like one—except I'm not. I figured I might as well at least be comfortable."

He studied her face, but he didn't make any further comment. "I was wondering what we were going to do for dinner. My stomach feels like it's going to cave in. Must be the nice, fresh country air."

Haley chuckled at the sarcasm in his voice. "I'm starving, too. I guess I'll check out the kitchen."

The sound of a door opening drew her attention as she headed toward the kitchen and Haley looked up before she thought better of it. Chance snagged her gaze before she could look away and she felt her face reddening. Fortunately, the sound of a second door opening caught her attention and they broke eye contact before it got too uncomfortable.

"What's for dinner?" Boyd demanded jovially as he and Joy followed Chance around the upper 'balcony' that overlooked the great room and headed down the stairs.

Frowning in irritation, Haley ignored his hopeful question and kept going. She was joined in the kitchen a few minutes later by Boyd and Joy. Boyd made a beeline for the refrigerator and pulled both doors open to stare at the contents. A look of pleasure lit his face. "I'll say this for Forester! He knows how to throw a party! Now, what have we here?" he said, pulling out wrapped containers of food and settling it on the counter.

Having checked out the pantry, irritated that Boyd had beat her to the refrigerator when she'd headed in to check out the food before him, she moved closer to see what was in the containers as he unveiled it. "I think we should start with the catered food first—It'll probably be best if we do," he said decisively. "I noticed there are some steaks for the grill, but we should save those for tomorrow."

Stepping back, he left Joy and Haley to examine the pre-cooked food. "What do you think, ladies? The duck tonight and the steaks tomorrow?"

Haley and Joy exchanged a look and turned to stare at him.

"How long do you think it'll take you two to get this all heated up?"

Haley and Joy exchanged another look.

"I take it we've been volunteered for kitchen duty tonight?" Haley asked tightly.

Boyd looked surprised. "It's just heating. It's already cooked. I figured us guys would handle the grilling."

"I didn't see a grill when I went out to shovel the walkway," Chance volunteered from the doorway of the kitchen.

Boyd glanced at him in surprise. "There must be a grill somewhere. Forester sent steaks." Disappointment was evident in his voice. He shook his head. "We'll worry about that later. What do you say to a game of pool while the ladies take care of dinner, Crossman?"

Chance flicked a look at Haley's indignant face and shrugged. "I think I'll help out in the kitchen since I'm low man on the totem pole."

Mark came up behind him. "I'll give you a hand. The duck and orange should be heated up just so or it'll be ruined."

Discomfort wafted through Haley. As much as she resented Boyd's assumption that she automatically have kitchen duties simply by virtue of being female, she abruptly felt small for having objected when it really wasn't that big of a deal—particularly if Boyd assumed they'd split the kitchen work. She shook her head. "I think Joy and I can handle it, if it's alright with Joy?"

Joy still looked indignant, but she shrugged. "Where's the microwave?"

Mark was aghast. "You can't heat this food in a microwave! Shoo! I'll help Haley."

Chance fixed Haley with a steady look. "You're ok with this?"

She nodded, turning away to search for pots and pans to heat the food. She was relieved when she looked around and discovered that Joy and Chance had followed Boyd, who'd dismissed the debate right off and headed into the great room.

As soon as they had the kitchen to themselves, Mark took over, as if he was a master chef. After searching the kitchen drawers, he pulled out a large kitchen towel and tucked it in the waist of his jeans apron style and turned the oven on to heat. "This really should warm to room temperature before it even goes in the oven," he muttered in dissatisfaction as he studied the duck.

Smiling faintly, Haley shook her head. "What about the sides?"

“Just transfer them to pots for now. Timing is everything. It would be a shame to ruin such a fabulous meal! Not that we can hope for it to turn out as it should anyway When you’re done with that, maybe you could set the table? I’m going to see if he had the forethought to get a decent wine to top it off. It needs to breathe, you know.”

Actually, she thought wryly, she didn’t. She’d never developed a taste for wine.

She caught a glimpse of the others as she headed to the table with the dishes and silverware. Joy had found a perch to watch Boyd and Chance at the pool table.

Chance, awaiting his turn to shoot, watched her while she moved around the dining table. She might have thought it was her imagination except that, when she glanced their way, he was staring straight at her.

It was impossible to tell what was going through his mind, but she felt her cheeks heat as the memory surfaced of the incident in her room. Trying to convince herself that look had nothing to do with waking up naked and discovering she’d left the damned bathroom door open, Haley set the table as quickly as she could. She couldn’t resist glancing their way again as she headed back into the kitchen, however, and she met Chance’s gaze again, fleetingly.

Mark, in the process of pouring a round of before dinner drinks jerked nervously when she breezed back into the kitchen. She looked at him in surprise and he reddened faintly.

“I figured we might as well help ourselves. Forester has a hell of a wine cellar.”

Haley chuckled. “That doesn’t mean we’re supposed to help ourselves.”

He shrugged and grinned easily. “That’s not what I heard. I’ll just take these in to the guys. Don’t touch anything while I’m gone,” he admonished her as he headed out.

Shrugging, Haley found a kitchen stool and settled on it.

* * * *

Mark’s heart was still tripping over itself as he headed out of the kitchen. He felt purely giddy and had to work hard to act nonchalant. He’d thought for sure Haley had seen him stirring Boyd’s drink. Then again, the ‘danger’ was half the fun, he thought with an inward grin. Knowing Haley, she would’ve been a spoilsport about the whole thing and ruined his little surprise for Boyd—the prick—and his sexatary.

He’d tell her later, he decided. Then she wouldn’t have to feel guilty about it and he’d still have someone to enjoy it with.

Dismissing Haley from his mind as he spotted his quarry, Mark struggled to keep from grinning.

Good old Danny! He’d been at a loss to figure out where he could get his hands on saltpeter at such short notice, but Danny had come through, he thought with an inward grin as he handed Boyd the glass of wine, struggling not to smirk when his boss took the glass and drained half of it in one gulp.

The low class prick, he thought derisively! He deserved it for abusing a fine wine if not for the rest.

Joy wasn’t going to be so joyful when she discovered old Boyd couldn’t get it up for her!

He was a little uneasy when he handed Chance his glass of wine ... but it was all in fun, he reminded himself. They’d probably laugh about it later.

He might not be terribly amused about the Cialis just now, though.

Well, somebody had to give Haley and Chance a little nudge, he thought! He

hadn't planned it—not like he had Boyd's downfall. It had been inspiration of the moment and just his good fortune that he happened to have a couple of tabs on him, but Chance had been giving Haley 'I could eat you alive' looks for a solid week and he just hadn't been able to resist when the idea popped in his mind. If he was going to stick his neck out to play imp, he thought with amusement, he might as well play cupid while he was at it.

It was about time Chance did something besides drool down the back of Haley's neck every time she turned around, and this was definitely the place!

Discomfort and uneasiness wafted through him when Chance took the wine and barely took a sip. Had he tasted the Cialis?

Deciding he didn't look suspicious, Mark headed into the kitchen area again to check on the duck, wondering if he'd put enough in Chance's drink. It would be a shame to waste his last two tabs on Chance and then find out it didn't have any effect on him at all. Unfortunately, that led him to wonder if he should've given Chance two at all. It hadn't occurred to him at the time, but it suddenly seemed a bit much when he never took but one himself. Then again, he was sure Chance outweighed him by a good thirty pounds and he took one himself. Two couldn't be enough to hurt him, he assured himself.

He didn't waste any time worrying about the dosage of saltpeter he'd dropped in Boyd's wine. They regularly used it at the prison where Danny worked as a guard. Danny had assured him it was the correct dosage and would keep Boyd's pet dragon snoozing through the weekend.

When all was said and done, he was probably doing the old bastard a favor. Joy was half his age. It would be a real shame if Jekyll's heart gave out on him from trying to keep up with that young thing!

Particularly when he had a Mrs. On the other hand, Mrs. Jekyll might not be all that broken up about him porking his sextary.

The wine certainly broke the ice! Even Haley was in a good mood when they all finally gathered to dine together.

* * * *

It occurred to Haley about midway through the evening that indulging in a couple of glasses of wine might not have been the best of ideas. She felt mellow enough to melt, especially after watching Chance at the pool table for a while.

Worse, the idea had popped into her head that it wasn't altogether a bad idea to indulge her fantasies about Chance. They were two consenting adults—she was definitely ready to consent!

What would be the harm in indulging in a little weekend fling?

The long list of reasons she'd racked up over the past week flickered through her mind, but she didn't have any trouble dismissing them. In point of fact, she couldn't actually recall what they were.

She toyed with the idea for a while of initiating sex games, but even with her buzz she couldn't quite picture herself actually doing any of the things that popped into her head.

Unfortunately, she couldn't shake them either.

After a while, though, she finally realized that Chance obviously had no intention of going up to his room any time soon and the wine had mellowed her to the point that

she was going to go to sleep on the couch if she didn't head up.

Maybe she'd think of some way to get him to make the first move, she thought sleepily?

Chapter Five

Shivering under the spray of the tepid water from the showerhead, Chance wasn't sure whether he was more annoyed with his dick, or Haley. He'd woken with a hard-on—no huge surprise since he often did—but he hadn't been happy about it when he'd been sporting a damned boner most of the evening before and was already feeling uncomfortably antsy. It hadn't gone down when he'd taken his morning piss, either, at least not completely.

Deciding that if he ignored it it would go away, he'd tried to focus on just that, but then Haley had bounced down the stairs and that had shot that idea to shit. Worse, since Boyd, Mark, and Joy had decided to head for the nude ski resort to spend the day skiing—and gawking—he'd spent the day alone with Haley and that had been a real roller coaster ride.

He wasn't certain if it was his imagination or not, but every time he'd thought he'd tamed the anaconda, Haley had managed to brush against him, or present him with a view of her ass or tits, and he'd had a raging hard-on all over again.

Maybe it was just knowing that they were alone together when he'd been wanting to get his hands on her so bad he could taste it already?

He didn't know, but the day had already been torture and it wasn't over yet!

He'd finally decided after he'd tried everything from a brisk hike to shoveling snow, to try a cold shower. Instead of heading upstairs to the bath he shared with Haley, though, he'd decided to use the shower in the gym the cabin boasted. Haley, as far as he knew, had gone up to her room to take a nap, or to read when they'd finished eating the steaks he'd grilled for the two of them when they'd finally discovered the cabin boasted an indoor grill in the kitchen. He didn't want to run the risk of running into her in the bathroom.

Hell, as much trouble as he'd been having, just knowing she was in the next room, lying on her bed, was enough to get him frisky.

He'd no sooner stripped down and climbed in the shower for another torture session, though, when Haley had decided to check out the damned steam room!

