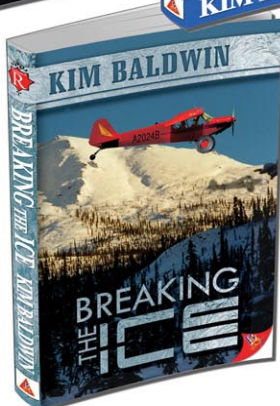
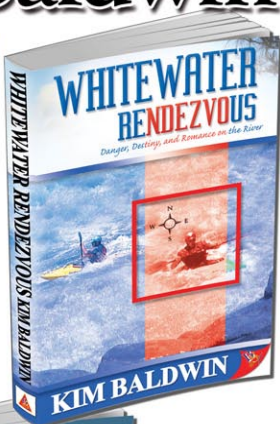
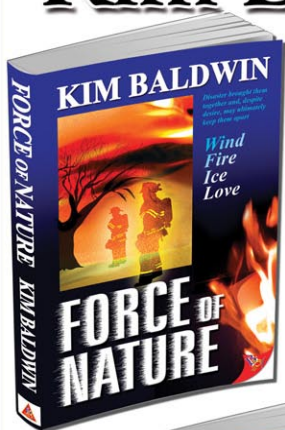


Kim Baldwin



**ROMANCES
VOL. II**





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“Fast paced, with dazzling scenes that stir the heart of armchair travelers, *Thief of Always* grabs the reader on the first page and never lets go. (Kim) Baldwin and (Xenia) Alexiou are skilled at fleshing out their characters and in describing the settings...a rich, wonderful read that leaves the reader anxiously awaiting the next book in the series.” — *Just About Write*

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By the Author

Hunter's Pursuit

Force of Nature

Whitewater Rendezvous

Flight Risk

Focus of Desire

With Xenia Alexiou

Lethal Affairs

Thief of Always

ROMANCES
VOLUME 2

FORCE OF NATURE
WHITEWATER RENDEZVOUS
BREAKING THE ICE

KIM BALDWIN

FORCE OF NATURE

by
KIM BALDWIN



2005

FORCE OF NATURE

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By the Author

Hunter's Pursuit

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Force of Nature was written with deep respect and appreciation for the women and men who daily put their lives on the line to protect and serve their communities as firefighters.

It is dedicated with all my love to my partner, M., my inspiration for Gable and the kindest, most giving individual I've ever had the privilege to know. You have taught me the importance of living a life of character and purpose. And by your example, you encourage all those around you to be the very best individuals they can possibly be. Every word I write, I write for you. Now and always.

Dedication

For M.
Grádh geal mo chridh'

CHAPTER ONE

Gable McCoy slowed the Jeep and craned forward to look out the windshield. Branches large and small littered the roadway. No other cars were about. Above her, the sky was a color she'd never seen before, a sickly greenish yellow. Directly ahead, a low wall of clouds churned and boiled with furious intent. She tried to shake off a feeling of unease that threatened to overwhelm her.

The emergency radio at her side was crowded with voices, overlapping each other and fighting to be heard above the relentless static. Many were harried and anxious, reflecting the unusual strain on the emergency dispatchers, firefighters, and police. None of them had ever experienced a storm like this.

It was a freak weather phenomenon, a convergence of hot and cold fronts coinciding with a change in the jet stream. An unusually muggy April morning had spawned a violent afternoon. Tornadoes were touching down all over Michigan. Two had already been spotted in her county and three more in the surrounding areas.

Gable had come through torrential rain and a brief burst of walnut-sized hail that left two small cracks in her windshield. But it had stopped all at once, and that was somehow more unsettling, as if the storm was gathering its strength to launch an all-out assault. She took another look at the dark, foreboding sky and increased her speed slightly—there were several more houses she wanted to check before nightfall.

She was still in her one-year probation period as a volunteer with the Plainfield Township Fire Department, one of only three women on the squad. The demanding physical training had not been a problem for her, though at forty-six she was older than many of the other volunteers.

She had been athletic all her life, and the taut musculature on her tall, lean frame reflected many hours spent kayaking and mountain biking.

So far, all the callouts she'd attended had been for relatively minor things—fender-bender auto accidents and small brush fires started by discarded cigarettes or careless campers. Today was different. This time she was responding to a full-out mobilization of SAR—the county's search and rescue squad, which involved fire departments, law enforcement, 911, and other local emergency personnel.

Right after she'd finished her initial training, SAR had paired her up with a veteran firefighter, Tim Scott, and assigned them a five-square-mile area west of the village of Pine River, three miles south of where Gable lived. The entire region was mostly state forest, but there were a number of cottages and year-round homes scattered here and there, tucked back off the road and hidden by trees.

Tim had taken her up and down the mostly dirt roads in his pickup until she was familiar with the area. She was now especially grateful he'd been so thorough. When she'd gotten the callout two hours earlier, the dispatcher told her Tim was out of town. No replacement was available, so she was on her own.

She felt the full weight of that responsibility as a ferocious wind gust tried to wrestle the steering wheel from her hands. Butterflies crowded her stomach as she struggled to keep the Jeep on the road. *Lives might depend on you today.* She had to bury her fear and try to remain focused.

Most of the places she'd checked so far were summer cottages, still locked up and vacant. Power was out in a few of the year-round homes, and wind had caused minor damage to roofs, but no one had been injured.

Gable slowed to turn onto Cedar Trail and rolled down the window. Something was very wrong. Suddenly there was no wind at all, where a moment ago it was buffeting the Jeep. She braked to a stop and got out. Stared up at the sky. Sniffed the air. It was eerily quiet, a kind of quiet she didn't think she'd ever heard in the forest. Where were the birds?

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her pulse began beating double time. The air seemed charged by electricity. The ozone crackled around her. It just felt...*wrong*. Like there was too much air pressure.

That was when she heard it. Just like it was always described. A distant, muffled roaring, like an oncoming train. Dense forest

surrounded her. The trees blocked her view except where the road cut through. She couldn't see the twister.

The unearthly roar got steadily louder. A series of sharp reports, like rifle shots, sounded in the near distance. *Those are trees! Shit!*

To her left was a lone, boarded-up convenience store on the corner where she'd stopped. A simple wood-framed building, locked up tight. It didn't look like potential shelter.

Gable ran to the opposite corner of the intersection, where the edge of the road sloped away into a drainage ditch. Beneath the roadway was a concrete drainpipe that looked about three feet across. A tight squeeze, but her only chance.

In a whirling hail of sticks and stones and leaves, she scrambled down the bank, her hands shielding her face. The wind tried to blow her off her feet, and the noise of the tornado was deafening, like a jet aircraft parked directly overhead. Squinting between her fingers, she saw the twister cut out of the woods and onto the highway a quarter of a mile away. It looked like a mammoth V-shaped plume of black smoke.

Frozen with horror, she stared at the debris rotating within. Huge limbs whirled around the funnel with astounding velocity, crashing into each other in the air. The tornado was fifty yards wide, and headed straight for her.

Adrenaline jolted her from her inertia and she dove into the pipe, ignoring the stench of rotted matter and the cold slimy water that soaked her to the skin. It was upon her in an instant, trying to suck her from the pipe, tugging at her with fierce determination. She fought back, bracing herself against the sides, but they were slippery with algae. *Please God please God please God.*

It was hard to breathe, caught in this incredible vacuum. The whole drainpipe seemed to be vibrating. She began to lose ground, slipping by inches, her fingers clawing at the slick surface. Her feet protruded from the pipe, then her calves. Sticks, dirt, and stones pelted her. *Can't hang on much longer!* Her arms began to tremble, braced against the pipe. *Please God, don't let me die like this!*

It lasted no more than thirty or forty seconds, but it seemed an eternity. While her life didn't exactly pass before her eyes, she had time enough to think about family and friends, and to feel a pang of regret that she hadn't seized upon every experience she'd wanted to try. Then, all at once, the world was calm again.

Gable wriggled out of the drainpipe, gasping for air. Her heart pounded in her chest like a runaway jackhammer, and her body shook all over. The adrenaline rush was so intense she thought she might faint.

It registered that one of her tennis shoes was gone, ripped from her foot and nowhere in sight. All the stuff that had been flying around had pelted her legs pretty good, and she'd have some impressive bruises to show for it. But she was otherwise uninjured. She could hardly believe she was alive. *Thank you, Lord.*

The convenience store on the opposite corner was now only concrete foundation and scattered wood, plaster, bricks, and assorted wreckage. The store's large metal Dumpster was lodged in a tree, twenty feet off the ground. Pieces of lumber and store shelving and dozens of cans of food littered the road. *Any one of those could have killed me.* Right where she'd stood only minutes ago, the tornado had driven a huge two-by-four several feet into the ground. A few feet away, an enormous white pine had been pulled up by its roots, leaving a gaping hole seven feet wide.

Stunned, she climbed up onto the roadway and surveyed the area around her. Her Jeep was still right side up, but the front windshield was shattered and the vehicle was sitting half on and half off the road, a dozen yards from where she'd parked it.

The rain started anew as she reached for her radio and headed to the Jeep. "Dispatch from McCoy. Reporting tornado touchdown, Cedar Trail at Wolf Run Road. Debris in the area. No injuries. Over."

Though she tried to keep her voice even, she could not completely disguise how much the twister had scared her. She had grown up in Tennessee, and though she retained the soft-spoken slower cadence of a Southerner, she had mostly lost her accent. It surfaced in the occasional word, and was more apparent when she was stressed. Tornado came out *tornayduh*.

Gable had thrown a pair of knee-high Wellies in the back of the Jeep in case she hit some flooding. After the dispatcher responded, she pulled the black rubber boots on and got behind the wheel. As she reached up to adjust the rearview mirror, she caught a glimpse of herself. *Holy shit.* Her short brunette hair was standing up at odd angles, as if she'd stuck her finger in an electrical socket. A pungent slime from the drainpipe covered her face and neck, turning her normally bronzed

complexion an eerie greenish gray, and her eyes were so dilated that the black pupils had nearly overtaken the hazel irises.

Her soaked clothing was filthy too—her T-shirt and jeans were the color of mud, and they clung to her uncomfortably. She looked like an extra in a grade B horror flick, a member of the undead, rising from the grave. Somewhat apropos, she thought.

The pavement had disappeared where the tornado traversed it, and branches and downed trees lay scattered all about the roadway. She put the Jeep into four-wheel-drive and maneuvered over and around what she could, but she had to get out several times to haul some obstruction out of her way so she could proceed.

The road curved up and over a hill. At the top, Gable braked to a stop and sat gawking at the devastation below her. *Dear God!*

The twister had carved out a path of destruction a quarter mile wide through the forest. Trees were snapped like matchsticks, jagged edges uniformly cut five feet off the ground. There were two homes within the area, and from a distance, both looked like they'd been hit by bomb blasts.

She headed toward the nearest one and keyed her radio. "Dispatch from McCoy. Two homes leveled on Cedar Trail. Stand by."

The two-track driveway to the first of the flattened homes was overgrown with high weeds and blocked by a padlocked gate. The place was obviously another seasonal cottage still closed from winter. *Thank God.* She reported it to dispatch as she sped toward the other house.

This driveway was open. And despite the rain, Gable could tell from the tire impressions in the dirt two-track that it had been recently used. *Shit.* She gripped the steering wheel harder and headed up the drive toward the house, which was set well off the road in a small clearing cut into the forest.

The first thing she came to was a red pickup truck lying on its side, partially blocking the driveway. She was able to squeeze the Jeep around it, but a few yards farther on, the home's five-hundred-gallon propane tank prevented further progress.

The smell hit her at once. *Gas! Holy shit!*

Her heart pounding, she cut the engine and eased out of the Jeep. The tank was intact but on its side, gas hissing from a broken pipe that stuck out of the top. When she turned the valve beneath it, the hissing stopped. She grabbed her helmet and a thick pair of leather work gloves

from the Jeep and went the rest of the way to the house on foot.

A portion of one wall still stood—the area around the fieldstone fireplace. A massive section of the roof was propped against it, forming a nine-foot-high lean-to. An intact bookcase rested beneath it, empty of all its books. Everything else around her was debris—insulation, lumber, electrical wiring, shingles, bits of furniture—all precariously jumbled together in towering heaps. It was impossible to negotiate through it. Jagged pieces of glass and metal were everywhere, the footing uncertain. Here and there lay various clues about the homeowner. Sheet music. A computer keyboard.

“Hello? Anybody here?” Gable listened for a response, but could hear nothing but the howl of the wind and the drumming of the rain. Picking her way around the perimeter, she tried again on the other side of the house. “Hello?”

She thought she might have heard something human. Or maybe it was the wind playing with her imagination.

“Hello!” she yelled as loud as she could.

This time it was unmistakable. Through the pounding rain, she heard a muffled female voice. “Down here! In the basement!”

“I hear you!” Gable shouted. “I’m with search and rescue. Keep talking. How many of you are there? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not hurt. And it’s just me, but I’m trapped. Get me out of here!” The voice had a panicky sound.

“Hang on. I’m coming. How do I get to you?”

“There’s a storm door right outside the house in back.”

Gable stared around. She was already behind the house. Finding the door beneath the mountain of rubble in front of her would be a daunting task. “I’m calling for more help. Sit tight and try to relax.”

“Hurry! Please hurry!”

Gable reached for her radio and turned it up. The bedlam of voices was even worse than before. While waiting for a break in the radio traffic, she pulled her work gloves from her back pocket and started picking through the debris, searching for the door. “How are you doing?” she shouted. “Can you move around?”

“I’m in the basement shower! Part of the ceiling came down. I can move around but I can’t get out of here.”

As soon as there was a lull in the cacophony on the radio, Gable reported in and requested assistance, but was told that all available

resources were tied up on other calls at the moment.

Knowing she was on her own, she resumed her search with a heightened sense of urgency. The debris of the house didn't appear to be shifting, so the trapped woman was probably not in any immediate danger. But it was going to be dark very soon.

"I'm Gable McCoy, a volunteer firefighter," she hollered. "What's your name?"

"Erin. Erin Richards," came the muted reply. "Have you seen my cat? He's charcoal with a white mustache."

The devastation was so complete, Gable had trouble imagining anything as small and defenseless as a cat living through it. "No, I'm sorry, Erin," she shouted. "I don't see a cat."

"Maybe he'll come out if you call his name," Erin begged. "It's Earl Grey. Maybe he's hurt or scared, and just hiding."

Gable wanted to get the woman out of there. It went against her better judgment to spend time worrying over a cat, but something about Erin's plea touched her deeply. So she hollered Earl's name and kept an eye out for him as she dug through the wreckage, searching for the entrance to the basement. She came across a snowshoe. A green and white Michigan State University baseball cap. A diving mask and snorkel. Lots of mementos of Erin Richards's life, but no door.

"Erin, we need to concentrate on getting you out, then we can both look for your cat, okay?"

"All right. I understand."

"It will help me if you can direct me to exactly where the door is," Gable shouted. "It's covered up."

"It's outside the bathroom window."

Gable frowned. "That doesn't help. Erin, I'm afraid your house is pretty much gone. It took a direct hit. There are no windows and no bathroom left."

There was a lengthy silence.