He had no idea whether she'd *also* stripped or not, but he couldn't convince himself that she hadn't and that was all it took for his dick to spring to attention.

Releasing an irritated huff, he shut the shower off.

As he grabbed his towel to dry off, he heard a sudden crash from the main area of the cabin, as if someone had fallen over, or knocked over, a piece of furniture. Skis? Freezing, he listened intently for several moments, but he realized very quickly that it wasn't his imagination and it wasn't Haley.

The others were back and here he was in the gym with Haley! *Shit!* They'd have a field day over that, particularly if they found both of them naked.

Easing the shower door open, he wrapped the towel around his waist and moved quietly down the short corridor that connected the gym with the great room of the cabin to see if everyone had headed upstairs as he'd hoped, or had decided to gather in the great

room.

He was pretty sure they were in the great room and couldn't decide whether to just get dressed and brazen it out or try to get back to his room some other way.

He froze in his tracks when he'd come close enough to survey the main floor of the cabin, however.

There was a monster of a grizzly bear—or at least a damned big brown bear—snuffling at their plates in the sink—which he hadn't washed because he'd been so preoccupied with his dick when he and Haley had finished eating that he'd decided to head for the shower instead!

For several moments, he was so paralyzed he couldn't even think. Finally, he managed to command his feet to move backwards, very slowly. He glanced wildly around the room for escape once he'd moved down the corridor again. There was a window. It wasn't very big, but he was damned sure willing to make it a little bigger if that was what it took!

Racing on tiptoe to the steam room, he was on the point of snatching the door open when it occurred to him that Haley was liable to scream if she actually was naked. Instead, he hissed a warning to her through the door. "Bear! Haley! There's a bear in the cabin!"

Without waiting to see if she responded, he raced to the window, unfastened the locks with shaking hands and, gritting his teeth against the anxiety that the damned thing would squawk when he opened it, carefully shoved the lower window upward. Haley emerged from the steam room just as he got the window open.

"What? My god, Chance!"

Chance stared at her without comprehension, although he was dimly aware from the breeze across his ass that he'd lost his towel when he was struggling with the window. He couldn't wrap his mind around anything beyond the fact that she'd practically shouted at him, however.

It was too much to hope the bear hadn't heard. She'd barely gotten the words out when they both heard a roar from the other room and the thundering and clicking of about a ton of furry teeth and four inch claws barreling toward them.

"Bear!" Chance bellowed.

"Bear!" Haley screamed, having whirled toward the sound and gotten a good look at the beast.

Chance charged toward her, grabbed her arm and dragged her to the window. She didn't need any encouragement. She leapt at the window, flinging herself halfway out. Chance planted his palms on her ass and gave her a boost, diving through the opening almost before her feet cleared the window. He landed on top of her in a tangle of bare arms and legs, the first he realized that he'd lost his towel and Haley was, indeed, completely naked.

Throwing a panicked glance over his shoulder, he saw that the bear had reached the window and was tearing at it in an attempt to climb out after them. His mind went perfectly blank in horror for several seconds. Leaping to his feet, he grabbed Haley's arm and jerked her to her feet.

Haley, as mindless with sheer terror as he was, headed toward the woods. Since he'd aimed for the rear of the cabin at the same time, they slammed into one another and rolled around in the snow for several moments before they managed to disentangle

themselves and get to their feet again.

Deciding directions were in order that time, Chance grabbed her arm again, bellowed at her that there was a shed around back and then hauled her with him as he struggled to run in calf deep snow. They'd just rounded the cabin when the bear careened out of the front door, roaring.

There was no time to get inside the shed. Chance grabbed Haley and pitched her toward the roof. He didn't have time to wait to see if she'd made it. With the bear practically on his heels, he dashed around the shed, trying to put enough distance between himself and the bear to either climb on the roof himself or dash inside the dubious safety the rickety shack represented.

Haley landed on the roof with a thump that knocked the breath from her. She was so panicked for several moments, in point of fact, that she didn't realize she was on the roof until she'd leapt to her feet and spat out the mouthful of snow she'd scooped up when she landed.

As she whipped her head around to decide which way to run, however, she spied Chance hoofing it around and around the shed with the bear directly on his heels. "Shoo! Go away!" she screamed at the bear, glancing around frantically for something she could throw. There was nothing but a few pinecones. Scooping them up, she flung them at the bear, hoping to catch him on his sensitive snout.

The first one caught Chance on his bare ass. Letting out a yelp, he bounded upward several feet from the ground and poured on more speed. The second one caught him in the back. His back bowed as he threw his chest forward, but that time he apparently realized it wasn't the bear.

"Stop helping me, god damn it, Haley!" he bellowed at her.

"Shoo!" Haley yelled. Ignoring his command, she hurled her last missile as hard as she could.

It caught Chance on the side of the head, sending him sprawling.

"Oh my god! Chance! Play dead!" she screamed.

She hadn't even managed to get the words out when there was a tremendous explosion. The cabin seemed to disintegrate. Burning debris flew in every direction. The bear uttered a howl and charged off into the woods at almost the same instant that a charred piece of timber slammed into the shed Haley was standing on and sent her flying over the edge. She landed on top of Chance.

They lay stunned for several moments. Finally, apparently remembering the bear, Chance bucked Haley off and leapt to his feet, whipping his head around in search of the bear.

When he didn't see any sign of him, he glanced toward the burning rubble of the cabin and then glanced down at Haley. "You ok?" he asked, helping her to her feet.

"Bear?"

"He ran off when the cabin blew up," Chance said grimly.

Haley gaped at him blankly and turned to look, staring at what was left of the cabin with a sense of disbelief. The explosion hadn't just taken out the cabin, however. The detached garage had caught enough burning debris that it, too, was on fire. Smoke was rising ominously from the shed, as well, but the beam that had hit it had already demolished it.

Shivering, Haley glanced around and then looked down at herself. Her skin was

already turning blue from the cold, what there was that wasn't red from friction burn and scratched from the ice she'd skidded across. "My god! What are we going to do, Chance?"

Chance was studying his dick, still coated with snow from his fall. Amazingly enough, the fucking thing was still at half-mast. A reddened scrape, he saw, ran from his lower belly all the way across his mutilated dick and balls and down to his thighs. He knew that from the burning sting. He just wasn't certain where he'd gotten it until it dawned on him that he'd raked it across the frame when he dove out the window.

Somehow, he doubted Haley would think it was very manly to cup his abused genitals and whimper, so he made an effort to be stoic and ignore the pain. Distracted, thankfully, by her question, he glanced at Haley and then looked around again. "There was a snowsuit in the shed!" he said abruptly.

Moving quickly toward what was left of the shed, he began grabbing rubble and tossing it to one side. Haley watched him blankly for a moment and then hurried to help. Now that the terror was wearing off, she was beginning to feel the cold.

"Found it!" Chance shouted suddenly, grabbing a handful of material and trying to wrench from beneath the pile of smoldering debris. Haley leapt to help him, dragging broken boards and tools off of it.

Chance held the suit up when he'd finally freed it, examining it.

Haley studied it in dismay, wrinkling her nose at the smells emanating from it, of which smoke was the most pleasant. The thing smelled like a dead animal! "Is that the only one?"

Chance lowered the suit and stared at her. "I didn't see but one, but I wasn't looking." He wrestled with himself a moment and shoved it at her. "Put it on. I'll see if I can find another one ... or something."

Haley felt guilty, but she was freezing. Grabbing the suit, which smelled more strongly of sweat than smoke, she began wrestling to get it on while Chance dug through the debris. He found bootliners—two complete pair than stank worse than the suit—but no boots and he didn't uncover another snowsuit or even anything to wrap up in.

His teeth were chattering when he gave up the search and turned to survey the cabin which, by that time, was little more than blackened, smoldering debris. Haley studied it unhappily. No clothes. No shelter!

They were going to freeze to death if the others didn't get back soon.

Chance before that.

"Look, there's room in this thing for two," she said on impulse.

Chance surveyed her skeptically, but she could see he was cold enough he was ready to climb in, whatever his reservations. He glanced around a little hopefully, as if expecting another suit to magically appear, or the cavalry to come charging up the drive. When neither happened, he moved toward her, studying the enormous suit. Haley unzipped it, holding the sides open. Grasping her shoulders to keep his balance and hold her upright, as well, he carefully pushed one leg into the suit beside hers. She sucked her breath in as his icy cold skin touched hers.

He hesitated. When he tried to get his other leg inside, however, they both tumbled into the snow. "I don't think this is going to work," he grunted from beneath her.

Haley thought it over. "Of course it will!" she said briskly. "I think you need to

get in first, though.”

That didn’t work either. He lost his balance, pin-wheeled his arms, and sat backwards in the snow, taking her with him. That time she landed in his lap. When she looked back at him, she saw that his eyes were closed and his complexion a little green. Since his cock and half his balls were squeezed between the cheeks of her ass, she was pretty sure what that pained look indicated. She gave him a moment to recover.

“I think this would work best. I’ll sit in your lap and we can put it on together.”

Chance was breathing in pained grunts when he sat up. “Ok,” he grunted. “Let’s try it. I don’t think I can stand it if you land on my balls again. At least this way you can’t fall on them.”

Irritation flickered through her. “I didn’t do it on purpose!” she said crossly.

He let out a deep breath, the first he’d been able to draw in since the ‘incident’. “I know.”

Untangling the snowsuit, he held one leg up, sliding his leg inside. Haley wiggled and finally managed to get her leg in beside his.

He paused to suck in another pained breath and then lifted the other leg of the suit. They repeated the process. “Ok. All we have to do now is get up and we can pull it the rest of the way on.”

It hadn’t occurred to Haley until she stood up that she would have her bare ass in Chance’s face. She peered around at him when he didn’t make any attempt to get up and discovered, as she’d feared, that his gaze was glued to her ass. “What do you think happened?” she asked abruptly, as much to distract him from his focus as because she was wondering herself.

Chance flicked a look from her ass to her face. Slowly, his complexion darkened. He shrugged. “The bear was in the kitchen when I first saw it. I’d guess he turned the gas on from the size of the explosion or maybe broke the gas line.”

Haley frowned, offering her hand to help him get up. He ignored it, but they both discovered a problem. She was so close to him that he couldn’t lean forward far enough to get up.

“If you’ll ... uh ... bend over, I think I can get up.”

Haley hesitated, but she was freezing the longer they were exposed. As badly as she hated turning her ass up to him, she could see they weren’t both going to be able to stand up the way things were. “Maybe if I lay down on top of you we could get the suit up and our arms into it and then we could roll onto our knees”

Chance considered it. “I’m not sure that would help. Just bend over and lean forward and I think I can manage it.”

Shrugging inwardly, Haley complied. It took him several aborted attempts, but he finally managed to get on his feet. Twisting to one side, he grabbed the snowsuit and dragged it up over one arm. Anxious by now to get covered again, Haley shoved hers in beside his and then leaned with him as he brought the suit around his back and shoved the other arm in. She discovered the moment she’d pushed her arm in beside his that she couldn’t reach the zipper to close the damned thing. Worse, he was taller than her and, once he straightened, her arms were above her head.

“I’ll get it,” he grunted a little breathlessly, curling his arms around her while she struggled to get her arms out of the sleeves and searching blindly for the zipper tab.

Haley sucked in a sharp breath as his cold hand settled on her mound. He jerked

his hand back as if he'd been burned and then reached a little lower, feeling his way down her thigh. Freezing as she was from the outside temperatures, she'd begun to feel really warm across her back, buttocks—in fact everywhere their bodies made contact inside the suit—by the time Chance managed to grab the tab and pull the zipper up.

As huge as the damned suit was, there wasn't nearly as much room inside as Haley had anticipated when she'd made the offer. Once the zipper had closed the front, she was practically pasted against Chance.

She wouldn't have minded, considering how cold she'd been before, except for the fact that he had a raging hard-on by that time and it was wedged between the cheeks of her ass.

"My feet are freezing," she managed to say in a strangled voice. "Do you think we can get those boot-liners on, too?"

There was skepticism in Chance's voice as he twisted his head to look around for them. "We sure as hell need to give it a try."

"We'll just have to move together."

Easier said than done! They managed a half a dozen awkward steps before Chance lost his balance and took both of them down. They lay huffing for breath for several moments, trying to figure out how to get on their feet again.

Haley was getting warm enough by the time they managed to wiggle over onto their knees and get up that she'd broken a sweat. Chance's cock, dislodged by their movements, speared between her legs as they got up.

Deciding to try to ignore it, Haley leaned down to grab one of the boot liners. "We've got four. Should we try to get our feet in the same boot, you think?"

"I don't know. They look big enough, but I'm not sure we could walk like that."

"We don't really need to walk, though, do we? I mean, surely to god somebody heard the explosion! Even if the others aren't already on their way back, they'd have emergency services out here, don't you think?"

"You'd think," Chance responded, "but I don't hear any sirens."

They'd just managed to get their feet in the damned boot-liners when it abruptly occurred to both of them that the bear that had created the disaster might still be in the vicinity. "Shit!" Haley exclaimed. "What if the bear comes back?"

Chapter Six

"We're fucked," Chance responded worriedly. "No way are we going to outrun a bear in this straight jacket."

"Maybe we should move closer to the fire? Animals are afraid of fire, right?"

Chance grunted. "I don't have a lot of experience with wild animals," he muttered, "but it sounds like the best idea at the moment. Look. I think I can walk us over there if you'll just let me sort of carry you."

Haley nodded jerkily.

Clamping his arms around her just beneath her breasts, Chance lifted her and waddled toward the house clumsily, releasing her once they'd gotten close enough to feel the heat.

They stood for a time, staring at the roaring fire of the cabin, mesmerized by the leaping flames. Haley was beginning to feel downright toasty.

"I hate to mention it, under the circumstances," she said finally, "but ... do you think, maybe, that you could get your cock out of my ass?"

There was dead silence for several moments. "It's attached," he gritted out finally. "Exactly where do you propose I put it?"

Irritation flickered through her at his testiness. "All I'm saying is that it shouldn't be a problem ... considering the situation, and its starting to chafe."

"Don't take this the wrong way. It isn't that I don't find you attractive," an understatement if there ever was one, "But I don't usually have a problem with ... this ... sort of thing."

Haley had already drawn breath to point out that he probably wasn't in the habit of sharing a snowsuit with another person when a sudden thought struck her like a cannonball.

Mark had looked both guilty and privately gleeful the night before when she'd caught him pouring wine for everyone. She'd thought it was because he was filching the boss' private stock, but what if he'd been up to one of his pranks?

Something about the way Chance had admitted the 'problem' seemed to indicate that he'd already been having trouble with it before they'd ended up naked in the snowsuit together.

And that spelled malicious prank.

Mark had spiked his damned drink with something!

He'd been trying to push her toward Chance almost from the time he'd started working with her. It was just like him to decide to have a little fun at their expense by giving it a little extra push.

Haley was abruptly glad she had her back to Chance. She had a feeling if he'd caught the expression on her face that he would've been certain *she* had spiked his drink!

Under the circumstances—the possibly that he might kill Mark if he found out and end up in jail—she thought it might be a good idea to try to distract him from mulling over it. "Sorry I brought it up," she muttered. "What do you think we should

do? I mean, the fire's burning down and it's getting dark."

"Maybe we should try to make it to the road? I don't like the idea of hanging around here. I don't know if the bear will come back or not, but I'd just as soon not find out."

"Good point! Boyd and the others ought to be heading back soon. Even if we don't meet up with them, there's the possibility that fire and rescue might still show up, or we might be able to flag somebody down and catch a ride."

"That ought to be fun," Chance said dryly. "Let's hope for strangers. You ready?"

"Maybe it would work better if we just try to sort of step in sync? It's a long way to the highway from here."

"We can try."

"Alright. Ready? Step—step—whoa!" she exclaimed when they skidded in the snow and almost went down. They managed to set a fairly synchronous rhythm after a few moments, but it was nerve wracking when the ground was so icy they kept skidding, and exhausting when his stride was so much longer than hers. They'd both worked up a sweat by the time they'd made it down the drive to the first switch back.

"I need to stop a minute," Haley gasped. "My it's warm in here! How much further to the highway, you think?"

Chance turned to look back. Naturally enough, when he twisted, he carried her with him. She could see the smoldering ruins clearly enough in the waning light to see that they hadn't gone far. "Never mind," she said glumly.

"Ready?"

"Yeah—step—step."

It was dark by the time they reached the next switch back.

"I think we should stop here and wait until the moon comes up or the stars. It's getting so dark we might lose the driveway."

Chance twisted from right to left to survey the area. Haley looked it over herself while he was at it. "That looks like a log under the snow over there. We could sit down."

Chance didn't say anything for several moments. "Alright. Let's go for it."

By the time they'd reached the log, Haley had had plenty of time to consider that sitting down meant sitting in his lap or taking off the snowsuit. As warm as she was, though, she wasn't about to climb out of the suit. Reaching the log, they teetered back and forth until they'd managed to turn their backs to it.

"Ok," Chance said with the air of somebody bracing themselves. "On the count of three, we sit."

"Wait!"

"What?"

"I just need to ... uh ... adjust something," Haley said. Unwedging one of her arms, which were plastered to her sides by the suit, she reached behind her, grabbed his cock, and shoved it between her thighs. He grunted as if she'd punched him in the belly. "Ok, ready."

He collapsed so hard on the log they nearly went backwards. "Thanks," he muttered after a moment. "I was really dreading"

"No problem," Haley said briskly, trying to ignore the fact that she had his cock

between her thighs. Fortunately, he'd braced his/their legs wide for balance and it wasn't as uncomfortable, for either of them, she supposed, as it might have been. "Tell me if I get too heavy."

He was silent a moment and then chuckled. "And then what? You'll change places with me and hold me on your lap?"

The question startled a laugh out of her. "I wasn't thinking."

"I'm trying not to," he said wryly. After a few minutes, he started humming.

Haley craned her head around to look at him. "What are you doing?"

"Meditating," he said, keeping his eyes closed. "I saw my grandfather's naked ass when I was about six—looked like an old hound dog, all saggy and white. Whenever I need to get rid of a hard-on, I just meditate and think of that white ass and it goes away ... usually."

Haley burst out laughing. "You should be ashamed! Poor old man!"

"Poor old man!" Chance exclaimed, laughter threading his voice. "I was the one that was traumatized."

"Poor baby," Haley murmured with amusement. "Is it working?"

"It might if you weren't sitting on top of me naked," he said somewhat irritably.

"I'd suggest packing it in ice, but I don't want ice in the crack of my ass."

"Don't," he said through gritted teeth, "put that sort of image in my head. The fucking thing will never go down."

"Sorry," Haley said meekly. "Is it very uncomfortable?"

"No, no!" he said sardonically. "I'm starting to get a little lightheaded and my balls feel like they're on fire, but other than that, I'm just dandy."

Guilt tugged at her. He sounded really miserable. She felt like strangling Mark herself! "Maybe if we just focused on something else?" she suggested.

"Sorry. I can't think of anything else."

"I don't suppose you happened to notice whether there were any other houses close by?"

"I didn't see anything after we passed the ski resort."

"I guess that would account for the fact that there hasn't been a fire truck or any kind of rescue vehicles."

"I guess it would. I suppose they didn't see the fire from the resort since it's the next peak over."

"It was daylight, too, but it looks they would've heard the explosion. It nearly deafened me."

"They might've heard it. They might still be wondering what it was, but I doubt it would've occurred to them that it was the cabin blowing up."

Haley frowned. "I still haven't figured out what brought the bear in or how he managed to burn the place down."

Chance shifted uncomfortably. He didn't see that admitting that he hadn't taken their scraps outside would help the situation, though. "I had the vent on when I was grilling the steaks. He could've picked up the scent miles away. Or he might have been close by at the time. There's a lot more food around the place than usual with us spending the weekend at the cabin."

"I guess. I can hardly believe he managed to turn the gas on, though."

"He might not have. He might have broken the gas line. It wouldn't take more

than a spark to make it blow if the gas was leaking.”

“I hope Mr. Forester had some good insurance. He’s going to be totally pissed off about his cabin.”

“Well, if we get canned, it’s been nice working with you.”

“Don’t even talk like that! I just got promoted and I worked my ass off for it!”

Chance’s silence was eloquent. He was probably right. Not that it was fair. They hadn’t blown up the damned cabin! It had been a freak accident, but that probably wasn’t going to appease Daniel Forester even if he believed it. He’d lost a substantial piece of real estate.

She didn’t dwell on those thoughts long, though. Chance’s state of arousal was contagious. She thought, even if she hadn’t already had a problem lusting over the guy, she would still have had trouble keeping her hormones in check if she’d been stuffed naked in a snowsuit with almost any reasonably attractive male. The fact that it was Chance just made it that much harder to ignore and she began to wonder why she was trying.

She’d been determined to ignore the attraction before for a lot of very good reasons, she reminded herself, but one of them was that it could make working with Chance awkward or impossible. Given their current circumstances—freaky weird as they were—she didn’t think they were going to be able to go back to being nothing more than friendly strangers anyway—or at least that she could manage it.