"Erin? You still with me?"

"The house is gone? Everything's gone?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Try not to think about that now. Help me find you."

"Isn't there anything at all I can save?"

Gable looked around. "Maybe. It's hard to tell—everything is all piled up. Erin, you can't worry about that now. You gotta concentrate

on helping me find you.”

After another brief silence Erin hollered back. “The door is a couple of feet outside the house. About a third of the way down from the corner nearest the driveway.”

“That’s great. Hang in there.”

The area Erin described was covered by a large pile of wreckage, topped off by the stove. Gable cleared what she could, then put her back to the appliance to shove it out of the way.

“Is more help coming?” Erin shouted.

“As soon as they can.” Gable gave the stove another push, putting her long legs into it. A jagged edge tore her jeans, cutting into the flesh of her thigh. It wasn’t deep. She ignored it.

The stove toppled off to one side. She dug through the rubble beneath it, spotted the edge of the big metal storm door, and cleared a space around it. The door was dented in and wouldn’t budge, despite her best efforts. She had to run back to the Jeep for her tire iron to get the job done.

Several steps led downward, out of the rain. Following them, Gable found herself in a concrete basement about fifteen feet wide and thirty feet long. One wall was lined with shelves containing home-canned goods—peaches and pears and tomatoes in jars, undisturbed. Cardboard boxes and large plastic storage containers were stacked high along the opposite wall, each one carefully labeled—“Old dishes,” “Winter clothes,” “Christmas ornaments,” and the like.

Two-thirds of the room was untouched by the tornado. Farther in, much of the ceiling had given way, toppling onto a desk and file cabinet. It caved in right over the only door. It had to be the bathroom. She knew she couldn’t move the enormous beam that blocked her way, and even if she could, doing so might bring the rest of the house down on top of both of them. It would take more than human hands to get the woman out of there.

Picking her way through the rubble, she got as close to the door as possible. Creaks and groans from over her head were frequent, as though the remaining wreckage would collapse upon her at any moment. It was a scary, precarious situation. Her mouth was dry.

“Can you hear me, Erin?”

“Thank God.” A muffled response filtered from the other side of the wall. “I’m here. In here.”

"How you doing?" Gable glanced upward. A bit of sky was visible through a three-foot-wide hole above her, and she felt a mist of rain against her face.

"All right, I guess. I'll be fine as soon as I'm out of here."

"The door is blocked on this side," Gable said. "It'll take heavy equipment to move everything out of the way safely, so you'll have to be patient. It may be a while before anybody can get to you."

There was another long silence.

"Erin? Keep talking to me. How you holding up?"

"How much longer do you think it'll be?"

"I'll see what I can find out."

Gable stepped back into the untouched half of the basement. She had turned her radio down, but she'd heard no letup in the turmoil of voices and static. Unclipping it from her belt, she increased the volume to listen to what was happening.

Another tornado had touched down. Three homes were destroyed and six people were injured. Resources were stretched thin. When there was a break in the voices, she radioed in with an update.

The dispatcher told her it would likely be morning before the required manpower and equipment could be spared to her location. But she wasn't needed elsewhere at the moment, so she was free to stay and do what she could for Erin, at least for the time being.

Amid more groans and creaks from overhead, she made her way back to the bathroom door and called, "Erin? You're gonna have to be patient. We probably won't be able to get to you until morning."

"Morning? You have to get me out of here! I can't wait until morning!" There was a manic desperation to Erin's voice.

"Look, I know you're scared. But you should try to stay calm."

"You don't understand! I have claustrophobia! Really *bad* claustrophobia, know what I mean? I *have* to get out of here!"

Oh great. What do I do now? Gable thought for a moment. Oddly enough, having Erin's discomfort to focus on dispelled some of her own unease.

"And there's another problem," Erin said, in a much more subdued voice.

A chill ran over Gable and her arms puckered with goose bumps. Something about Erin's tone told her this would not be good.

"I'm terrified of the dark. It's worse even than my claustrophobia."

Oh crap. “Well, that’s just a bit more of a challenge, that’s all.” Gable tried to keep her voice even and reassuring. She angled her head to see through the hole above her. Rain pelted her in the face. It was already early twilight. It would be dark in less than half an hour. “So... you still have some light to see by over there? Can you see the sky?”

“There’s a hole in the ceiling near me. It’s been letting light in,” Erin said.

“How big a hole?”

“Couple of feet across, I guess.”

Gable tried to picture where they were in the house in relation to the wreckage above. “Got anything you can stick up through the hole? A towel bar, a piece of wood or something?”

She could hear sounds coming from the other side of the wall as Erin shifted things around. Before she could open her mouth to warn Erin, there was a loud crash as a piece of ceiling gave way above the bathroom.

Hearing a sharp cry, Gable put her ear to the wall. “Erin? You okay?”

“Damn! I pulled on the wrong piece of wood and the ceiling caved in. Well, part of it did, anyway. I have even less room to move around now, and I cut my arm.”

“How bad is it? Do you have first aid supplies in there?”

“It’s a pretty deep cut,” Erin said. “It’s not very big, but it’s bleeding quite a bit. I have a towel wrapped around it. I can’t get to my medicine cabinet.”

“Is the hole in the ceiling above you big enough that I could maybe get some supplies through it to you?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m going upstairs. See if you can find something to stick up through the hole to help me find you. But be careful!”

“I’ve got a piece of wood that will reach,” Erin said.

“Good.” Gable started toward the storm door, but Erin’s voice stopped her.

“Gable?”

“Yeah, Erin?”

“Would you have another look around for Earl Grey while you’re up there? Please?”

“Sure.”

On her way back through the basement, Gable glanced again at the boxes. It was getting decidedly cooler out, and she felt a bit chilled in her soaked clothing. She imagined Erin might be feeling the same.

"I see you have a box marked *winter clothes* out here," she called. "Are you warm enough, or do you want me to try to get something to you?"

"Yes! Some sweats would be great. Thanks."

Emerging through the storm door with the clothes, Gable discovered the wind had picked up considerably, but the rain had diminished to a steady patter. The sky was getting darker by the second.

She opened the back of the Jeep and reached for the daypack SAR had issued her. She emptied it out and sorted through the contents, selecting a flashlight and extra batteries, three candles and matches, a bottle of water and two power bars. These went back into the pack along with the sweats and several items from her first aid kit. Antibiotic ointment. Gauze. Tape. An Ace bandage. The flashlight she kept in the glove compartment of the Jeep went into her back pocket. After tying one end of a twenty-five-foot length of thin nylon rope to the pack, she returned with it to the house.

"Erin!" Her voice was getting hoarse from yelling. "Show me where you are!"

Near the middle of the wreckage, a long strip of wood waved back and forth. The hole it came out of was a bit larger than a basketball hoop. Gable couldn't get nearer than ten or fifteen feet. Too much debris was in the way, and the flooring around the hole was too uncertain. She didn't want to bring more of it down on Erin's head.

Standing as close as she dared, she instructed, "Okay. Back away from the hole."

"Go ahead!"

It took two tries to get the pack to Erin. After another quick look around for the cat, Gable headed back to the basement. The light was fading fast, and she had to use her flashlight to find the bathroom door.

"Erin? How you doing?"

"Better. Warmer. I got a candle going and took care of my arm. It's stopped bleeding."

"Good. Hey, you mind if I borrow some sweats? I got soaked through."

"Of course. Help yourself."

Gable found a lone large sweatshirt amid the preponderance of mediums, and managed to get on a pair of Erin's sweatpants. They were tight and several inches too short, but she felt worlds better. As she changed, she listened to the radio traffic. It sounded as though things were finally beginning to quiet down. She returned to the door.

"I'm back."

"Gable, I'll never be able to thank you enough for everything you're doing," Erin said. "Especially for staying with me."

"I'm just sorry you're stuck there till morning." As soon as she'd spoken, Gable immediately regretted it. *Why remind her she's trapped, idiot? You need to be taking her mind off it.*

She found a spot near the door where she could sit comfortably out of the rain. Though she'd rather have been in the undamaged portion of the basement, the rain was really coming down again, and if she got farther away she and Erin would have to shout so loud to hear each other they'd be hoarse in no time. Even sitting just a few feet from the door, Gable had to raise her voice to be heard over the frequent downbursts.

"I'd rather be anywhere else, that's for sure," Erin said. "I want to be out looking for Earl Grey. I keep hoping he's just scared and holed up somewhere."

"Well, if I'm not called away, I'll go up at first light and have another look-see," Gable promised.

"Do you think you *might* be called away?"

"Ya never know. It's been a really wild, busy day. But I checked in not long ago and it sounds like things are quieting down. There haven't been any tornados in a while. Not since it's cooled off."

"I hope you *can* stay," Erin said. "But I certainly will understand if you have to go help someone else who needs you worse than I do. You know, I was amazed at how fast you got here, by the way. I couldn't believe it when I heard your voice. The tornado had just hit the house. Did you see it?"

"I sure did. It was coming right at me. I had to dive into a storm pipe."

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified. Absolutely terrified. You?"

"I didn't have time to be," Erin answered. "I turned on the TV and saw we were under a tornado warning, but I couldn't find Earl Grey. I

was down here looking for him when the house blew apart. It happened so fast I hardly had a chance to register what was happening. Not until it was over did it really hit me. I still don't think it's really sunk in fully yet. Probably won't until I get out of here and see what's left of my house."

"This half of the basement wasn't badly hit. Everything in your bins down here is okay. And you might be able to salvage some things from upstairs. I saw a bookcase and some clothing."

There was a loud groan as debris above them shifted. Gable ducked just as a portion of the ceiling near her fell a foot and then inexplicably stopped. She held her breath, waiting for it to fall farther. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. *You shouldn't be sitting here. It's too dangerous.* But she felt compelled to stay within earshot of Erin. "How you doing over there?"

"Could be better." Erin's voice seemed to get a bit higher whenever the ceiling shifted.

"Let's try to take your mind off where you are," Gable suggested. "First, get as comfortable as you can. How much room you got? Can you lie down?"

"More or less."

"Got a towel or something you can use as a pillow?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Now I want you to close your eyes and try to relax. Concentrate on your breathing. Nice deep breaths. In and out. Pretend you're someplace nice and peaceful."

"Okay."

"Good. Now describe where you are to me. Really *be* there. What do you see? Smell? Hear?" Gable cleared a path in the debris around her so she could stretch out her legs.

"Hmm, let's see...I'm lying on a beach. And that isn't rain I'm hearing, it's...the sound of the surf. The air smells like salt."

"Very good. Now I want you to try to relax. Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Start anywhere. Whatever you want to share."

CHAPTER TWO

Well, let's see. I'm thirty-nine. Single. I teach music at the elementary and middle schools in Pine River. This is my first house—I bought it last summer after I moved here.”

“So you're new to the area?”

“Yeah, you?”

“I've been here just over a year. I live probably seven or eight miles north, about halfway between Pine River and Meriwether. Where did you move from?” Gable asked.

“I was born in Petoskey and lived there until I went to Kalamazoo to go to Western. After I got my teaching certificate, I wanted to move back up here somewhere, but there were no jobs at all. I've been downstate—first in Mason for a couple of years, then in Grand Rapids, and most recently in Saint Joe. My job there was axed by budget cuts. Fortunately, I found this opening right after that. I love it up here.” Erin paused. “I also give piano lessons. Or at least I did. Any sign of my piano?”

“Nope. Sorry.” Gable turned her flashlight off, conserving the battery. She could see a dim glow of light above her and through a tiny crack in the wall that separated her from Erin.

“Oh well. I can get a new one.” Erin sighed. “It's not like I had an emotional attachment to it.” There was another brief silence. “I sure hope Earl Grey shows up.”

“I wish I could do more to find him.” Gable had never had a cat, believing them to be generally unsociable creatures that clawed the furniture. But it was obvious that Erin loved her pet, so she was genuinely sorry that Earl Grey had gone missing and was probably

dead.

“He’s a sweetheart.” Erin’s voice was husky with emotion. “He sleeps tucked up against my neck every night.”

Gable didn’t know what to say. “Erin, do you have a place to stay after this?”

It was strange, she felt oddly protective of this woman, though she barely knew her. She felt as though she had a personal stake in Erin’s future, and that realization surprised her. *Is it because we’re surviving this together? Because we’ve had this shared, life-altering experience?* She’d heard of that happening. Bonding from sharing adversity. *That’s what makes friends for life.*

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’m homeless! Jesus. That’s a reality check. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“The Red Cross will be sending people in,” Gable said. “I can put you in touch with them. Or if there’s anything I can do...” *What were you just about to volunteer? You were going to invite her to stay with you, weren’t you? You don’t even know her.* The impulse disconcerted her. A very private person, Gable rarely welcomed overnight guests who weren’t members of her immediate family.

“Thanks, but that’s not necessary. I’ll figure something out. I could go stay with my mother,” Erin considered aloud. “But I’ll want to be nearby while I go through everything—see what I can salvage. And figure out what I’m going to do. Maybe I’ll stay at the Blue Moose for a while.”

Gable was familiar with the place. It was a motel on the outskirts of Pine River that consisted of neat log cabin units, set off by themselves in the woods. “Erin, I don’t mean to get too personal. If you don’t want to answer this I’ll certainly understand. But...are you insured? You going to be okay?”

“I do have insurance, and it’ll cover everything, I hope. I should be able to rebuild.”

Gable found herself unexpectedly pleased to hear that Erin would remain in the area. “I’m glad you’re not going to let this chase you away.”

“Oh, it couldn’t do that. I have a great job, and I love it up here with all the trees and animals.”

“Me too.”

“Besides, what are the chances that tornadoes would hit the same place twice?”

Gable found herself smiling. "That's a good way to look it at."

"Well, my mother always told me...when things look bad, take a deep breath and count your blessings. Try to look on the bright side. Then forge ahead! I guess the bright side of this is that I can design my new house to be exactly the way I want it. No more ratty carpet. No more drafty patio door. And I can finally get a bathtub and some storage space."

Gable was impressed that Erin was dealing so well with what had happened. She could tell that Erin seemed not quite as stressed as she'd been earlier. Her voice, once she relaxed, had an interesting timbre to it. Low and rich, it resonated warmth and humor.

"What about you?" Erin asked. "Forgive me if you've told me this already—are you a cop?"

"I'm a volunteer firefighter. Still a rookie. I've never experienced anything like this before."

"I doubt anybody has. Are you just out of college?"

Gable smiled broadly. "Not hardly. I'm forty-six."

"Oh! When you said you were a rookie, I pictured you in your twenties."

"No, only that I've been on the squad less than a year. Right after I moved here, I went to pay my property taxes at the township hall and saw a flyer saying they needed volunteer firefighters. So I signed up and went through the training."

"Have you fought a lot of fires?"

"A few. Brush fires, mostly. And we respond a lot to car accidents."

"Where did you move here from, if you don't mind my asking? Do I detect a trace of a Southern accent?"

"I grew up in Chattanooga, and most of my family is still there."

"What brought you to Michigan?" Erin asked.

"I came up here a lot over the last several years to visit my brother Stewart, who lives in Kalamazoo," Gable explained. "We'd drive up to Pine River to go canoeing or camping, and I fell in love with the area. In the south, you don't really get the changes in the seasons the way you do here. And I like small-town life a lot better than the noisy sprawl of a big city."

"I feel the same way."

Gable shifted position to get more comfortable. She wanted to lie down, but there was not enough room. She turned on her flashlight and

began clearing a wider space. Amid the pieces of wood and flooring, she found a framed photograph, the glass shattered. She picked it up and shone her flashlight beam on it.

It was an eight-by-ten of a bride and groom, circa early 1940s, she guessed, by the man's World War Two U.S. Army uniform. He looked a bit like Van Johnson, with blond hair combed back and a movie-star smile. The bride, petite and delicate, was recognizable as such only by her veil; she was otherwise clad in a nice, but everyday dress. She looked very young, and she was carrying what appeared to be a checkerboard. *Kind of odd.*

"I found a picture out here in a frame. A wedding couple. Are these your parents?"

"Yup, that's them. Dad passed away a couple of years ago. Mom's still going strong—nearly eighty but going on twenty, and a real pip. I can't keep up with her."

"They both look so young."

"They were. Mom was only seventeen, Dad was eighteen. They were high school sweethearts, and he was going off to war."

"Can I ask why she's carrying a checkerboard?"

Gable heard the sound of laughter through the wall. It made her smile.

"That's her purse. It was the height of style then, she keeps insisting. But we—my sister and I—we kidded her and Dad for years about how exciting their honeymoon must have been."

That got Gable laughing too. There was another long, sustained creak, as if the house were groaning, from directly overhead. It startled them both into silence.

Gable shone her flashlight around. It didn't look like anything had moved. But she knew Erin had to be as nervous as she was, probably much more so. *Keep talking. Keep her mind off it.* "So what did your dad do?"

"He was a high school teacher," Erin said. "Calculus and trigonometry."

"My worst subjects."

"Mine too, unfortunately. Apparently a talent for advanced mathematics is not genetic."

Gable smiled.

“But he did pass down his love of education. I always wanted to be a teacher. So you’re a volunteer firefighter, you said? Do you have another job?”

“Yeah. I’m a pharmacist at Lakin’s drugstore in Meriwether. I’ve always done some kind of volunteering, though, wherever I lived. In Chattanooga I helped out with the Red Cross.”

“Is volunteering something you get from your parents?”

“Not really,” Gable said. “My folks were wonderful people. But they both worked long hours. My dad usually held down two jobs. They didn’t have a lot of spare time for anything. I’d have to say it was Camp Fire that got me into volunteering.”

“Camp Fire? You mean, like in Camp Fire Girls?”

“Yup. I was involved in it for a long time. Heard of the Boy Scout oath?”

“Sure. Do your duty, be honest, and all that?”

“Exactly. Well, we had the Camp Fire Law. And even as an adult, I always thought it was a pretty good thing to live by. One of the ‘laws’ is ‘Give Service.’ You know—do what you can to make the world a better place.”

“Well, I admire that,” Erin said. “I can’t say I’ve done my share. I’d like to argue I never seem to have the time, but I guess that’s just an excuse. Other people make the time.”

“It’s never too late to make a difference,” Gable said.

“That’s true.”

“So you teach piano, you said. Do you play anything else?” Gable asked.

“Well, as a music teacher I have to know something about most every instrument. But the only other ones I’ve actually played a lot are flute and trombone.”

“That’s an odd combination.”

“Well, my parents started me on piano lessons when I was seven,” Erin said. “I took up flute to play in my junior high school band, back at a time when girls were discouraged from playing what I really wanted to play—trombone. I finally got myself one a few years ago on eBay.”

“I wanted to play drums. But they made me play clarinet.”

“Didn’t you hate that? That was just so unfair.”

“Sure was.”

“Do you still play?” Erin asked.

“No, not in years,” Gable answered. “What’s your favorite kind of music?”

“Well, you’re probably not going to believe this, but I like the old standards best. You know—Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin.”

“Me too. I love that stuff. My current favorites are the new Rod Stewart American songbook CDs. I was never really a fan of his growing up, but I love what he’s done with those great old songs.”

“I have all three of those! Well, I *had* all three, anyway,” Erin amended. “Guess my music collection is gone. Damn. It was a good one too. I think I had every Ella Fitzgerald album available on CD.”

It tugged at Gable’s heart to think about all that Erin had lost. “I’m sorry this happened to you, Erin. I wish there was more I could do to help.”

“I appreciate your concern, Gable. I’ll be fine. I really will. And I look forward to meeting you, when I get out of here. I really feel like I’ve made a new friend.”

“I do too. I admire the way you’re keeping your chin up through this.”

“I’m trying to be positive. I know I’m lucky to be alive, and I’m a firm believer of counting your blessings. So I’m just going to concentrate on the good things right now. I’ve got my health. A job I like. Great family and friends. And I’m still hoping Earl Grey will turn up.”

“That’s the spirit,” Gable said.

“I just wish I could get out of here. What time is it, do you know?”

Gable clicked on her flashlight and shone it on her watch. “Nine thirty.”

“Only nine thirty? Oh man, this is going to be a long night.”

“It’ll pass before you know it. We just have to keep your mind occupied. So...we’ve covered music. How about movies? What are some of your favorites?”

“Hmm. Well, *Gone With the Wind* is a classic. And I love all the old Hepburn-Tracy movies. Oh! And Carmen Miranda! And those Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney ‘Let’s put on a show!’ films. And most of the great old musicals. *My Fair Lady*. *South Pacific*. *King and I*. *Music*

Man. Oklahoma.”

“I love those too!” Gable broke into a boisterous chorus of “76 Trombones” and Erin joined in, with a lilting soprano that complimented Gable’s rich alto perfectly. By the end of the song, they were both laughing.

“You have a lovely singing voice,” Erin said.

Gable could feel herself blushing. “Nice job on the harmony,” she replied.

“How about...” Erin broke into “I’m Just a Girl Who Can’t Say No” from *Oklahoma*.

Gable countered with “Tonight” from *West Side Story*, and thus began nearly two hours of shared show tunes. They sang until they could sing no more.

“Okay, we’ve covered music and old movies. How about more recent films?” Gable asked. She had to nearly shout to be heard through the wall. The rain was really coming down again.

“Well, let’s see... I really liked *The American President*. *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You’ve Got Mail*. I love just about anything Tom Hanks is in.”

“Yeah. I like him a lot too. And Annette Benning is wonderful in *American President*.”

“What are your favorite flicks?”

“Oh, I’m a big man-against-nature fan,” Gable said. “*Vertical Limit*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Castaway*. *The Edge*, *Touching the Void*, *Titanic*. And old war movies: *In Harm’s Way* and *The Longest Day*, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*”

They moved on to TV shows. Both never missed *Survivor*, *Alias*, *Medium*, and *Joan of Arcadia*, but Gable was alone in her devotion to the History Channel and college football, and Erin had a fondness for old *Little House on the Prairie* reruns that Gable didn’t share.

Around midnight they drifted to literature and found they both liked mysteries and shared many of the same favorite authors: Nevada Barr and Sue Henry, Steve Hamilton and Dana Stabenow.

They covered food for the next hour, discovering a mutual fondness for Asian and Mexican cuisine. Cappuccino. Crème brûlée. Tiramisu. And chocolate, especially dark chocolate. And both were fervent devotees of a medium-rare Victoria’s filet from Outback Steakhouse, with garlic mashed potatoes on the side.

Two to three a.m. was devoted to funny stories about past vacations each had been on.

Hobbies took up another half hour. So did religion—both were lapsed Roman Catholics.

Politics and social issues were next. Both were decidedly Democratic and they shared a deep concern for the environment and other issues.

Gable kept Erin talking while keeping an ear tuned to her radio.

About the time that dawn was breaking, the questions and answers began getting more and more personal. Gable was nearly hoarse from having to raise her voice half the night. But the rain had stopped, finally.

“How did you get your name, Gable? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone named that before.”

“My mom really liked old movies, and she named all of us after actors she liked.”

“Oh! Clark Gable! I get it! It’s unusual, but I like it very much,” Erin said. “You said ‘all of us’? I take it you have brothers and sisters?”

“Eight brothers, no sisters. I’m the baby of the family.”

“You have eight older brothers? Oh my. That must have been fun when you were young! Tell me about them. What are their names?”

“Well, there’s Grant, Stewart, Kelly...” Gable counted them out on her fingers to make sure she got them all. “Flynn, Mason, Wayne, Fitzgerald and Tracy. And we’re all very close. Dad died when I was ten, so they all kind of stepped up. Grant taught me self-defense. Flynn took me fishing and showed me how to shoot a gun. Kelly turned me into a pretty good poker player, and Fitz taught me how to shoot hoops. With Mason it was whittling and carpentry, and with Wayne it was fixing cars. Stewart’s really good with computers. I’ve learned a lot from them and they’ve all really been there for me. But they are awful overprotective.”

Erin laughed. “Well it was quite different for me growing up. My sister Sue was so much older—twenty years—that she was out of the house before I was born.”

“Did you say twenty *years*?”

“Yeah, I was a major surprise—Mom was forty when she got pregnant with me. It was like being an only child, really. I was spoiled rotten. Got anything I asked for.”

“Okay. Favorite Christmas presents, then,” Gable prompted.

“Hmm. Well, my first two-wheeled bicycle, when I was seven. It was pink. I got a phone in my room, when I was fourteen. And a Mustang convertible—used—after I turned sixteen. *That* was a memorable one, as you can imagine. And two weeks in Paris, the year I turned eighteen.”

“Pretty cool presents,” Gable agreed. “I never got anything near that good, but then I did do well in the sheer volume category.”

Erin laughed.

“Course, back when we were growing up, a lot of the presents were homemade,” Gable said. “I’d get all sorts of things whittled out of wood or molded out of clay. Homemade kites. Vases that couldn’t hold water. Wallets made at summer camp. But the boys have all done pretty well for themselves since they got out into the working world, so I’ve been really raking it in the last several years.”

“Part of me, especially as an adult, misses having a lot of siblings,” Erin said. “Sue is married, with four kids, and lives in Seattle. We hardly ever see each other, and don’t often talk on the phone.”

“That’s a shame. I can’t imagine not being close to my brothers, especially Stewart—he’s only a year older than I am. And Grant, because he took me in and became kind of a second father to me.”

“Grant took you in?” Erin repeated.

“Six years after Dad died of a heart attack, Mom got killed in a car accident,” Gable said, her voice thick with emotion. “Being the only girl, my parents both really doted on me. It was real hard.” She took a deep breath. “Anyway, I was just sixteen. Grant—he’s the oldest—he was married by then and had a house. He took care of me until I went away to college, and he and the rest of my brothers all chipped in to pay for my tuition and dorm. I don’t know how I’d have come through it without ’em.”

“It’s wonderful to have people in your life who you know will be there when you need them.”

“Sure is,” Gable agreed.

“I certainly needed *you* tonight,” Erin said. “And I won’t forget all you’ve done, Gable.”

Gable smiled at the words. She knew that she and Erin were building a very special friendship tonight. And the thought warmed her from within.

Growing up a tomboy in a house full of brothers, she'd always found it much easier to talk to men than women. She fit right in at the firehouse and was accepted as one of the guys, but they were mostly superficial relationships. Apart from the occasional poker game, she rarely socialized and never had anyone over to her house. She was an intensely private person, and her innate shyness had so far kept her from developing the kind of close friendships in Michigan that she'd had in Tennessee.

But there was something different about Erin. It was easy to talk to her—like they'd been friends a long time. Why was that?

Gable hadn't considered her life lacking. She was comfortable with the status quo. But the thought of having Erin to hang out with...*catch a movie, try a new restaurant. Maybe catch a play in Traverse City. We sure have a lot in common.* The prospect sent a ripple of excitement up her spine. *And won't it be great to have someone close by that you can really be yourself with?*

That brought up a whole new question. *How will she react to that bit of news?*

Gable had not a clue about Erin's sexual orientation. Their love lives had not really come up—Erin had only said that she was single. *She's thirty-nine and she lives alone. She's either divorced, or widowed, or homely as hell, or...or maybe she's just like me and hasn't met the right person yet. What kind of person is the right person for you, Erin?* Her curiosity suddenly shifted into overdrive.

"Erin? What do you look like?" *Are you cute? Are you gay?* She wanted to ask, but of course she couldn't. *You're supposed to be professional here. You're acting as a representative of the fire department.*

"Well, I'm five-five. A hundred twenty pounds. Red hair. Strawberry-blond, really. Down to my shoulders. And I wear glasses. You?"

"I'm five-ten," Gable said. "Short hair, dark brown. And I wore glasses too, until a couple years ago. I had radial keratotomy."

"Ew. I considered that, but the thought of someone coming at my eyes with a sharp instrument or a laser or something gives me the willies."

"It wasn't so bad." Gable couldn't help smiling. *How do I find out what your story is, Erin?* "Do you have any kids?"

"Nope. Just cats. Earl Grey was number nine."

“*Nine* cats?”

“Yeah. My first was Mamma Cat.” At Gable’s small chuckle, she said, “Yeah, I know, real original. My mother’s choice. I was six at the time. This cat showed up at our door during a snowstorm and gave birth a few days later.”

“Hence the name. I get it. And after Mamma Cat?”

“There was Whiskers and Buford. Then...let’s see...Cookie and Crumb—they were brother and sister. Then Freeway, and Jake. And Festus—he was a Siamese. Then Earl Grey.”

“That’s a lot of cats.”

“I usually have at least two at a time. Strays just seem to find me. I never actually go out looking for one,” Erin said. “Do you have any pets?”

“Nope,” Gable said. “We had a golden retriever when I was growing up. Her name was Sally. But nothing after that.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I love having pets to come home to. What about you? Do you have any kids? Are you married?”

“Nope, no kids. Never married. You?” Gable held her breath.

There was a lengthy silence. “I was married once.” Erin’s voice suddenly sounded a bit funny. Strained. “It didn’t last very long. He was a real asshole.”

Gable felt her heart sink. “I’m sorry. That’s a shame.” *Of course she’s straight. They’re always straight.*

The radio at her side blared to life. “McCoy from dispatch. Respond accident involving two trucks, intersection Lincoln Road and M-42.”

Gable keyed the mike as she got to her feet. “Dispatch from McCoy. Responding.”

“You have to leave, don’t you?” Erin asked.

“Fraid so. But hang tight. Help should be here soon.”

“I’ll be all right. You go,” Erin urged. “But I want to take you to dinner or something soon. I owe you, big-time.”

“I’d like that. And I’m glad I could help. Take care, Erin.”

Gable jogged to the Jeep and started to back down the driveway, but paused when she heard the approaching rumble of heavy equipment. She pulled off onto the lawn as two cars and a construction crane appeared in the rearview mirror. The lead car contained two of the veterans on her firefighting squad—Radley Stokes and Oscar Knapp. She quickly briefed them and asked them to keep an eye out for Erin’s cat.

Maybe if this is a quick callout I can make it back by the time they get her out, she thought as she turned on her emergency flasher and sped down the road. *I really want a face to put with that voice.*

CHAPTER THREE

Eight days later, Gable still had no better idea of what Erin looked like.