Guilt was eating at her, too. By rights, she shouldn’t have felt any. It certainly hadn’t been *her* idea for Mark to spike his damned wine! She thought it was the fact that she knew Mark had done it because of her added to the fact that she’d noticed something was up and she’d dismissed it when she should’ve known better.

Maybe it was also because she just felt responsible for his suffering? Not that it was something that was going to kill him, but he was clearly miserable and she didn’t think he would’ve been *as* miserable if not for their circumstances.

And maybe she was just trying to rationalize going for something she wanted to do so that she could enjoy it guilt free?

She was still wrestling with the question—should I? Or shouldn’t I?—when Chance finally stirred. “The moon’s up. I think we can see well enough to make it safe to go on.”

She didn’t know if she was more relieved or disappointed to have the decision taken out of her hands. She nodded acknowledgement. “I think we’re going to have to try this together.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. One, two, three—up.”

They’d been sitting too long in too awkward a position. They were stiff. That awkwardness added to the situation proved too much. They managed to lean forward enough to start their rise but, with their centers of gravity so mismatched, they began to lose balance almost immediately. Chance tried mightily to right them as they started forward, but all he managed was to control their fall so that they landed on their hands and knees. He bumped his chin on the back of her head hard enough she saw stars.

“You OK?” he asked in a pained breath.

Haley pulled an arm out of the suit and checked her scalp for blood. “I think so.

You?”

He was silent for a moment, either performing a mental check or trying to decide whether he was or not. “Yeah. I’m going to try to get us both up. Why don’t you just ... uh”

“Not help?”

“I was going to say push up with your legs when I get my foot situated.”

It wasn’t his foot she was worried about. The head of his cock was pressing into her tailbone and it was way too close to her rectum for comfort. “Wait a second. I need to adjust ... something.”

He flinched all over when she grabbed his member. She paused, her heart abruptly hammering against her chest wall at the impulse that hit her. But did he actually *want* to take care of the problem ... with her?

Maybe she could just sort of *accidentally* plug him in and let him take it from there?

After holding onto him so long he was bound to have guessed she was trying to decide what to do, she finally moved it lower along her cleft until she managed an awkward connection. She held her breath, waiting ... and discovered he was also holding his breath, waiting.

Shrugging inwardly, she rocked backward enough to envelop the head more fully.

Chance expelled a ragged breath. Tremors began to wrack him. After a moment, however, he cupped his hips, driving a little deeper.

Haley released a shaky breath and leaned into him.

His resistance crumbled. Shifting his weight to the arm/arms they had planted on the ground, he curled the other around her hips and began to saw back and forth until her lubrication and his insistent thrusts sheathed him fully. He uttered a sound somewhere between a groan and a rumbling growl of satisfaction, hesitated again for several long moments and then seemed to lose touch with everything beyond their connection, pumping in to her with the smooth, regular cadence of a piston. Haley experienced a minor eruption within a few moments. The kneading motions of the muscles along her channel when she climaxed seemed to set him on fire. He grunted, shifted his hold and began to drive into her in a mindless frenzy that set off another climax, this one nearly a ten on the Richter scale. Haley’s convulsions came so hard and fast that she was only dimly aware of the fact that her climax seemed to echo through him until he released his frantic grip on her and braced both of his palms on the ground to hold them up.

It was as well he did. She would’ve landed face first in the snow. The arm she had braced with his to help hold them up felt like putty. She couldn’t seem to find the armhole to get her other arm back in the sleeve.

He hung his head weakly beside hers, gasping for breath. “Thank you,” he murmured gustily, and somewhat drunkenly, when he’d finally regained some control of his breathing. “Can I just stay here a minute? Jesus, that felt good!”

Haley felt goosebumps break out all over her. He wasn’t just whistling Dixie! Wow! Mind blowing! And they hadn’t even had foreplay!

Actually, she supposed rubbing all over each other for an hour or so *was* foreplay, just not the traditional kind. She nodded weakly, but she didn’t think she could’ve moved if she’d wanted to.

She’d just regained enough of her mental faculties to begin considering how they were going to get up when she felt his cock growing hard again. He moved slowly in and

out of her again, almost experimentally.

Haley felt like groaning, but there was no getting around the fact that it felt good. She stopped him when she felt him beginning to withdraw, preventing his escape by pushing back against him and grinding her ass against his pubic bone. He grabbed her hip, grinding back and then pitched both of them over onto their side.

It occurred to Haley when he began thrusting into her again that he was exhibiting definite signs of some kind of sex drug.

She thought.

It *might* be normal for him, or the product of their unique circumstances. From her experience, though—limited granted—guys couldn't usually get it up again that fast.

Of course, Chance was several years younger than she was, she reminded herself. Thirty-something-year-old men usually didn't have the drive that twenty-something men had.

She stopped trying to figure it out when she felt her body reacting to his, felt the pleasurable tension growing. She didn't actually expect to climax again. She felt thoroughly sated from the first two. It was just as well she hadn't expected it, because she'd just gotten really worked up when he came.

Her disappointment was *way* out of proportion to the circumstances, she told herself irritably. She'd already come twice. There was no sense in being greedy about it!

Chance caught his breath. "Can you turn over?" he asked gustily.

She considered it. "I don't think so."

He was silent, apparently trying to figure it out via mental exercise. "I need to get out of this damned thing for a minute."

He didn't wait for her to agree that time. He grabbed the zipper and opened it from neck to crotch. The blast of cold air that hit Haley was like a slap, but she tumbled out of the suit and into the snow. Chance ripped the suit off a little frantically, tossed it onto the ground, rolled her onto it and practically dove at her.

He'd speared into her and began pumping before she'd fully oriented herself. The itch he hadn't scratched in the last go round instantly began to throb and ache, though, wringing an enthusiastic response from her.

The tension built a lot higher that time than it had either time previously, expanding and growing until it finally ruptured cataclysmically, tearing a series of high pitched screams from her and nearly ripping her from consciousness. Chance began pumping faster as soon as she began convulsing, following her into ecstasy a minute behind her. He almost seemed to melt into her when he finally stopped shuddering. For many minutes they simply lay melded together by the heat of their bodies, huffing for breath. Finally, with a groan, Chance rolled off of her, landing face first in the snow.

"God! Kill me now!" he muttered.

Chapter Seven

Shivering from exposure almost the moment Chance removed his heat from her, Haley sat up and looked down at him worriedly. “Chance?”

He groaned in response, struggled a moment and finally pushed himself up onto his hands and knees.

He’d left a snow angel where he fell—with a hole where he’d driven his pole into the snow.

Haley wrestled with a hysterical urge to giggle and weep at the same time.

He glanced at her uncomfortably. “We should get back into the fucking suit before we freeze. Maybe you should get in back for a while?”

Haley studied him a little doubtfully, but she didn’t argue. They discovered it was even harder to get into the damned thing together with her in the back than it had been the other way around, but they finally wrestled it on and were zipped in. Fortunately, even though the boot-liners weren’t as protective as actual boots would’ve been, they were more malleable and actually easier to get into since they’d wallowed them out before.

It actually worked better with Chance playing engine and her caboose except that he wore her out a lot more quickly. She gave up on the idea of getting her own arms into the suit and wrapped them around Chance’s waist to help keep her balance.

They traversed two more switchbacks and the highway was in sight when they stopped to rest and catch their breath again. “This isn’t working as well as I’d hoped,” Chance muttered.

Haley couldn’t agree more! It was a relief not to have to try to walk riding his cock, but he was taller than her and the man that owned the damned suit was obviously a giant. She was completely enveloped in the damned suit now and completely blind.

Not that she particularly wanted to view the scenery! But she couldn’t get fresh air and, with the heat the two of them had generated, the owner’s scent was getting more and more ripe—as *if* the damned suit hadn’t stunk before!

The owner either didn’t bathe regularly or he sweated like a horse when he was wearing the damned suit.

She was almost inclined to give him the benefit of doubt. She felt like she was in a sauna, herself. Maybe the guy just had a very strong musk?

“I’m game. I’m suffocating back here.”

Chance was already struggling out of the suit before she’d finished talking. He stood watching her while she finished climbing out of the suit. “I don’t suppose ...? Never mind.”

Haley glanced up at him and then down at the erection jutting toward her. “I suppose that means you want to play sit and spin a few minutes before we suit up again?” she asked a little tiredly.

“Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of bouncing you up and down on it,” he said, his voice deepening.

Haley's pussy--mindless thing!—clenched in response. "I think we've still got enough lubrication to manage it," she said a little wryly.

He didn't wait for another invitation. Grabbing the suit, he spread in on the ground and dragged her down onto his lap facing him. She discovered she'd been right. There was still plenty of lubrication. Chance mounted her on his cock with a minimum of effort and began jogging her up and down on his pole, his movements eloquent of desperation.

She shouldn't have felt anything but exhaustion, but she discovered there was still life after two major climaxes. She began bouncing with a lot more enthusiasm when she felt her body reaching for the high note. He almost beat her to the finish line that time. He'd already begun grinding into her in convulse release when her own hit her.

She was warm again, despite the nip in the air, by the time they finished.

She was finished.

Chance wasn't done, she discovered. They went three more rounds before he gave up and collapsed backward on the suit, dragging her with him. They lay sprawled together weakly for a few moments. Finally, with obvious effort, Chance wiggled and bucked beneath her until he'd managed to get both his legs and arms in the suit.

Chilled to the bone by that time, Haley was tired enough she was still undecided as to whether she had the energy to get up or not. Finally, she merely burrowed under the edges of the suit. "I'll get up and turn around in a minute," she muttered weakly against his chest.

He curled his arms around her, twisting until he managed to grab the zipper tab and work it at least part of the way up, and then collapsing weakly again.

Haley found herself drifting in a euphoric haze as soon as she was warm. She'd almost drifted to sleep when she realized Chance was breathing really heavily.

"You alright?" he muttered a little drunkenly.

"Fine. You?"

He dragged in a deep, shuttering breath. "Yeah. Why are you breathing so hard if you're ok?"

"I'm not breathing heavily. I thought you were."

The comment brought her head up and her eyes open. Chance opened his eyes at almost the same moment and they discovered the bear was leaning over them, snuffling at them.

Haley screamed, leaping instinctively as far from the bear as she could considering she was tethered to Chance by the suit.

Chance yelped, lurching over and trying to scramble to his feet. "Fuck!" he bellowed when he couldn't stop and pitched over onto his other side.

"Bear!" Haley screamed frantically, unable to see anything but Chance's chest, trying to untangle herself from him, terrified the bear would be on top of them any second. She screamed again when she felt herself pitching over Chance and realized they were still falling—rolling.