The accident that had called her away that night had taken hours to clear—a lumber truck collided with a Road Commission truck, pinning one of the drivers in his cab and spilling gravel and logs all over the highway. It was midafternoon the next day before Gable arrived back home, exhausted, to find a message waiting on her answering machine. Her brother Stewart, telling her he'd lost half his roof to the high winds.

After quickly arranging to take some time off, she drove to Kalamazoo to help with the repairs. The damage was much worse than she'd expected and she found herself stuck at her brother's for a week, working ten or more hours a day. Although she was constantly occupied, her mind wandered on and off to Erin throughout each day.

Gable missed her.

It was weird missing her without having a face to put the voice to. She hoped that when they finally met, she'd be able to get past this maddening *fascination* she'd developed over what Erin looked like. It seemed to be all she could think about.

You're being silly. You know she's straight. It's just that you really haven't had a close woman friend in ages. That's all. And you met under extraordinary circumstances, and had nothing to do all night but get to know each other. Naturally you want to see her face.

When the repairs were finally completed, Gable was happy to escape the congestion of the college town and return to her remote woodland home. Her ten acres were off a dirt road, surrounded by

hundreds of acres of state forest but within easy reach of the two small villages she frequented. Pine River, five miles southeast, had the nearest grocery store, and Meriwether, seven miles west, had the nearest pharmacy, where she worked.

Erin's place wasn't *exactly* on her way home. It was a good ten-minute detour off her fastest route back from Kalamazoo. But she took the back roads there anyway, as if seeing what was left of the place would somehow preserve her connection with its owner.

Although the lot had been cleared and leveled, Gable was disappointed to discover that no construction was underway. She nearly stopped at the Blue Moose motel next, convinced suddenly that seeing Erin would put an end to her irrational fixation. But she needed to shower and change before coming face-to-face with the woman she longed to see, so she swung home instead, prolonging the torture.

She tried on various outfits, eventually settling on jeans, a white shirt, and her leather jacket. She was so nervous her palms were sweating. She brushed her hair until it shone, feeling every bit like she was on a very important first date, though she knew that wasn't the truth.

Stomach churning, she headed to the Blue Moose. Once she'd parked in the lot, she took a moment to control her breathing, then wiped her palms on her pant legs before she went into the office.

"Hi, I'm here to see Erin Richards," she told the bespectacled older gentleman behind the counter. "Can I have her room number or can you ring her for me?"

"Erin Richards, you say?"

The man typed the name into his computer using only two fingers. Who knew what could happen if he hit the wrong key? Clearly, he was terrified. He would look at the keyboard, searching for the letter. Strike it with painful deliberation, then peer at the monitor over his reading glasses to make sure it was there.

Gable bit her tongue to keep from telling him to hurry. Finally, he announced, "I'm sorry, we have no one here by that name."

She stopped breathing for an instant. "Not here?" she repeated. "*Was* she here? Can you tell me that?"

He looked back at the computer screen, then called over his shoulder, "Martha! Can you come out here a minute?"

There was an open door behind him that led into an inner office. After a moment a diminutive woman with gray hair and a ready smile

emerged.

"Hi." She greeted Gable. "What's up?" she asked the man behind the desk.

"Erin Richards. Does that name ring a bell with you?"

"Yeah, that's the teacher that was in fourteen for a couple of days. Lost her house in the tornado?" She directed the last sentence to Gable.

"She was only here a couple of days? Did she say where she was going?"

"Don't think so." The woman cocked her head slightly. "I remember her because her pickup was all caved in on one side, and I asked her about it. She told me what happened. Hey!" Her face lit up with recognition. "I bet you're Gable, aren't you?"

Gable couldn't help the faint flush of embarrassment that warmed her cheeks. *She talked about me!* The realization made her a little giddy with happiness. Apparently she'd made an impression on Erin. "Yes, I'm Gable," she said.

The woman held out her hand. "Martha Edwards. Nice to meet you, Gable." They shook. "She'll be sorry she missed you. She told me how you sat up all night keeping her sane."

"I'm sorry too," Gable said. "Thanks. It's been nice meeting you."

She sat in her Jeep for a moment, drumming her hands on the steering wheel. She didn't want to go home. She was too keyed up. She decided to drop in on Carl Buckman, a poker buddy who ran a bait and tackle shop when there were no emergencies demanding his attention. Carl was a volunteer firefighter too, as well as the local 911 director.

The store was only a few minutes away and Gable spent the drive time practicing normal-sounding conversation.

"Gable! You're back!" Carl waved as she walked in the door. "Missed a good game last night. I won twenty bucks off ol' Don Baum."

She chuckled. "And did he pay up?"

"He promised to bring it in today."

She laughed harder. "Keep dreaming. You'll be lucky to get a free haircut out of him."

Carl shrugged. "Say—I know what I was supposed to tell you. You know that woman you sat up with the night of the tornadoes?"

Her heartbeat picked up. “Erin Richards?”

“That’s her. She called the firehouse a couple of times looking for you. Right after you left, and then again a few days ago. She said she’d keep trying until you got back.”

She wants to find me too! “Did she say where she was staying?”

Carl ran a hand through his hair. “Don’t think so. Oh—there’s something else too. After she called the last time, Dick came in with news about that cat of hers you were asking about.”

“Has somebody seen him?”

“Sounds like it. Dick was having breakfast the other day at the café in town, and he overheard some woman talking. Apparently her son found a hungry-looking cat in the woods a couple of days after the tornado. Turns out it’s gray with a white mustache, just like you said!”

“Where’s the cat now?”

Carl pulled a slip of paper out of his wallet. “Here’s the number of the people taking care of it. The woman told Dick she’d give it back when we found the owner.”

Gable called the family and arranged to pick up Earl Grey. She’d look after the cat while she searched for Erin, she decided. She didn’t want him settling in too comfortably with a new family. She stopped at the grocery store on her way there and got a bag of dried food and several cans of moist, along with a litter pan and litter and a variety of toys.



Gable had to admit that Earl Grey was truly adorable; a Groucho negative, all dark gray but for his perfect white mustache. The cat had viewed her with suspicion at the start—and hid under the car seat all the way home. She lured him out with a handful of treats, and he clung to her shoulder crying pitiful mewling sounds when she carried him inside.

Within a week, he had charmed her in a way she’d thought impossible, sleeping curled beside her every night and wailing loudly how much he’d missed her when she returned home from work.

Gable did everything she could think of to find Erin. The school where Erin taught was no help. The principal had given her a month off and said only that she’d be back in touch once she got things settled.

Why didn't you give her your number, idiot?

She hung out a lot at the fire station when she wasn't working, hoping Erin would call. But when another week passed with no word from her, she began to worry that maybe Erin had reconsidered her decision to rebuild. Maybe there was a problem with her insurance.

She drove by Erin's place again, and her heart skipped a beat when she spotted the Oakleaf Log Homes truck parked in the driveway. A crew of workers was busy putting up log walls.

After that, Gable went by regularly to check the progress. The house looked like one of those prefab kits. It sure was going up fast. Sometimes she rode her bike out there—the fourteen-mile round trip was a satisfying evening ride after work. Other times she drove and took Earl Grey with her, riding on her lap. Soon the way to Erin's became as familiar to her as her route to work. Off her dirt road, she headed south along a paved two-lane until she came to the farm with the twin silver silos, glinting in the sun. Left onto a gravel road for a half mile, then right onto another paved road and over the bridge to Pine River.

This time of year, the bridge was usually lined with cars belonging to the fishermen who were trying to catch rainbow trout in the sparkling water below. A mile or so beyond was the intersection where she'd encountered the tornado. Gable always slowed and said a prayer of thanks as she passed the concrete slab that marked where the convenience store had stood. When she reached the final quarter mile, her heartbeat would begin to pick up. She always hoped to get a glimpse of Erin, but was disappointed each time.

Finally, after a month or so, the new cabin looked done from the outside. After that, she'd see the occasional electrical company truck or plumber's van in the driveway, but still no Erin.



One Friday evening, two months after the tornadoes hit, Gable got off work early to attend the bimonthly supper meeting of the volunteer fire department.

Carl greeted her as she stepped into the Plainfield Township fire garage. "Hey, girl, you playing with us later? Going to have a game over at Billy's."

"Maybe," Gable replied. "Let's see how late this goes."

“You hear the news? Chief Thornton says we have a new volunteer. You won’t be the rookie anymore.”

“Oh, it hasn’t been so bad. Y’all have been pretty easy on me.”

“I’d know that voice anywhere,” came a warm, familiar tone from behind her.

Erin! Gable whipped around.

Her stomach turned cartwheels and her breath caught in her throat. The sweet and caring music teacher she’d gotten to know just happened to be a damn fine-looking woman with a body to die for. Petite and fit, her arms and legs softly muscled. Round breasts beneath a snug-fitting yellow cotton blouse, and a firm backside accentuated nicely by her denim shorts.

And that face. Gable thought Erin surely must be Irish, with her green eyes and reddish-blond hair and faint hint of freckles beneath the small wire-rimmed glasses that rested on her nose. She had delicate features, and a ready smile Gable found irresistible. There was an excited rosy blush on her high cheeks and, more than that, a vivaciousness about her—a spark of life and vitality—that was immensely compelling.

They stood frozen, grinning at each other, for a very long moment.

Then Erin threw herself at Gable and embraced her tightly. “Thank you,” she whispered into her shoulder, in a way that sent shivers up and down Gable’s spine.

She could feel Erin’s warm, moist breath on the skin at the base of her neck, a particularly sensitive spot. “You’re welcome,” she managed, her throat tight. Her body was acutely aware of Erin’s, pressed up against her, thigh to thigh, breast to breast.

Erin broke the embrace and looked her up and down. “You’re just like I pictured you! I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch sooner. My mother came and abducted me from the motel. Have you been out to my place?”

Gable blushed. She couldn’t admit she’d been there almost every day since she got back from Kalamazoo. “Yeah, it looks very nice! I can’t *believe* how incredibly *fast* it went up.”

Erin nodded. “Wasn’t that amazing? It’s one of the reasons I went with that company. They promised it would be finished in six to seven weeks. It was one of those kit deals where they build the walls and roof elsewhere, and just have to assemble it on site.”

"Have you moved in?"

"I just now got back in town. Tonight will be my first night."

"Oh, that's exciting!" Gable felt her grin get bigger. "And I have the perfect housewarming gift."

Erin smiled back. "Let me guess. A weather radio? Fire extinguisher?"

"Good choices, but mine's better."

"Do I get a hint?"

"Do I get an introduction?" Carl interjected.

Gable had completely forgotten he was there. "Sorry, Carl. This is Erin Richards. The woman I sat up with, the night of the tornado."

"I gathered that. Pleased to meet you, Erin." He extended a hand.

"Carl Buckman here is our 911 director, and my closest rival in our Saturday night poker games. All-around great guy, and fortunately an extremely bad bluffer."

"Do all rookies get to play?" Erin asked. "I'm a force to be reckoned with when it comes to five-card stud."

"You're the new recruit?" *Someone pinch me. She's joining the squad?*

Erin rested a hand on her shoulder. "Don't look so surprised! I got to thinking a lot about what you said, about giving service...and it never being too late to make a difference. And what *you* do, as a volunteer firefighter, can mean the difference between life and death. I sure know *that* firsthand." She winked at Gable, whose heart fluttered in her chest.

She joined up because of me. Gable felt a surge of pride at the realization. *And that means I'm going to be seeing her a lot!*

"Hey, Gable, who's your friend?" The voice belonged to a ruggedly cute thirtysomething fireman with honey blond hair and a matching mustache.

"Hey, Tim!" Gable greeted the newcomer with a hug. "Tim Scott, meet Erin Richards. It was her place that got hit the night of the tornadoes."

"And you're the Tim who's assigned to my zone with Gable, right?" Erin asked.

"That's me. Very pleased to meet you, Erin." They shook hands. "Sorry I wasn't around to help you out that night. Did I hear you say you're joining the squad?"

“Yes, you did,” Erin replied. “I start training next week.”

“Well, welcome aboard. We’re happy to have you.” Tim was grinning at Erin in a way that Gable recognized. *He likes her.* The thought made her kind of queasy.

“Thanks, Tim. I look forward to meeting everyone else.” Erin smiled back at him, and Gable wished she knew her well enough to be able to read her expressions as easily as she could read Tim’s.

“Hey, we better get in there or there won’t be any food left!” Carl gestured impatiently for the women to go on ahead.

“Food? I didn’t know we were eating dinner,” Erin said as she and Gable headed inside. Tim and Carl fell in line behind them.

“Well, having everybody in the firehouse share a meal is kind of a time-honored tradition in the firefighting community,” Gable said.

“Particularly in big cities, where you live at the firehouse,” Tim added from behind them. “Even though we’re all volunteers here, we honor the tradition by centering our meetings around a community meal. Kind of acknowledges that we’re family, that we watch out for each other.”

“Everybody takes turns cooking,” Carl said. “You’ll get your turn, probably sooner rather than later.”

“Sounds like a good tradition,” Erin said.

They went through a set of swinging double doors and found themselves in the large rectangular room normally used for training. Six-foot-long folding tables stood end to end in the middle of the room, surrounded by enough folding chairs to seat at least two dozen people. Just about as many as were currently milling about and chatting. An elderly man and woman were covering the tables with large plastic tablecloths in ubiquitous red and white checks, while two more men stood by with a pile of china plates and a bucket filled with silverware.

It took a good thirty seconds for everyone to notice there was a new face in the crowd, but once they did the room fell silent.

“Hey, everybody,” Gable said. “Come say hi to the newest addition to our group, Erin Richards.”

Erin was immediately surrounded and introductions made, too fast for her to remember. It had taken Gable a while to get all the names when she joined up too, but everyone was friendly and welcoming. The volunteers were a diverse group, ranging in age from twenty-one to seventy, and included farmers, shopkeepers, bankers, and even a couple of college students.

In short order the tables were set, and Erin was directed to a seat at one end, with the chief occupying the other.

Gable flanked Erin on her right, Carl her left.

“Who’s cookin’ today?” Gable asked.

“Larry,” someone farther down the table replied.

“That means beef stew,” Tim told Erin. “One of the rules for the meal is that everything has to be made from scratch. Larry makes a mean stew, but that’s the extent of his cooking abilities.”

A middle-aged man wearing a large apron dotted with stains appeared with a huge pot of beef stew and set it down next to the chief, who ladled it into big deep bowls that got passed all the way down the line. Erin was the first person served. As that was being done, the cook made several more trips to the kitchen to distribute pitchers of lemonade and plates of corn muffins and Parker House rolls.

No one ate until everyone had a bowl in front of them and Larry had removed his apron and joined them at the table.

“I’d like to welcome Erin, our new rookie.” The chief lifted his glass of lemonade.

“To Erin!” the assembly chorused, raising their glasses.

“Okay, everybody, dig in!” the chief said, and all eyes looked expectantly at Erin as she picked up her spoon and tasted the first bite.

“This is really good stew,” Erin said, and a woman a few seats away snickered. So did the man sitting next to her.

“Glad you like it,” Larry said loudly from three tables away. “It’s my own special recipe with a secret ingredient.”

More snickers.

Erin showed no sign of wilting under the scrutiny. “Secret, eh? I’m pretty good at guessing ingredients.” She dipped another spoonful and tasted it, and set off another round of sniggering. Erin acted as if she hadn’t heard it. “Tarragon? Thyme?”

More laughter.

Erin was clearly determined to rise to the challenge. She took another spoonful. “Worcester sauce? Beer?” Half the group was laughing now, full-out laughter, bowls of stew forgotten.

Erin’s expression grew more determined. Her spoon went into her stew again, stirred it up...and the light suddenly dawned. She scooped out the hard, alien object she discovered at the bottom of her bowl and found it to be a partial dental plate, with four false teeth attached.

Loud roars of laughter shook the room.

“Ah. I see.” Not chagrined, Erin held the teeth up for inspection. “I thought the stew had a bit of a bite to it.”

They howled. Gable laughed so hard she had tears streaming down her face. Carl snorted lemonade out of his nose.

It took several seconds for the chief to regain enough composure to tell Erin, “Well done, lass. And by the way, it *was* sterilized. We’re not totally cruel.”

“I must admit I kind of freaked when they did it to me,” Gable told Erin as the rest of the crowd resumed eating. “We were having soup, and I didn’t find it until I was about half done. Thought I was gonna heave.”

“Me too,” one of the guys near them chimed in.

“Ah, but you forget I work at an elementary school,” Erin said. “You develop a pretty strong stomach when you take care of kindergarteners during flu season. And no one can touch a fifth grader when it comes to practical jokes.”

Gable had a hard time not staring at Erin throughout the meal. The woman was not only great looking, she was charming, and funny, and totally at ease in the room full of strangers. And Gable wasn’t the only one enchanted. Tim and several of the other single young men—and a couple of the married ones too—kept glancing in the newcomer’s direction.

When they were nearly done eating, Chief Thornton thanked everyone for coming and made a few announcements. “The duty roster is posted. In addition to the two regular training gigs we’ve got set up this month, I’d like to schedule several training sessions for Erin, if I can get some volunteers.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before a dozen hands shot up, Tim’s a fraction ahead of Gable’s.

“Great,” the chief said. “Let me know when you’re free and I’ll be in touch. Erin, you mentioned you’re pretty flexible until school starts back up, right?”

“Sure, Chief. I’m eager to get started. You can schedule me most any time. Whatever’s best for you and whomever I’m working with.”

“Excellent,” he answered. “You’ll do some of your training here, and next month you’ll get the classroom courses in Charlevoix that we talked about. Okay then, for the rest of you, a reminder that we’ve got the big Fourth of July picnic coming up, and we need all the help we

can get. Pass the word. Any questions?"

There were a few more announcements and a recap of recent callouts. As the meeting finally wound to a close, Carl turned to Gable and Erin. "Cards, ladies?"

"Can't tonight," Erin glanced at her watch. "I'd like to hit the grocery store before it closes."

"I think I'll pass too," Gable said. "I have an important errand to run."

"Aw, can't it wait?" Carl whined, waving a deck of cards at her.

"Nope, sorry, Carl," Gable replied.

"If you change your mind, we'll be at Billy's." He scanned the room for other possibilities. "Good to meet you, Erin," he said, moving away.

"You too, Carl." Erin got to her feet and turned to Gable. "I wish we had more time to catch up, but I need to take a rain check. My cupboard is truly bare and I at least need to pick up coffee and cream or I'll never survive tomorrow morning."

Gable fell into step beside her as they joined the departing firefighters. "Do you mind if I stop by after you get home?"

Erin looked her way. "Tonight?"

"I'll only stay a couple minutes."

"Sure, all right," Erin said. "Give me a half hour?"

"See you then."

CHAPTER FOUR

Earl Grey greeted Gable at the door with his raspy mewl. It was the cry he made to remind her that his stomach was indeed empty and would she please remedy that straightaway?

She picked him up and set to work scratching the spot under his chin that always made him lean into her touch. He began purring immediately—a tiny engine on low idle. “I got a surprise for you, Earl. I’m gonna take you to see your mama in a bit. I bet you can’t wait to see her.” She carried him to the kitchen for a snack.

When he finished, she carried him into the living room and set him on her lap, petting him and talking to him until it was nearly time to go. She cleaned out his litter box and packed it up, along with a half-full bag of litter. Then she put the cat food into a shopping bag, along with the toys and treats she’d bought. In a separate bag, she put the sweatshirt and sweatpants she’d borrowed the night of the tornado.

“Guess that’s everything,” she announced to the cat, which had followed her from room to room, intently watching her every move.

She glanced at her watch. It was after nine. Erin would be home by now and she knew she really should get going. But she found it much harder than she thought it would be to say good-bye to Earl. *I never dreamed I could get so attached to an animal.* She stooped down to pet him.

“Are all kitty-cats sweet as you?”

Earl purred his response and stood up on his hind legs, his front paws propped against her pant leg. He was demanding to be picked up, and she complied, hugging him and kissing him behind the ears and trying very hard not to cry. “C’mon, you. Time to go. Just ten more

minutes till you see her! I can't wait to see her face."

She carried him out to the Jeep and set him on her lap as she always did. But the cat sensed that this excursion was different than the rest, and he remained alert and awake, as restless with anticipation as she was.

"Why didn't you tell me your mama was such a looker, Earl?" Gable asked as she pulled out onto the two-lane and headed south. "All those trips out to her place, and it turns out she ends up finding *me*."

Earl meowed loudly as if in answer, and got up and began to pace about on the passenger seat.

"Was she looking for me, do you think? Or did she just get the volunteering bug, like she said?"

Gable wanted to believe that Erin had been every bit as intent on finding *her* as she'd been in her efforts to track down Erin. She felt a flush of happiness when she recalled how Erin had virtually flown into her arms and held her tight. *That sure was awful nice.*

She glanced at Earl Grey. "I know, I know. I shouldn't be thinking like that. Your mama and I don't apparently have *that* in common." She sighed and scratched his head. "But you gotta give me a break. It's been a while, okay? I kinda forgot what it felt like to get all stirred up."

Her own dating relationships had been mostly brief and largely forgettable. The women had all been nice enough, but she hadn't fallen head over heels like she'd always dreamed she would. She hadn't met *the one*—the one person who could make her heart stop—the one person who would complete her. And she pretty much gave up hope she would when she hit forty-five and moved to the boonies. She suspected that her dating days were probably behind her.

And she hadn't been at all unhappy with the way things had turned out. She loved her job and her home, and she had some good buddies among the guys on the squad.

But Erin had made her suddenly aware that something was missing in her life here. Being close to someone—having someone to share things with—she needed that. It enriched every life experience. Maybe she couldn't have the kind of relationship with Erin that she might have liked—her hormones apparently hadn't gotten the news yet that Erin was straight. *But I can have something very special with her, I think, even without that part. I sure hope she wants that too.*

Gable braked to a stop at the intersection where she'd encountered the tornado. She remembered thinking that day that she should have seized more opportunities in her life. And she vowed that things would be different from now on.



Erin's new cabin was ablaze with light, a welcoming beacon in the darkness. But Gable walked slowly up to the front door, savoring her last bit of time with Earl Grey. She hid him under her jacket, a maneuver only partially successful. It concealed his identity, but she could not disguise the fact that something very *alive* was protesting its confinement against her chest.

Erin's smile when she opened the door and spotted Gable turned to a look of bewilderment when her eyes focused in on the squirming bundle of energy beneath her coat.

"Your housewarming present," Gable explained. "Anxious to be opened, as you can see." She smiled mischievously.

Erin stepped aside. "Well, do come in."

The cat let out a loud *rowl* as Gable stepped over the threshold. She hadn't heard this particular cry before, but she thought it sounded clearly like *get me the hell out of here right now!*

"A cat?" Erin guessed. She had a big grin on her face. "You brought me a cat?"

"Not just any ol' cat," Gable said as she unzipped her jacket.

"Earl! Oh my *God!* Earl Grey!" Erin scooped him up from Gable's outstretched hands and held him close against her. "I can't believe you're here!"

Earl was momentarily startled by the abrupt change but when he recognized Erin's familiar scent he mewed a soft, sweet sigh and rubbed his chin and whiskers against her cheek.

Gable thought it was one of the nicest reunions she'd ever witnessed, and said a prayer of thanks for the family that had found Earl and taken him in. Sad as she was to lose him, she was nonetheless gratified by Erin's joy at getting her cat back.

"Where...how?" Tears of happiness streamed down Erin's face as she reached over to embrace Gable with one arm, the other cradling

Earl. "Oh, thank you, Gable. Thank you so much."

Gable was near enough to inhale Erin's cologne, a subtle aroma she found very appealing. The proximity of their bodies unnerved and excited her. Her heartbeat accelerated. She reached out to scratch Earl under the chin, and he leaned into it as usual, his eyes closed and his purr kicking into high volume.

"He's really taken to you," Erin observed. "He's usually pretty stand-offish. How long have you had him? How did you find him?"

"Well, I'd asked a few of the guys to keep an eye out for him. A family found him, and word got around. I've had him a few weeks," Gable said.

"I just can't believe you found him," Erin repeated, shaking her head. "I'd given up all hope."

"I thought you were the eternal optimist!" Gable chided.

"Well, I am now!" Erin said, and they both laughed. "Seriously, though, I won't ever be able to repay you for all you've done for me."

"Not a problem, really." A faint blush warmed Gable's cheeks. "I was happy to do it. Oh, I've got a bunch of stuff for Earl in the car—litter box, food, toys. And I brought you back the clothes I borrowed. I'll get 'em."

She retrieved the bags and handed them to Erin, who was watching Earl Grey scout out his new surroundings.

"Make yourself at home," Erin said. "Excuse the lack of furniture! I'm going to put the litter box upstairs and set out food and water for Earl. I'll be right back." She headed up a short set of stairs at one end of the room that led to a narrow hallway with doors leading off it.

Gable took in her surroundings. She was in the cabin's great room. Though it was still mostly unfurnished, it had a warm and homey feel—constructed entirely of wood and stone and natural materials. The walls were rough-hewn pine and the ceiling was supported by a framework of massive logs; the spicy scent of new wood lingered subtly in the air. The floor was wood too, except for the entryway, which had been given over to terra-cotta tiles the color of Georgia clay.

The soft track lighting was expertly aimed, spotlighting the log rafters, high ceiling and fieldstone fireplace with dramatic emphasis, bringing out the warm amber glow of the wood.

Erin came back down the stairs and headed to the kitchen in the corner, giving Gable a big grin as she passed by.

The lighting does some really nice things for you too, Gable thought as she watched her fill one bowl with water and another with cat food. When Erin bent over to set them on the floor next to the refrigerator, Gable found her eyes lingering on her sculpted ass.

She quickly averted her gaze as the neatly built woman straightened, and resumed her study of the great room. The only furniture thus far was a brand-new dining table and chairs, set up near the corner kitchen, and a sofa and TV. The TV rested on a large wooden crate. Off to one side, against the wall, were several stacks of boxes and plastic storage containers, some of which she recognized from Erin's basement.

Erin came to stand beside her and followed her eyes. "That's what I was able to salvage. Still have a lot of things to get, as you can see." She turned slowly, surveying the room. "I'm really happy with everything, though. It's set up very much like the old place, but I made some improvements. The porch is bigger, the basement has a reinforced ceiling, and I've replaced my tiny shower with a brand-new whirlpool tub!"

Keeping her eyes off Erin was a hopeless task. Gable had never dreamed she would have such tiny, delicate hands, soft lips, and lustrous, silky hair. *Stop staring. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.*

She pried her eyes away and said, "Well, I'd better get going. It's late."

"Can I treat you to dinner tomorrow to say thanks?" Erin asked. "I'd cook for you, but I don't have pots and pans and dishes yet. I have a lot of shopping to do."

"Tell you what," Gable said. "I've got the weekend off. Why don't I come shopping with you? I can help lug packages and we can grab dinner while we're out. I'll let you pay—as long as it's nothing too extravagant. A burger's fine with me."

"That would be wonderful!" Erin seemed delighted. "I'd love the company. I'm actually kind of looking forward to picking things out for the place and restocking my closets. And we sure seem to have the same tastes about a lot of things!"

"We certainly do." Gable wore her own silly grin from ear to ear. It didn't seem to matter at the moment that she absolutely abhorred shopping. Ranked it right up there with getting a cavity filled. All that mattered was spending more time with Erin. Standing so close to her, she swore she could feel heat coming off their bodies.

"Do you mind getting an early start?" Erin asked. "I was going to leave about nine and get to Grand Traverse Mall about the time it opened."

"Sure. And I'll drive, if you like," Gable offered.

"That's awful sweet. You sure you don't mind?"

"Nope. Not a bit. Well then, I'll see you tomorrow." Gable turned to leave, and Erin followed and opened the door for her. But her voice stopped her before she could cross the threshold.

"Gable?"

Gable turned and faced her.

"I...well, I just wanted to say thanks again for taking care of Earl Grey. And for getting me through the longest night of my life. You made it not only tolerable, but actually...very memorable...in a good way." She had a shy grin on her face when she said this, and an expression that looked almost...*expectant*.

Gable was struck by how extraordinarily *breathtaking* Erin was at that moment. Suddenly the room was much too warm. "I'm really glad you're back, Erin. I'm looking forward to spending some time with you." Her palms were sweating. Her heart hammered in her chest. She needed air. She took a reluctant step through the doorway.

"Me too, Gable. Me too," Erin said, letting her go. "Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow."

CHAPTER FIVE

Come on, Gable, help me out here. Get on this bed!” It had finally come to this. Gable should never have volunteered to go shopping with Erin. The entire day had been one long exercise in temptation and restraint. Everywhere they went, she was taunted by provocative thoughts and images, and everything Erin said seemed like a double entendre.

Things had started out innocently enough. She picked Erin up at nine a.m. and they got to the mall in Traverse City just as it was opening. Erin had salvaged several items of clothing from her ruined home, but she was tired of living in the same half dozen T-shirts and jeans.

First stop: Marshall Field’s. Erin went through the aisles with purpose, pulling a sweater off an aisle display, then two blouses from a rack, pausing only to check for the right sizes.

“Hold these, please,” she said, shoving the items at Gable before reaching for a gray-green tank top that matched the color of her eyes. “What do you think?”

She held it in front of her, and Gable could easily picture the provocative top accentuating the curves of Erin’s nicely rounded breasts. She realized her mouth was hanging open and shut it abruptly. A faint flush crept up her cheeks and she prayed Erin wouldn’t notice.

“Well?” Erin said. “Think it would look good on me?”

Gable nodded, not trusting her voice. *Oh, this is so not going to be easy.*

Erin tossed the top to her, adding to the pile of prospective purchases, and continued on through the racks. Another shirt, three pairs of dress slacks. A blazer. Then, a leather skirt.

Dear God. Gable groaned. *That will barely cover her ass.*

"You know, I usually hate to shop," Erin said, sending a pair of khakis in Gable's direction. "But this is kinda fun." She surveyed the bundle of clothes in Gable's arms. "That'll do for now." She headed off in the direction of the fitting rooms, crooking a beckoning finger over her shoulder.