Haley's heart was thundering so hard in her ears she couldn't have heard the bear if she'd been focused on it. Her terror had instantly leapt away from the bear, however, the moment her mind assimilated the fact that they were rolling downhill and connected it to the size of the hill. She was far more focused then on trying to remember how long the drop had seemed when they'd arrived at the cabin and how many trees there were to

bounce off of.

Almost on the thought, they bumped over an infant tree, flattening it as they went over. Chance managed to roll to his back when they bounced. He spread his arms wide, trying to grab at the snow, rocks and tree branches to stop their slide. Haley managed to get her head out of the suit and peer down the hillside. It wasn't comforting. She discovered they were heading straight for a very large tree. Screaming, she pitched herself to one side. The maneuver diverted their course enough to prevent a head on collision. Chance threw one arm out and made a grab for the limbs. He managed to snag one just long enough to slow their descent and then their feet and torsos swung around. When he lost his grip, they were sliding feet first down the hill, which, in Haley's book was worse than heading down. At least before they'd been able to see what they were heading toward. Plastered belly to belly with Chance, she couldn't twist her head around far enough to see what they were about to collide with when they switched ends.

They slid under the low hanging branches of another pine. Fortunately, they'd slowed enough that the limbs snagged them. They lay panting for breath when they finally stopped, listening.

They could hear the bear on the road above them, bawling at them, but apparently the bear decided not to try the slippery slope they'd just slid down with Chance playing sled.

He grunted, pushing himself up. Haley ducked her head back inside the suit like a turtle hiding in its shell to avoid the branches clawing at them and dumping clumps of snow all over them.

"Do you think, maybe, we should just stay put for a few minutes? Maybe the bear will go away again," Haley said hopefully. "I don't think he can see us."

"He doesn't have to see us. He'll be able to smell us—or at least this fucking suit! I don't think he managed to get anything to eat before he set the cabin on fire. If he wasn't still hungry, why would he follow us at all?"

"Good point!" Haley agreed shakily.

Chance twisted his head to look up the slope when they'd emerged from beneath the tree. "I don't see him," he said quietly.

Haley strained her ears to hear. "I think he's still up there. I can hear grunting noises but it doesn't sound close."

Chance heaved a breath of relief. "You good to go? Or do you want to take the time to turn around?"

Haley wiggled and finally managed to lock her arms and legs around him. "This might work better ... if you don't mind carrying me."

He grinned abruptly. "I don't think it could work worse and there's at least one definite benefit to it that I can see."

"What?" Haley asked blankly.

"I can just slip my dick in and use it to help hold you up."

Haley didn't know whether to laugh or whine. "It's sore," she finally complained.

He uttered a snort of amusement. "Lady, I'm about to start coughing up dust, myself. I think my balls probably look like grandpa's by now."

Haley tried not to laugh, but she was only partially successful. "At least I know you're not always insatiable."

He frowned, but she wasn't certain if it was because of her comment or not. He lifted his head abruptly.

"Is it the bear?" Haley squeaked.

"I hear a car!"

"Oh! Thank god!"

"Not yet. We're still a good long way from the highway," he muttered, getting to his feet with an effort, "further, in fact, that we were a few minutes ago."

They slipped and slid to the edge of the switchback road and then, since there wasn't as much snow piled on it, Chance began jogging toward the highway. Haley was just thinking about what excellent shape he was in when he began to jog a little faster.

There was something about it that sent a shaft of alarm through her. "What is it?"

"That fucking bear!" he grunted out. "The son-of-a-bitch followed the road down. Take a look and see how close he is!"

Haley peered over his shoulder and tightened her grip on him. "Close!" she screeched in his ear. "Oh my god! Run! Run!"

They could see the highlights of the vehicle Chance had heard before they reached the road. Chance, facing the oncoming car, bounded into the edge of the road and began waving his arms to flag the motorist down. Haley clenched her eyes tightly, not only because she could see in the car's headlights that the bear was rapidly gaining ground on them but because she expected any moment for the car to slam into them.

Fortunately, she wasn't able to see how closely they came to getting spattered on the car's windshield. She heard the squeal of tires, though, as the motorist slammed on brakes and began to skid.

"We need help here!" Chance bellowed, alerting her to the fact that the vehicle had managed to come to a stop.

She couldn't see the man inside, but she heard the car door open as Chance raced around the SUV to the other side. "Bear!" she screamed in warning.

"Daisy! What the hell are you doing out here!" a man bellowed in a deep, growly voice.

As Chance turned to grab the rear door handle, Haley got a good look at the bear of a man that had climbed out of the vehicle. He looked like he was fully six and half feet tall and about four feet across the shoulders. The bear reared up on its hind legs and grabbed him.

Haley squeezed her eyes shut as Chance dove into the back of the vehicle and scrambled to close the door behind them.

Clutching each other in shock, they both stared in horror as the man wrestled the bear. Finally, the bear released him and landed on all four feet. The man patted the bear on the head. "Bad girl! You get yourself back up into the woods, now, Daisy! What the hell were you thinking to scare these folks like that?"

Chance and Haley exchanged a long look and then turned to look at the stranger as he squeezed himself back under the wheel of the SUV. He grunted as he twisted to look back at them. "You folks alright?"

"You *know* that bear?" Haley demanded with a mixture of outrage and disbelief.

The man chuckled. "I oughta. I raised her from a cub. Sorry about that. She don't usually mess with strangers." He frowned then and reached up to turn on the overhead light, surveying them critically. "Guess that explains that. Mind telling me

what you're doin' in my snowsuit?"

Haley and Chance exchanged another look.

"You're Forester's handyman," Chance said finally.

The man's bushy brows rose almost to his hairline. "You know Mr. Forester?"

"We work for him," Haley said a little stiffly. "He loaned us the cabin for the weekend."

Something flickered in the man's eyes. "There was supposed to be a party of five," he said slowly.

Haley let out a huff. "The others decided to go to the ski resort for the day."

"Well, that still don't explain you two cozied up in my suit."

"It's a long story," Chance said tiredly.

The man shrugged. "I'm Pete ... Pete Thompson. Why don't I take you folks back up to the cabin and we can get warm and then you can explain it?"

Haley glanced from him to Chance in dismay. "Actually," she said uncomfortably, "that's part of the reason we had to borrow your snowsuit. The cabin isn't there anymore."

"The bear came in looking for food. He must have ruptured the gas line," Chance volunteered.

"Holy shit!" He thought it over. "Everybody's been out searching for a plane crash!"

Turning around in the seat, he put the SUV in gear and headed toward the disaster site. Chance and Haley stayed in the vehicle while he got out to survey the damage. The moment he'd walked far enough away that they had a little privacy, Haley squirmed to reach the zipper. "I wonder if he has anything in the car I could wrap up in."

"I don't know, but he didn't seem too happy about us borrowing his snowsuit," Chance pointed out.

Haley would've liked to argue with him, but he was right. She shouldn't borrow without asking anyway.

The snowsuit was a different matter.

When Chance had righted himself on the seat, she squirmed back into the suit with him. "What the hell do we do now? We can't go all the way home like this."

"Maybe you could borrow something from Joy?"

Haley frowned. "I don't remember noticing her taking anything with her."

Chance shrugged. "I don't either, but don't you think they would've been back by now if they hadn't planned on staying the night at the resort before they left?"

"Not necessarily. It's a nudist resort for one thing, and they might not have intended to stay when they left. Anyway, I hate like hell to have to ask her of all people."

Because, besides being a total bitch, she was pretty sure she couldn't get her fat ass in anything Joy owned.

"We'll have to figure out something. I think the resort is going to be our best bet. I don't have any cash, any credit cards, or an ID. We're going to have to beg something off of somebody—clothes, a room for the night."

Pete got back into the car. "Well, that's a total loss. Guess I need to get somewhere and call the boss. Where do you folks want me to drop you?"

Haley gaped at the back of his head. They'd just been through absolute hell and nearly gotten killed and he was as blasé about it as if they'd just hitched a ride.

"Everything we had with us burned when the cabin blew up."

"I sort of figured that was why you two borrowed my snowsuit," he said drily. "You're sure there weren't nobody else in there?"

Haley felt a flicker of uneasiness, but she dismissed it. "We watched them leave this morning. I've been inside all day. I would've heard if they'd come back—and the SUV isn't here."

He nodded. "You want me to take you to the resort? I don't think much of the place myself, but it's the closest place with a phone and the closest that's likely to have a room."

"We don't have anything," Chance said, a faint edge to his voice. "No way to pay for a room, no ID—and no clothes."

Pete swiveled around in the seat with an effort and peered at them. "Oh!" he said finally. "Your stuff burned."

Haley and Chance exchanged a look.

"The thing is ... I was in the steam room when the bear came in and Chance was in the shower. We had towels, but we lost them when we jumped out of the window," Haley said uncomfortably.

Pete stared at her for a moment, then his gaze flickered down her length, as if he could see through the snowsuit. A faint grin tugged at his lips and he turned around abruptly. "Now *that* is a problem. Don't have nuthin' with me, or I'd offer it. How in the hell did you two make it to the road in one suit?"

"It was easier with the bear chasing us," Chance said tightly.

Pete chuckled. To do him justice, he did try to contain it, but by the time they got back to the main road, he hadn't mastered it. He'd shake soundlessly for a few minutes and then chuckle out loud. They had to listen to him all the way to the damned resort. Haley wanted to choke him. She was sure Chance did, too. Fortunately for him, he was built like the damned grizzly bear that had chased them and they were unarmed.

He parked in front of the lobby.

Chance cleared his throat. "I don't suppose we could get you to go in and page Mr. Boyd?"

Pete snickered. "Well ... guess I could. You're still gonna have to cross the lobby to sign in. I wouldn't worry about it too much. Ain't nobody much wears clothes inside around here."

"If we were 'in' to strolling around bare assed," Haley said testily, "we would've come with everybody else."

Pete glanced at her over his shoulder. "I ain't much for it myself, but I'm thinkin' you two might have to get used to it."

When he'd left, Haley considered the situation, craning her neck to see inside the lobby. "We've got two choices here"

"Yeah, bad and worse."

Haley shifted to look at him with a touch of surprise. "You really are shy about being seen naked?"

Chance glared at her. "I'm not shy, god damn it! I'm just not a damned exhibitionist." Then, too, he had another woody. He didn't think that would go over well even if he could brazen it out.

Haley shrugged. "I'm not really comfortable with the idea myself. We have to

consider the snicker factor if we go in like this, though.”

“There is that. What do you want to do? Flip a coin?”

“I think the strangers here are the least of our worries,” Haley said flatly. “We aren’t going to get through this without Mark, Joy, and Boyd knowing about it. We might as well try to brazen it out—go in wearing the suit. The only thing we’ve got a chance of preserving is our modesty.”

Through the windows, they saw Boyd strolling across the lobby to the front desk. He spoke briefly with Pete and hurried outside.

“We’re in for it now,” Chance muttered just as Boyd snatched the rear door open and peered in at them.

“What happened?”

They gave him the short version. He looked white and shaken. Haley doubted that had anything to do with their near fatal adventure. Most likely he was trying to think how he was going to explain the cabin to the big boss. “Either of you hurt?” he managed finally.

Surprise flickered through Haley. “Bruises,” she responded when she’d gathered her wits. “I don’t think I’m hurt anywhere besides the bruises.”

“You?”

“Fine. Tired,” Chance said in a tight voice.

Boyd considered their responses. “We need to get you two checked out in the infirmary,” he said decisively. “Insurance, you know.”

And Haley had just been thinking he was actually a decent guy! He wasn’t worried about a damned thing but a lawsuit!”

“How about you go inside and bring Haley something to wear?” Chance suggested.

Boyd gaped at him, scanning both of them curiously for the first time, making it obvious that he’d been too worried about Forester’s interests to pay them any attention.

“Why are both on you in the same snowsuit?”

Chance rolled his eyes.

“It was the only thing we could find to keep from freezing to death after the explosion.”

Boyd blinked rapidly. “Well, it’s warm inside. You can ditch that ... thing.”

Haley’s lips tightened. “We can’t. We were in the gym when we saw the bear. I was in the steam room and Chance was taking a shower. We bailed out the nearest window when he got after us.”

Boyd mulled that over. She knew the moment he’d put two and two together and come up with hanky-panky. His eyes began to gleam.

Alright, so they *had* been screwing around! But that was after the fact, damn it!

“I’ll see if I can get something from Joy. Nobody brought anything but an overnight bag, though.”

“Ask Mark,” Haley said quickly. “I think he’s closer to my size.”

He looked surprised, surveyed the suit, and finally shrugged.

Mark came bounding out of the hotel lobby almost ten minutes later and snatched the rear door open, gaping at the two of them. “Girlfriend! What in the world happened?”

Chance uttered a disgusted huff.

“Did you bring me something?”

He handed her a shirt and a pair of his trousers. She felt like weeping with relief.

Not that they weren't still going to have people gaping at them, but it beat the hell out of trying to act nonchalant waddling across the damned lobby together in the snowsuit. “Go away while I dress. I'll tell you later.”

Mark looked indignant, but he finally shrugged and retreated a short distance.

Haley flicked a shy glance at Chance when she'd crawled out of the suit and shrugged into Mark's shirt. “Good thinking,” she murmured, smiling at him. “I would almost have rather been eaten by the damned bear than to have to go in in that suit!”

“Necessity and all that,” Chance responded dryly, but he smiled back at her.

She was barefoot and her hair looked like a cuckoo bird had been nesting in it, but she still felt worlds better when she and Chance limped into the resort lobby. Boyd was waiting at the desk. To her surprise, he'd already made arrangements for a room for them.

While she was trying to decide whether she should revise her opinion of him, she discovered he'd arranged for *one* room—not two. “You couldn't get two rooms?” she demanded, trying to curb her temper.

“Nope. They're full up.”

Chapter Eight

Haley glanced uncomfortably at Chance. "I need a shower."

"Infirmary first," Boyd said briskly.

Haley gaped at him in dismay, her mind leaping instantly to the dried semen she could feel on her thighs and belly and even the cheeks of her ass. "But"

"No buts! First we need to get you two checked out."

Chance sent him a sardonic look. "To make sure we don't have grounds for a lawsuit, right?"

Boyd smiled thinly. "To make sure you aren't hurt and just haven't realized it," he countered quickly.

Haley wanted to argue, but she realized fairly quickly that Boyd wasn't going to budge and she was only delaying the inevitable. "Fine! Can we just get it over with so I can get a shower?"

She didn't know whether to appreciate Chance's offer to let her go first or not. From his expression, though, he immediately realized what was running through her mind—it was going to be obvious they hadn't spent the entire time running from the bear.

"Thanks," she murmured, following the medic into the examination room, but there was something about the tight lines around Chance's mouth that bothered her.

The medic didn't say anything about the semen, but she knew he noticed.

Thankfully, the examination wasn't prolonged or invasive. He ran his hands along her arms and legs in search of cracked or broken bones, checked her breathing, examined her scalp for lumps and cuts, checked her pupils, all the while pelting her with a barrage of questions. Finally, he told her what she'd known all along—that she was battered and bruised and she was going to be sore as hell for a while, but he couldn't find anything that suggested a trip to the hospital was needed.

Relieved, she climbed off the table and quickly got into the clothes Mark had loaned her.

Chance seemed preoccupied when she came out. She glanced at him a little uncertainly and finally headed to the room to bathe, relieved to get the worst of the embarrassment behind her. Boyd was waiting and wanted a full report on the accident.

She stared at him a moment in disbelief. "You'll have to wait," she finally said. "I'm taking a bath. I was in that suit, which smelled as bad as the bear, for hours. I've stood the stench as long as I can stand it!"

She was exhausted, besides, but the inconsiderate asshole wasn't likely to take that into consideration!

It sucked big time that she didn't have anything clean to put on when she got out—and that she'd had to use the only thing available before she'd had a chance to bathe, but at least she felt cleaner.

And not sticky with grime from the suit, sweat, and semen!

It flickered through her mind to wonder if that was why Chance had been acting

so stand-offish, that he'd gotten the idea that she couldn't wait to wash 'him' off, but she dismissed it. He had to have found that snowsuit as repulsive to wear as she had. He was probably just feeling like she did—beat up, worn out, and spacey now that the fright and shock were beginning to wear off.

* * * *

"Any complaints you want to tell me about? Pain? Any cuts that need attention?"

The first thing that popped into Chance's mind was the one thing that had been driving him crazy. He wasn't in the habit of discussing such personal things, though, and he wasn't really comfortable bringing it up even if the guy was a medic and a stranger besides.

"Aside from hurting everywhere? No."

The medic merely nodded, continuing his tests while Chance continued the debate in his head. Finally, when the medic moved behind him to listen to his lungs, he cleared his throat and took the plunge. "This isn't actually related to the accident ...," he began.

The medic moved around him, giving his full attention.

Chance shrugged. "I've been in an almost constant state of arousal," he muttered uncomfortably.

"I'm guessing for a while or you wouldn't mention it?"

Chance frowned, trying to pinpoint a time line. He'd been so focused on Haley once they'd gotten on the trip, though, that it was hard to say when, exactly, his discomfort had reached a point that it became almost his complete focus. "Let's just put it this way ... I woke this morning with what I thought was a piss hard and it never really went down after that—not for long, anyway."

"You take anything? Ecstasy, maybe?"

Chance was offended and he didn't try to hide it. "I don't pop pills," he growled. "And if I was in the habit of it, I wouldn't have brought it up."

The medic frowned thoughtfully. "Have you been proscribed anything for erectile dysfunction?"

Chance felt his face heat. "No," he said flatly. "I didn't have a problem before and I sure as hell haven't had a problem lately."

"Any outside influences that might account for it? I understand you were with Ms. Freeman—pretty lady."

Chance's discomfort was growing by leaps and bounds. "It isn't like I didn't notice," he said dryly. "I find her attractive, if that's what you're asking, but I ... uh ... we" He stopped and cleared his throat. "It still doesn't feel right, if you know I mean."

The medic was beginning to look a little uncomfortable himself, despite his efforts to maintain a professional demeanor. "You're sure you didn't take anything that might account for it?"

"Like I said."

"Ok—so could anybody have slipped you anything?"

A jolt of shock went through Chance. "Why would anybody do that?"

The medic shrugged. "That's what I'm asking—might they, and would anyone have had the opportunity? If you've been experiencing a problem with erections—having them when it doesn't seem like you should—Well, it sounds like there's a

possibility someone might have given you something. I could take blood and send it to the lab and have them check.”

Chance considered the suggestion, briefly, and dismissed it. “That’s alright. I’ll just do a little checking on my own,” he said grimly.

* * * *

Chance, Haley discovered when she left the bathroom, was winding up his report to Boyd. She felt a little guilty about it. She’d grabbed the shower first and left him to be grilled by Boyd.

The sense of guilt didn’t last long. As soon as she got out, Chance bounded up from the chair where he’d been sitting and headed in to take a shower and Boyd began grilling her for her version.

He recorded everything. Haley had a bad feeling about it, wondering if she should refuse to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate her, or demand a lawyer, but she reminded herself that she hadn’t done anything to bring the disaster upon them. If anybody was responsible it was the caretaker, Pete, for making a damned pet of the bear and then failing to mention it.

She wasn’t certain that would’ve greatly changed the situation, actually. She didn’t think she would’ve been convinced the bear wasn’t dangerous if she’d *known* she was tame, or at least partly tame.

When he’d left, she pulled the covers back and climbed into the bed. As exhausted as she was from their adventure, she was beginning to really feel the effects of it and wished she’d asked the medic for something for pain, or to help her sleep.

Chance came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, halted for several long moments and finally moved around the room turning off the lights when she glanced at him questioningly. “You want me to leave this on?”

Haley glanced at him again, feeling a strange sensation wash through her at the situation. It was a little disorienting, she realized abruptly, to have gone from colleagues and virtual strangers to intimacy so swiftly. “Not unless you want it on.”

He flipped the bathroom light off and she lay tensely, waiting for him to move to the bed, wondering suddenly if he would when he’d been acting so distant ever since they’d arrived. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or not when he settled on the opposite side of the bed. He settled on the edge, as if trying to put as much distance between them as possible, and she couldn’t decide if he’d done it because he wanted the space or if he thought she did.

Did she?

She didn’t suppose she did or she wouldn’t have felt an odd sense of abandonment and rejection. Or maybe she would’ve anyway? As confused as she was about her feelings over the situation, there wasn’t any confusion on other levels. The urge to close the distance and cuddle, at least, was strong and her body felt warm enough she wasn’t in any doubt that she would welcome the physical intimacy. On an intellectual level, she realized it was probably for the best if they did put some distance physically and mentally between them.

It was going to make working with him awkward ... especially if he was already regretting it, and she was pretty sure he was.

She fell asleep worrying about it and woke up wedged under his back. Even as she roused up enough to realize where she was, Chance eased from the bed and

disappeared into the bathroom. She pretended to be asleep when he came out again, waiting until he'd left the room to get up.

The trip home was more miserable than the trip to the mountains had been. Chance had managed, somehow, to round up a shirt and a pair of jeans, but they fit him as badly as Mark's clothes fit her. Everyone in the car was subdued—even Joy—although Haley had a feeling that she was bursting with the need to tell everybody that would listen about her and Chance's little adventure.