Gable hesitated at the dressing room door, but Erin pulled her inside.

"Sit over there," she commanded, pushing her toward the small bench off to one side and closing the door. "I want to know what you think. Be honest, now."

It was a spacious corner stall, and the bench Gable sat on faced a trifold, full-length mirror guaranteed to capture every possible angle of the body standing in front of it. Gable almost whimpered aloud as Erin took the clothes from her and hung them up. *Uh-oh. I'm in serious trouble here.*

Erin considered her selections aloud as she absentmindedly kicked off her shoes and stepped out of her jeans. "Those charcoal pants will go with everything. And I really like this." She peeled off her top and reached for a nicely tailored white button-down shirt.

Gable tried to pry her eyes from the soft expanse of flesh between Erin's cream satin bra and matching panties. *I can't do this, I can't do this.* Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her mouth felt stuffed with cotton.

Erin pulled the shirt on, leaving three buttons unbuttoned to expose entirely too much cleavage, and stepped into the khakis. Checking out the outfit in the mirror, she glanced at Gable. "Whatcha think? I like these."

Gable nodded mutely and forced her eyes away so she wouldn't be caught staring. But her gaze fell instead on the short leather skirt hanging on the wall, and she worried she would hyperventilate.

Before she knew it, Erin was nearly naked again in that damn lingerie, giving her yet another chance to study some fascinating body part. Her eyes were drawn to lightly freckled shoulders and upper arms, the muscles bunching and expanding as Erin reached for another ensemble.

This time it was a burgundy blouse with a high round collar and subtle pattern, over the charcoal dress slacks.

“Teacher clothes.” Erin shrugged as she stepped in front of the mirror. “I’d love to have a job where I could go to work in jeans. That’s one of the perks of teaching piano at home. Speaking of which...” She whirled to face Gable, who tried her damndest not to blush under the scrutiny. “I think you should take up an instrument again. Wouldn’t it be fun to play together?”

Fun? Play together? Instrument? Gable’s mind was not her own. It refused to think coherently, filling instead with all sorts of images that were not at all remotely connected to music. She felt herself blushing. What the hell was happening to her? *You’ve been celibate way too long.*

“Gable? You all right?”

“Uh, sure, sorry. Drifted off there for a minute.”

“You tired of shopping already?”

“No! Not at all.” *If shopping was always like this, I might just live at the mall.*

“Good. So what do you think?”

“You...uh...you look very nice.” *Brilliant. Very original. Nice vocabulary you got there, Gable.*

“I mean about taking up an instrument. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“I don’t think I can remember much,” Gable protested halfheartedly. “I doubt I could even read music anymore.”

“I can fix that. Put yourself in my very capable hands and we’ll be playing beautiful music together before you know it.”

“Whatever you say.” Gable tried not to read anything into the choice of words.

Once again, Erin was stripping before the full-length mirror. This time she reached for the leather skirt. Slipping it on, she turned slowly to see herself in the mirror. “Does it show too much?”

Not if you wear it around me. Gable kept that compliment to herself. *No one should have those legs,* she thought, admiring Erin’s firm calves and toned thighs. She could only imagine how the boys at the fire station would react. The skirt definitely showed too much, she decided. But that was being selfish.

“You have the body to wear it,” she said, trying to keep her voice even.

“Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself,” Erin said offhandedly. Stripping off the skirt, she reached for a pair of navy dress slacks.

She looked at Gable's reflection in the mirror as she zipped up the fly and adjusted the belt. "So...maybe this is too personal, but...you and Tim...any...uh, did you ever go out or anything?"

The question caught Gable off guard. *Why are you interested?* "Nope. Good friends, that's all. Why?"

Erin shrugged. "Just curious."

Why are you curious? Has to be Tim. She likes Tim. Gable felt queasy again all of a sudden. It didn't help that Erin was stripping down to her bra and panties yet again.

She got to her feet and headed for the door of the fitting room. "It's pretty warm in here, I'm going to stretch my legs. Take your time. I'll meet you at the entrance to the mall."

She escaped without waiting for a response and found a bench outside the store entrance. While Erin finished trying on clothes, she took the time to compose herself. Her self-therapy included a pep talk. *You have to get over this. You're being ridiculous. She's the best prospect for a friend you've had in ages, and you're going to screw that up if you keep mooning over her like this. She's straight. Get over it already.*

She wasn't ready to tell Erin she was gay. With her hormones so out of control at the moment, she would feel far too *exposed* if Erin knew. No. It took her no time at all to decide. She wouldn't tell Erin until she got over this...this crush. That's all it was. A crush on a straight woman. *You've had them before. It'll pass.*

It had been a while since she'd come out to anyone. No one, in fact, since she'd moved to Michigan, not even the guys at the station. She hadn't felt close enough to any of them to volunteer something that personal. And she hated the idea of getting kidded about it mercilessly over their weekly poker games.

Besides, these days you're hardly even a lesbian. You're more asexual than anything. You haven't been out on a date in, what... She did the math in her head. Let's see. I was seeing Jane back when...Oh my God. I haven't been on a date in four years? Oh, you really are pathetic, Gable. No wonder you're panting after this woman.

The object of her musings appeared at that moment, exiting the store with large shopping bags in each hand and a concerned look on her face.

"You all right?" She settled on the bench beside Gable and put a hand on her back.

Gable swore she could feel the heat of Erin's palm through her clothing. Her throat felt tight. "I'm fine. Just seemed awful warm in there."

"Want to quit?"

"Nope. I'm okay. Where to next?"

"Well, we can kind of work our way down the mall. Let me know when you get tired and we'll stop for lunch. My treat."

"Sounds good. Let's go."

Gable suffered through another dressing-room strip show at JC Penney, where Erin loaded up on another armful of clothes. They dropped off their purchases at the Jeep and then spent nearly three hours in Target, filling two carts with essential odds and ends: cleaning supplies and kitchen ware, garden hose and tools. Bandages. A flashlight. Clocks and rugs. Curtains, towels, sheets, and blankets. A boom box and several CDs. Telephones and an answering machine.

After a stop for lunch at China Wok, they made brief forays to several other mall stores. She thought she'd come through the worst of it, temptation-wise, until Erin paused in front of Victoria's Secret.

"Let's go in here. I need some new bras and panties, and they have a good selection."

Oh Lord. Give me strength, Gable thought as they headed inside. She tried not to look at the provocative lingerie displayed all around her. Lacy camisoles. Push-up bras. Sheer negligees. Teddies. Thongs. She tried not to imagine how they would look on Erin. She really did. But her mind and body conspired against her. She could feel the wetness begin to pool between her legs.

"What do you think of these?" Erin held up a sexy black demi-cup bra and matching panties, made of silk.

"I think...I think..." Gable's ability to form a coherent sentence left her and she felt light-headed. "Fine. Just fine. I'm going to sit over here."

She found an easy chair outside the fitting rooms and plunked down into it as Erin shrugged and continued shopping. Closing her eyes, she tried to dispel the naughty images cascading through her brain. But she was not at all successful. So she was both relieved and mildly

disappointed when Erin appeared a short while later with another large bag, ready to go.

"Furniture next. Let's head to Art Van," she announced as they departed the store for Gable's Jeep.

Oh good. This part won't be so bad.

She was wrong.

It was in the bedroom display area at Art Van's that Gable realized her libido was now controlling her life. There was Erin, stretched out on a queen-sized mattress, looking tantalizingly kissable, beckoning and smiling, wanting an opinion on the firmness.

"Come on, Gable, help me out here. Get on this bed!"



That night, she called her brother Stewart. Just thirteen months older, he had looked out for her since they were in grade school, and he was the one person in the world she confided in. He knew her whole pathetic dating history and had seen her through more than a couple of crushes. And through it all, he was always a sound and reassuring voice of reason.

"How's the roof doing? Any leaks?" she asked after their hellos.

"Works like a charm. We had a downpour last week. Oh, Steven wants to say hi."

Her six-year-old nephew got on the phone. "I miss you, Aunt Gable. I play with the fire truck you gave me all the time."

"Are you saving lots of people?"

"Yes, today I saved the Lego people in Pirateland."

"I see. Well, that sounds very brave of you."

"Daddy wants to talk now. Bye, Aunt Gable."

"Bye, Steven."

"Can't thank you enough again for all you did," Stewart said. "I owe you. So...what's up? It's not like you to call without a reason."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gable asked indignantly. "I call you just to say hello."

"No, you never do."

"I do too."

"Name the last time."

"I called you right after I got home," she reminded him.

"To ask whether we'd seen your sunglasses."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I...I called you a couple weeks before the tornado, didn't I? You told me about Steven's karate classes."

"After you asked me what you should get Tracy for his birthday."

"Oh." There was a pause. "I really never call you unless I want something?" Gable asked. She felt awful if that was true.

"No. But that's okay. Because you want something often enough that I get to keep up with what you're doing."

"Well, jeez, then I should apologize, Stewart. That's kind of lame, to only call you when I want something."

"Not a problem, sis. Your heart's in the right place, I know. So spill. What is it this time?"

"Well, I...I need some brotherly advice. Or maybe I just need to tell someone, I don't know. I seem to have developed this..." She stammered and bit at her lip. It had been a while since she'd talked to Stewart about her love life, and even with her brother it wasn't exactly *easy* to pour out all her innermost feelings.

"Gable, are you all right?" Her brother's voice was suddenly serious. "Are you ill?"

"No, no," she hastened to reassure him. "I just...well, I seem to have developed this rather maddening crush on this woman..."

"Crush?" The mirth was back in his voice. "Crush?" he repeated. "You've got the hots for someone? Oh this *is* news! This is why you called me?" He started to chuckle, and Gable's embarrassment turned to irritation.

"Well, you're a big help. I'm so glad I called and confided in you."

"Oh, honey, don't be pissed. I'm just teasing. You gave me a scare, there. So, for real? You've got the hots for somebody? It's been a long time. Who is it?"

"You remember that woman I told you about? Erin?"

"Trapped-all-night so-much-in-common Erin?"

"That's the one."

"Didn't you say she was straight?"

"She is. She's also drop-dead gorgeous *and* my new best friend. We went shopping together today, and she bought lingerie and a bed."

"Oh, I see. Very tough."

"Yeah."

"Well, you said you two really hit it off. Any chance she might be open-minded enough to consider some new possibilities?"

"You mean switching sides? Stewart! I'm surprised at you!"

"Why? I want you to be happy. You've been alone too long."

"Well, that may be true, but..."

"So do you think she's interested?" he asked.

"No, she's definitely straight. Besides, she has no idea I'm so smitten with her. I haven't even told her I'm gay yet."

"You haven't? Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't want to do anything to muck up our friendship. It's just getting started."

"But that's kind of an important piece of information to keep from someone you want to be close to, isn't it?"

"I know. And I will tell her. But today was really only the first full day we spent together, face-to-face anyway, and it was torture most of the time. I mean, I gotta tell ya, bro...I got it bad. I can't stop thinking about her. And I'm afraid if I come out to her, then she'll be able to see how I feel about her." She sighed. "I keep hoping it will get easier. Maybe I just want you to tell me I'll get over this."

"I wish I could, hon. But I doubt you'd be calling me about this if she was just a passing fancy."

"Big help you are."

"Sorry. Best I can do is to tell you to follow your heart."

"I'll try to remember that," Gable said. "Thanks for listening."

"Any time, sis. Good luck."

Gable fell asleep that night repeating her resolve to get a grip on her hormones. She was *not* going to let her emotions get the better of her, damn it! Her friendship with Erin was too important to screw up.



"Come on, Gable, help me out here. Get in this bed!" Erin lounged on her side on the queen-sized sleigh bed, one leg straight, the other slightly bent, a provocative pose, especially considering her apparel. She had on a black silk demi bra and matching panties, and Gable could see her erect nipples through the lingerie, small dark circles straining against the sheer fabric. A few wisps of reddish-blond hair escaped the edge of the panties, a tiny triangle that left very little to the imagination.

Erin's hand gently patted the silky cotton sheet beside her. "I'm waiting for you." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and stared at Gable with a piercing look of desire. The bedroom was lit by candles, and soft soothing music played low in the background.

"Waiting for me?" Gable asked, drawn to the bedside.

"Mmm-hmm." Erin reached for her hand and pulled her down onto the bed.

Gable went willingly and lay on her side, drinking in every detail of the reclining woman—the fair skin, lightly freckled on her face, shoulders, arms. The inviting cleavage between her breasts. The flat plane of her stomach, with tiny blond hairs trailing down to disappear beneath the sheer material of the panties.

"Are you...do you..." she stammered, unable to believe what was happening even as she reached out her hand to caress the side of Erin's face. So soft. So incredibly soft. She knew it would be.

"Mmm-hmm," Erin purred again, leaning in to the touch. "I do want you, Gable. Just as much as you want me. I don't want to wait anymore."

"I don't either." Gable slid her hand around the back of Erin's neck to pull her closer.

Erin's hand slipped around her as their mouths came together, lips slightly open. Soft at first. Tentative.

Then, pressing harder, her tongue caressed Gable's lower lip, and the kiss deepened as their bodies closed the distance and heated flesh met heated flesh. Breasts pressed against each other. Erin's leg insinuated itself between Gable's. The lingerie was suddenly gone somehow, and Gable was mildly surprised to discover that she was naked too.

Her arousal went from simmer to boil in an instant when Erin moaned and climbed on top of her, not breaking the kiss until she had to draw breath. Erin's leg pressed harder against her aching center, and Gable's body began moving of its own accord, rocking against Erin, creating a delicious friction that cried out for release.

"Touch me, Erin," she pleaded in a whisper. "*Please*. I ache for your touch."

"Of course, love," Erin whispered back. "Close your eyes."

Gable obeyed, and she could feel Erin's body shift, the leg between hers replaced by a hand. Fingers toyed at the edge of her wet folds, as

Erin's lips found a nipple and began to suck, bite, lick.

The pounding of her heart rang in her ears. She spread her legs wider and lifted her hips to meet the caressing hand. Erin knew just how to stroke her. Harder. Faster.

Gable was poised on the edge of ecstasy when reality came crashing down and she awoke sweating in her own bed, her own hand between her legs. She was so disappointed to find it all a dream that she was unable to continue, unable to find relief.

In the damp tangle of her sheets, it took hours for her to fall back asleep.



The dream kept resurfacing in Gable's mind as she accompanied Erin to Cadillac the next day. She supposed it should have bothered her to spend her entire weekend off work trailing around stores—not exactly a habit of hers. But she found she didn't mind it one bit. She couldn't keep her eyes off Erin, stealing frequent, surreptitious glances at her, her mind's eye dressing Erin in the lingerie of the dream.

She felt vaguely aroused all day, and so was grateful Erin's shopping for the more risqué items on her list was already complete. This time, they spent hours in Home Depot and Meijer, selecting innocuous items like shelving and bird feeders, clocks, a vacuum cleaner, a ladder. Two full carts of groceries to fill Erin's empty pantry.

Erin insisted on cooking dinner for them that night, since their meal plans the previous evening had been thwarted by Gable's sudden loss of appetite while they were furniture shopping.

"After we eat, would you mind helping me put up some curtains?" Erin asked as she chopped salad vegetables on her new cutting board.