She was just glad when they dropped her off at her apartment building. To her relief, her parents had moved back to their own apartment while she was gone, but that made it necessary to get the super to let her in since she didn't have her keys.

Contrary thing that she was, the minute she was alone, she felt more alone than she could remember being and strangely restless. It took all she could do to focus on taking care of the chores that needed to be done before she returned to work the next day.

When she'd done her cleaning, she sat down at her computer and began the rather daunting task of trying to get all of her identification and credit cards replaced. Fortunately, she managed to get a good bit taken care of online. Unfortunately, she was still going to have a problem until she actually got them. Until they arrived, trying to function was going to be like trying to operate bound and gagged.

Sighing at the thought, she shut her computer down and went to look for aspirin for the headache she'd developed.

Boyd gave her a call later that evening and told her he'd talked with Forester and the big boss had suggested that she and Chance take a couple of days off before they returned to work.

Her belly clenched at the suggestion. She couldn't help but wonder if that meant he was assessing whether he wanted to keep either of them in his employ or not, but she thanked Boyd for the consideration and asked him to convey her appreciation to Mr. Forester.

The office was already a twitter when she arrived the next morning for work and it didn't take paranoia to realize she was the main subject. Everyone got quiet when she bustled in and headed straight for her office.

Chance didn't show up. She told herself that she was glad he'd decided to take the boss up on the offer. It would give her a few days to get herself together, but she couldn't help but worry that he was hurt worse than he'd admitted.

She was as sore herself as if she'd been in a fight, but Chance had carried the bulk of the load when it came to protecting both of them—carrying her most of the time—and he *had* been on the bottom when they'd rolled and skidded down that hill.

Or maybe he just wasn't anxious to see her?

She avoided Mark as much as possible. She was pissed off with him because of her suspicions for one thing. Beyond that, she knew he expected, as her best buddy, to get the lowdown on everything that had happened and she didn't want to discuss it with him.

He finally bearded her in her din midweek.

"You alright?"

Haley pasted a false smile on her lips. "Sure! Why wouldn't I be?"

Mark eyed her skeptically. "Well, for one thing, you nearly got blown up and for another, you got chased all over creation by a grizzly bear," he said dryly. "You sure

you're ok?"

"It was a tame bear," she said tightly.

"You didn't know that," he pointed out.

"No, I didn't!" Haley said crossly. "And it scared the hell out of me and Chance. I feel like the butt of some sick joke, if you want to know the truth!"

Mark looked uncomfortable. "Hey, none of us knew about the bear. Well, I didn't. I don't know about Boyd. He might've. It isn't the first time he's been up to Forester's cabin. Everybody that was supposed to go this weekend was pissed off, by the way, but Forester made arrangements for them to have a weekend at a resort."

Haley stared at him in disbelief. "They were pissed off about the cabin?"

Mark shrugged. "Well, you can't blame them. They were looking forward to it."

Haley narrowed her eyes at him. She could and did. Talk about unfeeling! If she and Chance hadn't bailed out of the cabin they would've been blown to bits! Of course, they hadn't actually been hurt, but it seemed to her that they should have at least had enough sensitivity about their near miss not to be pissed off about not getting their chance to stay at the cabin.

Well, she'd always known it was a dog-eat-dog kind of business!

She'd just shooed Mark out with the promise of meeting him for lunch when there was a tap on her door. When she called a welcome, Chance stepped in and closed the door behind him.

It shouldn't have been a shock when he was her assistant and she'd been expecting him back, but it still sent a paralyzing jolt through her—so much so that it took her several moments to realize his expression was hard and his eyes glittering with anger.

Mark shifted uneasily as if he was contemplating making a dash for the door, but when Chance didn't move away from the door, he scuttled a little closer to her instead.

"I've been giving it some thought," he said grimly, and without any preliminaries whatsoever. "And I've come to the conclusion that the only time anybody could've spiked my drink was at the dinner the night we arrived at the cabin."

Haley gaped at him, feeling her color fluctuate several times in quick succession. Of all the things she'd expected he might say at their first encounter after their weekend together, that definitely wasn't one of them. She dragged her gaze from him with an effort and glanced at Mark.

Mark looked downright pasty with fright at the look on Chance's face. "Hey!" he said shakily. "It was just a little joke! I didn't drop but a couple of tabs of Viagra in your wine! Nothing dangerous!"

Haley felt her jaw go slack. It wasn't disbelief. She'd suspected it herself. What horrified her was that, even to her, it sounded as if he was admitting that *they* had played the 'joke' on him!

She whipped a quick look at Chance and discovered the anger had mutated into rage. Mark jumped behind her, grabbing her shoulders and holding her so that his 'shield' couldn't abandon him.

"That's what I thought," Chance growled. "I just came to clean out my desk and give notice that I won't be back."

Haley managed a few mouth movements, but nothing came out. "Mark! Tell him I didn't have anything to do with it! I didn't even know! I swear I didn't!"

Chance uttered a snort of disbelief. "You don't honestly think I'd believe

anything your ‘girlfriend’ said, do you?”

Mark, clearly, wasn’t about to admit any such thing. As Chance turned toward the door and started out, she rounded on her ‘buddy’. “You asshole! You made it sound like *I* was in on your stupid damned prank!

Mark had recovered enough at Chance’s remark to feel indignation. “I’m *not* her girlfriend, you bigoted prick!”

Chance stopped abruptly but it was hard to tell if his flushed face was just from the absolute fury he was struggling to hold in check or Mark’s comment. “You call her girlfriend, don’t you?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t call *me* girlfriend—because I’m not!”

“How about I just kick your ass instead? It’d make me feel a hell of a lot better! Or better yet, file charges against you for spiking my drink?”

Mark’s eyes rounded until they looked like they would pop from his head. “Uh ... no. That’s ok.”

Chance slammed the door so hard behind him when he left that Haley winced.

“Nasty temper!” Mark commented the moment the door was closed, although he said it quietly. “Some people just can’t take a joke!”

Haley glared at him. “And I’m one of them! It wasn’t funny, Mark! Out!”

Chapter Nine

No one was more surprised than Mark when he didn't get called into Boyd's office and fired for his little prank. He lived in terror of it for two solid weeks and the fear that, once Boyd heard, he'd begin to wonder about his own weekend 'problem'.

On reflection, as hilarious as it had seemed at the time he'd been contemplating the results, it wasn't particularly funny.

Joy and Boyd had apparently had a falling out over it. He wasn't particularly sorry about the fact that it appeared to have ended their affair when they'd had no business carrying on together to start with, but he couldn't shake his guilt over screwing things up for Haley. Mostly, because she hadn't shown any signs of forgiving him for it.

Worse, she was so unlike her usual, happy, self that he thought he'd really screwed things up, not just messed up a promising affair.

It took more nerve than he'd imagined to look Chance up.

Chance's face hardened to stone the moment he opened the door and saw who it was on the other side.

"What do you want?"

Mark repressed a shiver of dread. "Haley didn't know!" he burst out.

Chance nearly slammed the door in his face.

"I hate to see her so miserable when it's all my fault."

Chance hesitated. Finally, leaving the door slightly ajar, he headed back inside.

Wondering it was an actual invitation or if Chance was just luring him inside so that he could make good on his promise to beat the shit out of him, Mark finally gathered his nerve and inched inside.

Chance, he discovered, had moved to his private bar to mix himself a drink. Mark couldn't help but notice he didn't offer him one.

"I'm listening."

Mark drew a shaky breath. "I actually didn't intend to do it, myself. It was an impulse" He trailed off at the look Chance him, then added a little indignantly. "Well I didn't! I meant to screw about with Boyd, mind you. I went to a great deal of trouble to get some saltpeter from a buddy of mine. Partly, it was because he's such a prick and I was pissed off because he always favors Joy because she sleeps with him—or did. Anyway, I figured it was harmless."

Chance sent him a tight-lipped glare. "So you screwed things up for him, too?"

"Hey! I did his wife a favor—even if she didn't know it. Anyway, I knew Haley really liked you, but also that she was never going to make any kind of move ... for a lot of reasons. I also knew you really liked her. I just figured it would turn up the heat a little bit and maybe you could both have a little fun that weekend. It isn't like I put a hit of ecstasy in your drink. Honest to god, it was just an impulse. I didn't plan it."

"And Haley didn't know?"

"I decided I'd tell her later. I knew she'd freak if she discovered what I'd done and I was afraid Boyd would figure out I'd spiked his drink and kill me."

Chance frowned, but a little more thoughtfully. "I'm not familiar with any of that stuff. All I do know is that it was fucking miserable."

Mark shrugged. "Well, nothing came of it. It would've worn off by the next morning."

Chance sent him a startled look. "The next morning?"

"It's only good for a few hours, you know."

Chance nodded absently, but he looked skeptical.

Mark decided it was time to go. He'd been uneasy when he came in and he wasn't getting any more comfortable. "Well, I just wanted to clear the air. I also wanted to tell you I appreciate the fact that you didn't tell Boyd and get me fired. I'm sure I deserved it."

Chance didn't comment, which led Mark to believe he'd refrained from it for reasons of his own—*not* because he'd felt inclined to be generous hearted about the situation.

He paused at the door. "How goes the job hunt?"

Chance glanced at him. "I started work with the Beverly Group the week I left Forester."

Mark's eyes widened. "No shit?"

Chance sent him a sardonic look. "No shit. They offered me a position before I took that one at Forester. Forester offered me more, even though it was a lower position." He hadn't been completely comfortable about it even before he'd known Haley, because he knew Forester was planning on giving him Haley's position as soon as she had him trained, or at least suspected it. Forester had suggested as much at the time.

"Well—that's great, then! I know Haley's been worried about Well, she isn't speaking to me, but I know Haley well enough to know that's part of the reason she's been so unhappy."

Chance wrestled with the urge to prompt Mark to tell him more. He still wasn't sure he believed she hadn't had a hand in his humiliation, though.

She had at least guessed even if she wasn't guilty of the actual deed. Not that he'd minded pity sex under the circumstances. Actually, he wasn't against pity sex under any circumstances as long as he got it when he wanted it.

It still rankled to think that was Haley's motivation.

Know it was. If he'd doubted it the first time, because he was in such a state he didn't want to examine it too closely, he sure as hell wasn't left in any doubt the second time—and she'd made it clear to everybody, including him, that she was near frantic to bathe.

Alright, so he could see it. The fucking snowsuit had stunk to high heaven. He'd felt his flesh crawl, felt as if he could feel the germs of the previous occupant crawling all over him, and it sure as hell hadn't helped his feelings when he'd gotten a look at the guy! Beyond that, they'd both been sweating with effort—from exertion and the sex.

And they'd both been sticky all over from the sex.