"Whatever you need." Gable watched Erin from a seat at the dining table, Earl Grey curled in her lap, purring contentedly. "Sure I can't help with dinner?"

"Everything's under control. Why don't you just relax. I've worked you pretty hard the last couple of days."

"I enjoyed it." *Perhaps a little too much.*

"You know, when I think back on the tornado, it's just not quite as traumatic as it probably should be. I mean...it was awful, sure. But it brought me the best friend I've had in a long time. I really feel like I've

known you for ages.”

“I know what you mean. I haven’t had a lot of women friends,” Gable admitted. “Growing up in a houseful of guys, I guess. But it’s nice. You’re easy to talk to.”

“Same back atcha. I’d have really been a basket case that night without you.”

“I think you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. I really admire the way you’ve come through all this.”

“Well, I admire the fact you were there in the first place,” Erin said. “Putting yourself at risk in order to make a difference. To help a stranger in trouble.”

“Well, you’ll be doing the same in no time.”

Erin set the salad on the table and lit two candles she had bought that day at Meijer. Gable tried not to think about how romantic the setting seemed.

“I’m looking forward to the training,” Erin said as she added a bowl of mashed potatoes to the table, and two New York strip steaks she had seared in a cast-iron skillet. “I’m a bit nervous about it, though, I’ll admit. I’m certainly the smallest person on the squad. Okay, we’re ready to eat. Help yourself.”

“Everything looks great! And don’t worry about the training, I know you’ll do fine.” Gable assured her. “Some of the drills do require a certain amount of brawn—pulling hoses and putting up the big ladders. But we always put a lot of people on that stuff. The hardest part for me was the classroom tests. Learning fire science and how fires spread. Building construction. Michigan fire laws. What precautions you gotta take around hazardous materials.”

“That reminds me, I need to stop off at the station tomorrow,” Erin said. “The chief said he’d have my training schedule worked out.”

“You’ll be able to start going out on callouts after a couple weeks of training, though you’ll have limits to what you can do,” Gable said. “No going into burning buildings right away.”

She cut several small pieces of steak and fed them to Earl Grey, still curled contentedly in her lap. “During your training, you’ll work one-on-one with some of the guys to learn things like ropes, portable extinguishers, how to ventilate buildings. Communications and equipment on the trucks. How to use an SCBA—that’s your self-contained breathing apparatus. Some of the other stuff takes several

people—rescue operations, working the hoses and ladders. And you learn a lot on the job itself.”

“So when we get a callout, we go right to the station?”

“Well, if you’re really close to it, yeah. We’re so spread out here that most of us keep our gear in our car, so we can go directly to the scene.”

“How often do you get called out?”

“Hard to say. There’s always way more in the summer because the tourists are up here. The population triples. So you get more car accidents, more brush fires from cigarettes getting tossed out windows.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re on the squad. Makes me feel less nervous about everything, knowing I can ask you for help if I need to.”

“You bet. Any time.”

After dinner, Gable washed dishes and Erin dried and put away. As she soaped up the last plate, she allowed herself a momentary wistfulness over how great it would feel to share such domestic chores with Erin on a regular basis. Then they retired to the living room to tackle putting up Erin’s curtains.

“I measured and marked everything last night,” Erin said, setting the ladder in place by the large patio doors. “But it was too awkward to try to put the rod and curtains up myself. Hope you don’t mind.” She handed Gable a screwdriver and three screws.

“Not a bit. Happy to help. I know you’ve got a lot of stuff to do yet around the place. Anytime you need a hand, just give me a holler.” Gable got a small stepstool and set it at the other end of the sliding doors.

Erin stood on top of the ladder with one end of the curtain rod and Gable took the other end. Getting that part installed was no problem.

Next, Gable got the heavy floor-length curtains and handed one end up to Erin before she mounted the stool to hang her end. Just as she was about to hook it, the rod slipped out of Erin’s hands. Erin leaned over to grab it, too far, and the ladder started to tip.

Gable dropped the curtains and lunged forward, catching Erin as she fell, wrapping one arm around her waist. She should have let go of Erin right away. But for some reason her body insisted that she hang on for a few seconds longer than was necessary.

“Hey thanks. But you can let go any time now, Gable. I’m fine,” Erin said, amusement in her voice.

Gable could feel the rush of heat to her face.

“You’re cute when you blush, you know.” Erin smiled up at her with a twinkle in her gray-green eyes. But then she climbed back up the ladder and reached down for the curtains without further ado.

Was she flirting with me? crossed Gable’s mind, but she quickly discarded the notion. *Nah. Wishful thinking.*

CHAPTER SIX

The latter half of June was Gable's favorite time of the summer. It was still mild out, with temperatures in the sixties in the morning and never reaching eighty during the day. And it was when animals from the woods surrounding her house brought their young ones by to forage for the scattered seed that escaped her many bird feeders. There were clownish raccoon babies, as intent on play as on food, and strings of downy-feathered turkey chicks, clustered protectively around their mothers.

Thirteen months ago, when she had driven up to the house for the first time, she had spotted a fawn, curled motionless in the tall grass not forty feet from the screened-in front porch. It had made the decision for her—she had found her perfect refuge in the woods. The two-bedroom home sat on ten acres of rolling mixed hardwoods, with a creek running by just off the porch. And best of all, it was surrounded by hundreds of acres of state forest, so it was home to abundant wildlife: deer and black bear and bobcats. Coyotes, fox, and otter.

She slept with the windows open, and the chorus of birdcalls at first light always woke her well before she had to get up to get ready for work. Ordinarily, Gable relished that quiet time on the porch with her coffee, seeing what animals were out and about. This particular morning, however, she failed to appreciate the snapping turtle crossing her creek, or the pileated woodpecker working on the half-dead oak tree twenty feet away. After spending the whole weekend with Erin, she could think of nothing but seeing her again.

As she showered and got ready to leave, she replayed those moments in the dressing room over and over in her mind and wondered

how she'd make it through a day at work. She wished she'd made definite plans with Erin on when they would get together again. *That reminds me. I should stop at the firehouse on the way to work and pick up a copy of her training schedule.*

The detour to the station only took a few minutes. A copy of Erin's schedule was waiting for her in her mail slot. The chief had some kind of training or drills scheduled for Erin nearly every day for the next three weeks, taking maximum advantage of her summer off from school. Gable saw her own name among those assigned to a trio of evening first aid classes this week, beginning in a couple of days. She was also among two large groups that would participate in Erin's search-and-rescue training drills later in the month.

Tim Scott, she saw, was in the same groups, and he also had several one-on-one sessions with Erin. That was no surprise. Tim was one of the most senior firefighters on the squad, and he'd been instrumental in some of Gable's training. But though she expected this, she felt a twinge inside her gut when she saw his name linked with Erin's on the page that way.

She couldn't begrudge them getting together. Tim was a great guy and would probably be good for Erin. She just wasn't ready to see Erin with someone.

"Hey, Gable, you're playing tonight, right?" Carl's voice surprised her.

She looked up to find him watching her.

"You all right? You look like a stunned mullet."

She forced herself to smile. Carl was sometimes just a bit too in tune with her, kind of like her brothers were. "You sure do have a way with words, Carl. I'm fine. And yes, I'm planning on it. It's at Jerry's house tonight, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Are you sure you're okay? You don't look so good."

"Gee, thanks. You sure can turn a girl's head with those compliments," Gable deadpanned.

"Gable..."

"I'm fine. I just didn't sleep very well last night. Look, I gotta run or I'll be late for work. See ya."

She escaped further questions and headed to Meriwether, her drive filled with reminiscences of why she'd not slept yet again. Last night's dream was only a slight variation of the previous evening's.

Erin was wearing a teddy this time, but the end result was the same. Gable awoke aroused and unsatisfied, and unable to get back to sleep for a long while.



Tired or not, Gable fully expected to come out ahead, as she normally did, in the weekly firefighter poker game. Her brother Kelly had taught her all the ins and outs of poker and blackjack and half a dozen other games. He'd taught her how to read other players' facial tics and body language when they looked at their cards, and how to keep her own expression from telegraphing what she had in her hand.

So in short order, she had gotten to know all the regular players well enough to beat them regularly. Carl bit his lip when he got a good hand and drummed two nervous fingers on the table when his cards were exceptionally bad. Don Baum's eyes narrowed ever so slightly when the deal went his way, and Jerry DeYoung played with his chips when he got a sure winner and was anxious to bet.

Oscar Knapp, a thin, reedy farmer, always had a toothpick between his lips when he played, and that ol' toothpick would start to dance at the corner of his mouth whenever he got a pair or better. The more the toothpick moved, the better the hand. All the other players had picked up on his tic, it was so obvious, and they bet or folded accordingly. Oscar always came up short and never figured out why.

The other firefighters who played joined in just now and again, and it was harder to read them. Gable had played with Tim Scott only twice, but that had been enough to discover he was about as good as she was. The last time they'd played, he'd cleaned the table.

She liked a challenge, especially when it came in the form of a payback, so she was initially pleased to see Tim's truck parked among those outside the cabin that was their venue for that night. But her mood deflated when she realized the pickup pulling in behind her belonged to Erin. Much as she wanted to see her again, Erin would be a big distraction during a poker game, and Gable wasn't particularly anxious to share her friend with the guys.

"Hey, Gable! I tried to call you today to ask if you were playing," Erin greeted her as they got out of their vehicles and headed up the walk together.

"I haven't been home. I came straight from work."

"Carl called me and said you needed another hand. So tell me, am I going to lose my shirt?"

Gable cringed inwardly at Erin's choice of expressions. "Depends on what kind of player you are," she said noncommittally.

They knocked and were admitted by a barrel-chested man with dark, bushy eyebrows and wild, unkempt hair.

"Hi Jerry," Gable greeted. "Have you met Erin Richards, our new rookie?"

"Not officially." Jerry offered a hand and introduced himself. "Go on in and make yourself at home." He gestured toward the living room. "Everyone else is here and we're about ready to start. Can I get you both a drink?"

"A beer would be good," Gable said, which prompted a raised eyebrow from her host. She rarely drank when she played cards, and was the exception to the group in that regard. But she had spotted Tim through the archway staring right at Erin, and a drink suddenly sounded mighty good.

"Beer for me too. Thanks!" Erin echoed her, and they went in to take their seats around a large round dining table.

Carl greeted them with a wave and Gable said, "Have you all met Erin?"

"Fresh meat!" Don Baum said. "Hope you brought lots of cash!" He stood and extended a hand toward Erin. "Hi, Erin. Don Baum." The town barber was by far the oldest of the group at seventy, a confirmed bachelor with a stubble of beard and food stains on his clothes.

"Hi, Don." Erin shook his hand.

"Oscar Knapp." The gangly farmer stood and offered his hand. "Don't know if you remember me..."

"Hi, Oscar," Erin took his hand in hers and shook it. "Of course I remember you. You were one of the guys who helped get me out of my basement that day. Thanks again."

"Don't mention it."

"Nice that you could make it," Tim said.

He and Erin exchanged broad smiles and Gable felt that same queasy sensation in her stomach again. Battling butterflies.

Jerry came in with two bottles of Budweiser and handed one to each woman.

"Why don't you sit here?" Tim invited, motioning to the empty chair beside him.

"Well, all right," Erin replied, which left Gable sitting between Don and Carl, directly across from Tim.

"So, Erin, what's your deal?" Don asked. "You married?"

She shook her head. "Divorced."

Gable glanced at Tim to see his reaction to this news, and cringed at the big grin on his face.

"So, are you seeing anyone?" Jerry asked as he started to deal the cards.

Oh great. Both of them? Jerry was single too, but he was in his mid-fifties, at least fifteen years older than Erin, so Gable hadn't really considered he might also be interested in Erin. And she didn't like the way he was looking at her, either, the old coot. *I'm gonna hate this. I'm just gonna hate having to sit here and listen to them hit on her all night.*

"Well, I hope to be seeing several guys before the evening is over..." Erin responded, and Gable nearly choked on her beer. "All jacks and kings, please, dealer."

The guys laughed, and Gable gradually relaxed as they got down to the business of poker.



It was clear from the outset that they had three ringers, all of them out for blood.

Tim and Gable went head to head in almost every hand, betting big and raising bigger, and Erin stayed with them most of the time, but the others just weren't in their league.

It was impossible to tell when Tim or Erin was bluffing, and Gable figured they were having the same problem with her. All three played with reckless abandon, the pots growing much larger than what was typical for the group.

The conversation was friendly and the mood at the table seemed outwardly relaxed despite the intense competition. Only Carl had a hint there was more going on tonight than was apparent.

"You're on fire tonight, Gable," Tim said as she began transforming her latest win—a huge pile of chips—into neat little stacks.

"I'd say we're about even, wouldn't you, Tim?" she replied good-naturedly.

"And the rookie there ain't half bad." He gestured toward Erin.

"Nope. She's got the touch," Gable agreed.

"She's got ears too," Erin added, but you could tell she was pleased with the compliment. It was her turn to deal, so she gathered up the cards and began to shuffle like she'd done a turn or two at the tables in Vegas.

"Come on, deal the cards," Oscar grumbled. He had only enough chips left to bet a couple more hands at the rate he was losing. He said he'd promised his wife he wouldn't lose more than the forty dollars he had in his pocket.

"How about we take a break?" Jerry suggested. "The pizzas should be here any minute."

"Sounds good to me. Maybe it'll cool off these three and give the rest of us a chance," Don said. He stood and stretched, his pants loose on him, held up by suspenders. "Pit stop," he declared, ambling off.

"Can I get anyone another beer?" Jerry got to his feet.

"I'll take another, please," Erin said.

"Me too." Gable held up a hand.

"I need to stretch my legs," Carl said, heading for the front door.

"Translated...he has to talk to his wife." Gable looked at Erin. "He won't admit that to the guys, of course. They'd rib him about it. But he's on that cell phone with her at least a dozen times a day."

"Not all men are afraid to admit they can't stand to be away from the women they love," Tim said, and Gable knew he was being sincere.

That was the awful thing. She liked Tim, she really did. He was honest and honorable. A sweet man and a genuine hero, though he didn't like to talk about his experiences as a firefighter. She'd heard the stories from the other guys on the squad.

"Is that right?" Erin asked him with a bemused smile.

"That's what I hear," he said, smiling back at her.

"Well, you'll let me know if you run across one of 'em," Erin said. "Cause they're a rare breed." She glanced at Gable. "Can you direct me to the restroom?"

"Through the archway, down the hall, second door on the right."

As soon as Erin departed, Tim got up and came around the table to sit beside Gable.

"Gable, we're friends, right?" He had a fresh-faced eagerness about him, like a teenaged boy with his first car.

"Of course, Tim. Good friends." Gable leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, and gave him a cocky smirk. "But I'm still gonna take all your money."

"Oh, I don't care about that," Tim said, shaking his head. "I was hoping you'd put in a good word for me with Erin."

Her smile disappeared, and the butterflies in her stomach became stampeding buffalo.

"Put in a good word for you?"

"Yeah. I'd like to ask her out, but she doesn't know me from Adam. I know it'd help if you vouched for me."