He'd still been offended. He'd still felt like it was at least partly because of him, and that still bothered the hell out of him.

He didn't know *what* to think about Mark's assertion that the drug would've been long since worn off before he'd climbed into that suit with Haley. Granted, he'd had the hots for her almost from the moment he'd lain eyes on her—damn shortly afterwards

anyway. And, contrary to what that dipshit medic had suggested, he'd never had a problem with erections.

He'd never felt *that* desperate, though.

Of course, he'd also never had an experience anything like what had happened, he reminded himself. Maybe getting naked with a woman he was already hot for, being stuck to her like glue, and having her rubbing all over him was all that was needed to drive him up the wall?

Maybe the boner he'd had all night the previous night because of the damned ED drug had contributed?

Damned if he knew, but he did know that distance and time hadn't helped him get over his desire for her anymore than screwing her until they were both sore as hell had.

He should have had his fill, he thought wryly. He shouldn't be having wet dreams about her, particularly after the blow his ego and his dignity had suffered. He'd been sure when he left her office that day that he never wanted to lay eyes on her again.

It was probably just guilt that was bothering her—if she was upset at all, he thought disgustedly. Mark was a fucking snake! He wouldn't put anything past the son-of-a-bitch! Especially not when he'd admitted he'd done it give them a push.

So could he believe that Haley was interested in him before all of that shit had gone down?

He'd thought she might be, he realized.

If she hadn't liked him already, at least a little bit, he wondered suddenly, would she have *felt* any pity for his predicament?

Did he want to find out?

The leap in his pulse at the thought was enough of an answer, but he was still leery. The question was, did he want to find out badly enough to risk another dose of humiliation, he thought wryly.

Rejection was hard to stomach any time. Rejection plus laughter, or revulsion ... well, he wasn't sure his ego was ready for another sucker punch from Haley.

Besides, if she hadn't already figured out he'd been hired to replace her, she would eventually—certainly would have if he'd stayed—and she wouldn't be inclined to look upon him with anything but loathing.

"Shit!" he growled.

* * * *

Haley wasn't sure she'd ever be able to forgive Mark or forget what he'd done, but she made up with him because she was miserable enough without being at outs with her only friend. She didn't think anything would ever be the same between them again, mostly because he'd broken her trust and she just couldn't trust him anymore, but she decided she needed to make the push to try.

"I went to see Chance," Mark announced almost as soon as they'd sat down to eat their lunch.

Haley felt a rush of adrenaline. It took an effort to act merely surprised. "You did? And he didn't beat the crap out of you?"

"He looked like he wanted to," Mark admitted. "I figured I owed it to you to at least try to explain that you didn't have anything to do with it." He thought it over. "I was sure he was going to go straight to Boyd with it and then I'd get canned and Boyd would probably figure out I'd spiked his wine with saltpeter, and he'd kill me."

Haley gaped at him. "You spiked Boyd's ...?"

He shrugged. "So I was pissed off that everybody else got the luck of the draw and he just decided that he and Joy were going. It was payback—and I thought it was funny—so I have a sick sense of humor."

Haley bit her lip. That *was* a little funny.

She dismissed the temptation to smile. "Why did you spike Chance's drink?"

He shrugged again. "I was just trying to give the two of you a little push. Like I told Chance, it was just a couple of ED tabs. It's not like I had any ecstasy—or would've given it to him if I had! So, he had a boner for a little while. I'm damned if I see why it's such a big deal!"

Haley frowned. "You didn't give it to him that first night?"

"I did—when you almost caught me. I put it in his wine."

Haley was silent, mulling that over. "It wouldn't have been in his blood the next night, then?"

Mark stared at her. "No. Of course not!"

"You don't think dropping it in the wine might've ... made a difference?"

He shrugged. "You aren't supposed to take it with alcoholic beverages, but he didn't have any reaction that I could see and it was just one glass of wine. It isn't like he was drunk—or he drank much afterwards."

Haley released a sigh. "I don't guess it really matters now," she said a little wistfully. "How was he doing?"

Mark had a strange look on his face when she looked up at him. "Uh ... I guess you can ask him. He's coming this way."

Haley's eyes widened with panic. "Oh god! I have to go!"

Mark sent her a look of disgust. "That's exactly why I was trying to give you a little push! Honest to god, Haley! Don't be such a total wuss!"

She gave him an indignant look. Before she could decide whether to flee or stand her ground and show Mark she wasn't a total wuss, Chance was standing beside them.

"Is this seat taken?"

Goosebumps leapt out all over her when she heard his deep voice. She flicked a panicked look at him, but her knees turned to water. She couldn't have leapt up and ran if she'd wanted to.

"Nope!" Mark said decisively. "And I was just leaving."

Chance pulled out the chair beside her and sat down.

Haley sent him an uneasy glance.

"We need to talk."

That sounded really ominous! "We do?"

"Yeah. I figured since Mark found his balls and came to clear the air, we needed to."

Haley reddened. She pushed the remains of her meal away, however, and turned to face him.

He studied her face, as if now that he'd forced the issue, he wasn't certain of what to say or where to start. Haley drew a deep breath and took the plunge. "I'm sorry," she said.

He lifted his brows. "About what?"

"Everything ... I guess."

He studied her for a long moment. "I don't know how to take that," he said finally. "You're saying, now, that you were in on Mark's prank?"

Haley gaped at him in dismay. "I didn't know! At least, I do know how bad he is about playing pranks, but I really, really didn't know that he'd planned Actually, I don't think he really did plan it. At least, not where you're concerned."

"So what did you mean?"

Haley reddened. She was sorry as hell he'd left and she hadn't had a chance to try to mend things. "I don't know," she mumbled. "That you quit."

"I guess it's been hell around there for you?"

She shrugged, grimacing. "It could've been worse. Joy and Boyd got top billing for their spat."

Chance frowned. "I hadn't thought about that when I quit."

"I know Forester would take you back," she said quickly. "You wouldn't have to work with me."

Chance looked uncomfortable. "You know there's a good chance he hired me to replace you?"

Haley gaped at him for a moment and then frowned. "Actually, I'm not surprised. To tell you the truth, I suspected it. He isn't much for promoting women. I had to work twice as hard for that promotion But I can't say that I'm surprised. Boyd's sort of his alter ego and you must have noticed he isn't really big on equality of the sexes."

"Pissed off?"

"I don't know. I'm kind of numb at the moment. I don't know what good it would do to be pissed off about it. It isn't like I could do anything about it. The chances are, even if I got a job somewhere else, it would be the same thing."

"I mean with me."

Haley stared at him blankly. "Why would I be pissed off with you?"

"I took the job."

She shrugged. "Anybody would've. It isn't like you knew me or owed me anything. I appreciate you telling me, though. At least I know I'm not paranoid. I really do have to watch my back," she said wryly.

He nodded, looked like he would say more and finally checked his watch and stood. Haley's heart sank. She'd known all along that nothing was going to come of the meeting, even if he had gone out of his way to arrange it, but she was still terribly disappointed.

"I have to go."

She nodded. "I should get back, too. Good luck on the job search."

"Mark didn't tell you I'd taken a job with the Beverly Group?"

She looked up at him in surprise. "No, he didn't. Actually, I haven't spoken to him since Today was the first time we'd gotten together in a while. Congratulations! I'm ... happy for you."

He tilted his head. "Are you?"

She managed a smile. "I am."

He surprised her by leaning down. Her heart seemed to trip over itself. "I had a thing for you right from the start, you know."

Haley felt her eyes widen with surprise. A dizzying wave of excitement washed through her. "You did?" she asked breathlessly.

He flushed and then chuckled. "Think about it."

* * * *

Haley had only had a ten minute warning—not that she was complaining! She'd been floating around in a daze for days since she'd met up with Chance at lunch, hopeful one moment and deeply depressed the next. When Friday rolled around and she didn't get the call she'd been hoping for, though, she hit bottom. It was all she could do to trudge home after work and collapse. She didn't want to do anything and she didn't want to think about anything.

She hadn't moved from her couch once she'd flopped on it until the buzzer went off. More than half-suspecting that it was just one of the other tenants who'd accidentally locked themselves out or a visitor for somebody else in the building, she still leapt up from the couch and raced to answer it.

She almost passed out when she heard Chance's voice. "Can I come up?"

"Chance?"

"Yeah?"

"Sure!" Once she'd buzzed him in, though, she looked around her apartment in a blind panic. She hadn't cleaned in weeks and the place looked like it! She'd dashed around the living room snatching things up and cleaning frantically for a few moments before it occurred to her that she hadn't showered or changed since she'd come in from work.

She didn't have time now!

She raced into her bedroom anyway once she'd dumped the trash and dirty clothes she'd collected from the living room. The view in the mirror was a little reassuring. At least she didn't look like hell!

She was still debating what she might have time to do when the front door buzzer sounded. It acted on her like a jolt of electricity to the ass. She jumped a foot.

Abandoning all hope of even a little primping, she raced into the living room, trying to regulate her wildly pounding heart and her breathlessness before she opened the door, but she wasn't very successful with that either.

She was dizzy from hyperventilation when she pulled the door open.

Chance was leaning against the doorframe. He looked so different in casual attire, so absolutely delicious, she merely stared at him blankly for several moments, trying to keep from passing out.

He held up the large box he had under one arm. "I brought you something."

Haley glanced from him to the box and back again, reaching for the box. "Come in! What is it?"

He managed a lazy grin that seemed equal parts wary and filled with anticipation. "Maybe I should wait here while you open it," he said wryly. "It'll give me a clear getaway if you aren't happy about it."

Mystified and suddenly more than a little fearful that he'd decided to play a joke on her, Haley set the package on the table near the door and pulled the lid off. She stared blankly at the contents for several moments before it fully sank in that it really was what she thought it was—the snowsuit she and Chance had had their 'adventure' in.

"I bought it from Pete. I had it cleaned," he added tentatively.

Haley glanced at him, searched his face, and then looked at the suit again, trying to command her mind to enough order to assess the situation. It dawned on her abruptly,

though, that if he'd only brought it to her as a prank, he would've left.

"You gonna hit me? Or invite me in?"

Abruptly, the hard, painful knot that had formed inside of her burst and warmth flooded her. Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back. "Only if you brought it to share," she said tentatively.

Chuckling with relief, he stepped inside, pushed the door closed behind him and swept her into his arms. "That's exactly what I had in mind."

Haley released a heartfelt sigh of happiness. "Good! Because I've had a thing for you right from the start," she murmured.

His eyes gleamed as he studied her upturned face. "Did you?"

"As if you didn't notice!"

He grimaced. "I hate to admit it, but I was too preoccupied to notice. I could be convinced, though." He took the suit from her and held it up. "It might take all weekend"

The End