Gable was momentarily speechless. *How can I say no? He is my friend, and he's asking me for a favor. And I think he'd really be good for Erin. How can I deny her that chance for happiness? Just because it's killing me?*

"Gable?" Tim's voice told her she better find an answer soon if she didn't want to make it obvious she had feelings of her own for Erin.

"Sure, Tim. I'll put in a good word for you, not that what I say will necessarily make any difference on who Erin goes out with." She was proud of how calm and composed her voice sounded when she was dying inside. "I'm going to get a breath of fresh air." She got to her feet and hoped Tim wouldn't read anything into her rapid departure.

She went out the front door and sat on the steps. Carl was in the street, still talking on the cell phone while he paid the pizza delivery guy who'd just pulled up.

Gable held it all in as he approached her, heading back inside, juggling three pizzas in one hand while he stuck the phone in his jacket with the other.

"Hey there, Lucky," he greeted her. "You're sure on a hot streak tonight."

"Yeah, lucky me," she echoed with halfhearted enthusiasm.

"You okay?"

"Fine, Carl. Get in there while the pizza's still hot. I'll be right in."

"Whatever you say. But I'm here if you want to talk about it later." He went inside and Gable put her head in her hands and let the weight of the evening fall on her.

The gnawing in her gut threatened to unleash the beer she'd consumed earlier onto the tidy hedges that surrounded her. She was angry as well, and where had that come from? *Not angry. I'm jealous, that's what I am.*

She hadn't recognized what it was immediately because it had never really happened to her before. This wasn't a crush at all. No sir, not by a long shot. She was jealous as hell. And that could only mean one thing. She was falling in love. At forty-six, she'd finally found the real thing. Just with the wrong person. And as Erin's confidante and Tim's good friend, she'd have a front-row seat for much of their courtship.

Her eyes grew moist at the thought of it. And she did lose her beer then—her stomach heaved and sent it flying over the narrow railing and into the bushes below.



Her game went all to hell after that. She was determined to continue on as if nothing had happened, but it was impossible. Tim was grinning all to hell, and Erin looked so damn cute. Gable suffered in silence as her pile of chips began to shrink.

"Well, someone's tide certainly has turned," Jerry observed with commiseration from the sidelines. He had pulled out two hands earlier, leaving only Gable, Tim, and Erin playing. Oscar, Carl, and Don had gone home.

"Hey, Gable, I need to run to Home Depot in Cadillac and pick out a couple of ceiling fans for my place," Erin said as Tim dealt the next hand. "Want to ride along? Maybe this weekend?"

Now's your chance. You need some distance. This is the perfect solution. She considered it and made her decision all in the space of a second or two. And when she answered, her voice betrayed none of her inner turmoil. "You know, you should get Tim to give you a hand. He'd know better than I what to look for, and I bet he'd even put 'em up for you. Didn't you tell me you rewired your cabin yourself, Tim?"

"Yup, sure did. Pretty handy with plumbing too, if you have anything in that area you need help with, Erin. And I've got a flexible schedule. We can go tomorrow, if you like."

"Well, if you're sure..." Erin glanced first at Tim and then at Gable, her eyebrows cocked in confusion.

Gable did her best bluffing all night, making it look as though she was real happy about the whole proposition.

"Great," Tim said. "What time shall I pick you up?"

"How's nine?" Erin answered.

"Fine with me."

"Well, since you're assigned to my zone, I would bet you know where my house is, right?"

Good thing Gable had turned down that second beer. The buffalos in her stomach were back, and they'd brought their friends. If she was going to feel this awful seeing them together, how would she ever get through Erin's training? And working at the firehouse?



She was glad the pharmacy was busy the next day. It helped to keep the images of Tim and Erin together at bay, at least for a while. After work, she drove home slowly with the radio playing, not anxious to be alone with her thoughts.

It was agony. But there was a spark of something wonderful there too. *I'm falling in love.* Words she'd never been able to say. Was beginning to doubt she'd ever say. *Still may not ever say them aloud.* The thought of that made her even sadder.

She pulled into her driveway, and when the two-track crested a small rise she could see a flash of red through the trees near the house. Her heartbeat picked up. As she got nearer, she saw that it was... *Yes! Erin's truck!*

"Hey there," Erin hailed her from the screened-in front porch, where she was sitting on an oversized wicker chair.

Gable mounted the steps and opened the door. "Hi. Didn't expect to see you today."

"Well, I got everything done that I needed to do. I knew you had to work, so I thought I'd bring you some dinner. They got a new Chinese place in Cadillac." She held up a large plastic bag. "Needs to be reheated, though."

Gable took the bag and unlocked the entry door. "Awful nice of you. Come on in."

Erin followed her inside and looked around while Gable zapped the food in the microwave and got out plates, silverware, and napkins. “Nice place, Gable. Really nice. Feels really comfortable and cozy in here.”

Gable’s single-story home was decorated in earth tones: dark brown furniture and a tan Berber carpet, hunter green curtains, and the accents around the living room—rugs and pillows—followed the spectrum of autumnal color. The room was a seamless extension of the forest outside the door.

An overstuffed sofa and matching easy chair and ottoman provided comfortable seating in a space where the predominant feature was books. Built-in floor-to-ceiling bookcases covered most of three of the four walls of the expansive living room, and the shelves were crowded with books, framed photographs, and items found on a walk in the woods. Wild turkey feathers. Porcupine quills. Enormous pinecones. Unusual rocks.

The handsome coffee table and end tables, and the matching entertainment center that held the TV and stereo, all were made of maple, and all by the same careful hand. A cast-iron woodstove sat in one corner, on a hearth made of brick and slate. Illumination was provided by wall sconces and indirect lighting, which lent a subtle warmth to every surface.

Gable had furnished the room with the sole purpose of her own enjoyment, as she seldom had any visitors except family. But she was thrilled that Erin was here, and very pleased she seemed to like what she saw. She wanted her to feel welcome so she’d visit long and often.

But she had to know what had happened. “So how was shopping?”

“Good. Got a lot done. Tim put both the fans in. One in the main room, and one in my bedroom. We had lunch at the Chinese place, and I got takeout for us. They have a great menu. I hope cashew chicken and Mongolian beef are okay.”

“Two of my favorites.”

“So tell me about Tim,” Erin said, taking a seat at the opposite side of the table.

Gable froze, but just for a second. *Oh great. Make me extol his virtues.* “Did he ask you out?”

“Yeah. I told him I’d think about it.”

Gable took a deep breath and let it out. “Tim’s a good man. He’s been a firefighter for...fourteen years, I think.” She dished food from the containers onto her plate, but she didn’t have much of an appetite. “He was married for ten years, but his wife passed away a couple of months before I moved here. She had breast cancer. He took it very hard, the other guys say. Beth used to play poker with them, even though she wasn’t on the squad. Tim hasn’t played much since she died.”

“That’s so sad. He seems like a really nice guy,” Erin said, digging into the chicken.

“He is. The genuine article. Tim’s seen a lot of fire and been in some bad situations—he’s lost count of his saves and had some close calls himself. Most of that was in Chicago, where he was a paid firefighter. He’s been a volunteer here about five years, I guess. You know he’s an EMT, right?”

“Yeah, he did tell me that. But he really didn’t talk much about himself today. He kept asking about me.”

“It’s obvious he likes you,” Gable said. *But I’m falling in love with you.*

“I haven’t been on a date since I can’t remember when. And first dates, especially, can be pretty awful.”

“I don’t think Tim has seen anyone since Beth died,” Gable told her. “So he’s probably as out of practice as you are. I don’t think you need to worry about that. He’s an easy guy to talk to. I know from all the driving around we did during my SAR training.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince me to go out with him.” Erin had stopped eating and she was watching Gable intently.

“No. That’s your decision. I’m just saying that if you’re interested... you could sure do a lot worse.”

“You have no idea how right you are,” Erin said without elaboration. She put her fork down. “I guess I had a bigger lunch than I thought. I can’t eat any more.”

Gable had hardly touched hers, either. She was too preoccupied with wondering what Erin’s hair would feel like, sliding through her fingers. It was lustrous and shiny—a blend of coppery red and golden blond.

“Well, I better run.” Erin rose and slid her chair in. “I have a full day of training tomorrow. As I recall, you’re in the first aid sessions with me that begin tomorrow night, right?”

"Yup." Gable followed her to the door.

"Good. I'll see you then. And maybe we can get together this weekend?"

"We'll see. Thanks again for dinner."

Erin paused at the doorway. "Thanks for the chat." She reached out and hugged Gable. "I'm so glad we met."

Gable hugged her back, allowing herself the brief thrill of holding her.

"Me too," she whispered after Erin had gone.



Tim corralled her the next night as she was getting out of her Jeep at the firehouse. "Thanks, Gable. I owe you big-time."

"Oh, you don't either, Tim. Just be good to her, okay?"

"You don't have to tell me that."

"She say yes to your date?"

"Yeah, this afternoon. We're going out to dinner and a movie Friday night."

Too much information, Gable thought, picturing them at a romantic candlelit table. Tim with his arm around Erin in a darkened theater.

"That's great. We better get inside, don't you think?" She led the way into the large conference room, where Erin was chatting with two other firefighters, both men. There were about a dozen other people milling about, none of whom Gable recognized.

"Okay, looks like we're all here," Chief Thornton announced, motioning everyone to the folding chairs that had been set up. Erin came over to sit between Gable and Tim.

"We're happy to have Leslie Franks with us. Leslie is with the local Red Cross and will be doing the training with us this week."

Leslie, a tall, thin woman with graying hair, stood and waved. "Hi, folks. Glad to be here. Don't be afraid to ask questions as I go along."

"And for those of you who don't know him, Tim Scott..." The chief motioned toward him and Tim waved his hand. "Tim's an EMT with the county ambulance service. He'll be going around and helping out, making sure everyone is doing everything right."

The chief then acknowledged the strangers among the gathering. "I'd also like to say welcome to the teachers from the Pine River schools who are joining us tonight to get their CPR certification. Okay, I think

we're ready to get started. Leslie?"

"Thanks, Roger," Leslie said. "Okay, folks, tonight we're going to cover CPR—that's cardiopulmonary resuscitation, as most of you know...and AED, that's how to use an automated external defibrillator. I'll be back tomorrow and Thursday to teach Standard First Aid and Preparedness, and how to administer supplemental oxygen."

Chief Thornton wheeled out a TV and VCR on a stand while she was talking and set it up in front of the chairs, then plugged them into a nearby outlet.

"First I'm going to show you all a video. Then we'll do some hands-on training. Can someone get the lights?"

"Haven't you done this already?" Erin whispered to Gable while they waited for the video to begin.

"Yup, back in Tennessee. But my certification was going to run out in a couple of months anyway. I thought I'd take it again with you, in case I could help you out." She glanced past Erin at Tim and forced herself to smile. "I didn't know you'd have your own EMT at the ready."

The video interrupted any further discussion. It was a good thing Gable knew CPR as well as she did, because she missed the entire screening. She kept glancing sideways at Erin and Tim in the dim light cast by the TV, expecting to see them holding hands or something. When it was over, Leslie hit the lights.

"Okay, first we're going to practice on Resusci-Andy," Leslie said, gesturing toward a flesh-colored mannequin the chief carried in and laid on a mat in the front of the room. "He was developed especially for CPR training. You can actually do the breathing on him and watch for the rise and fall of his chest. Plus, he's got an air-pressure device in him that will help you gauge how hard to press when you do the compressions. When all of you have had a turn with him, we'll split up into pairs and you can practice on each other so you can get a feel for what to do with a real person. Okay, who's first?"

After they had all had their turns, they cleared away the folding chairs and set up mats on the floor.

"Okay, if you'll all split up into pairs now," Leslie said. "You can take turns practicing on a real person. Remember the key elements. A-B-C. Airway, breathing, and circulation. Simulate the breathing, and don't really press during the compressions. We don't want any cracked ribs tonight!"

Erin looped one arm through Gable's, claiming her as her partner for the exercise.

Gable couldn't mask her surprise. "Don't you want to work with Tim?"

"I can't, I have to mingle," Tim said before Erin could answer.

"You want to be victim or rescuer first?" Erin asked.

"Rescuer," Gable said.

Erin lay flat on the mat and Gable went through the process, reciting what she was doing aloud so Erin could follow along. "Gently tilt the head to clear the airway. Look, listen, and feel for any sign of breathing. Clear any airway obstruction." Her hands were shaking slightly as she touched Erin's face and neck. She hoped to God Erin didn't notice.

"Now the breathing." She put her mouth near Erin's, and simulated the technique, turning her head to watch for the rise and fall of Erin's chest. She could see the faintest outline of Erin's nipples through the thin material of her T-shirt, and it made her pulse quicken and her mind go hazy for a moment.

She snapped back to what she was doing. "The victim is unresponsive," she said, her voice higher than usual. She put two fingers on Erin's neck near her windpipe, feeling for the carotid artery. Erin's pulse was strong, but a bit faster than normal. "No pulse. I'm starting compressions."

She positioned her right hand on Erin's chest below her breasts, feeling for the sternum, and used it to judge where to place her hands. Locking her elbows, she began simulating compressions, all the while trying to keep her mind on the task at hand.

Her former CPR training was certainly nothing like this. Despite her best efforts, she was getting aroused touching Erin.

It only got worse when they switched positions. Erin's lips, so close to hers, were a profound temptation. And having Erin's hands on her, however clinically, unleashed a growing pool of wetness between her legs.

"Okay, everyone had a turn?" Leslie asked. "Good. Now we want to practice two-rescuer CPR. Let's break up into threes so we have a patient for each team."

There weren't enough people to make it work out perfectly, so Tim joined Gable and Erin for the next part.

"I'll be the victim," Tim told the women, lying flat on the mat.

"I'll do breathing first, okay?" Erin looked at Gable.

"Sure." Gable positioned herself alongside Tim's chest to begin compressions.

Erin was trying to be entirely professional about the whole thing, and so was Tim, but Gable caught the shared shy smiles between them just before Erin leaned down to simulate mouth-to-mouth.

They switched places then, and when Erin put her hands on Tim's chest to begin compressions, Gable's overactive imagination found the whole maneuver entirely too erotic.

"Be right back." She excused herself and headed outside, where she leaned against the wall of the garage and tried to regain her composure. *You knew this wasn't going to be easy. You need to get a grip, girl. It's only going to get tougher and tougher.*

The door beside her opened and she half turned, expecting—hoping—to see Erin. But it was Carl.

"When did you get here?" she asked. "I didn't see you come in."

"Just a few minutes ago. Came in to pick up the training schedule. I'm going to work with Erin on the breathing apparatus next week. How's the CPR going?"

"Fine," she lied.

"Gable, what's going on with you?" Carl squinted at her in the dim light as if he was trying to read her expression.

She looked at the ground. "What do you mean? Nothing's going on with me."

"Okay, whatever you say. You know you can talk to me, right?"

"Nothing to talk about," she insisted, still avoiding his eyes.

"Whatever. I'm heading home. You have my number if you change your mind." He turned and headed toward his car.

If Carl can see so easily that something is bothering you, she wondered, how long will it be before Erin picks up on it too and starts asking questions?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gable gritted her teeth and suffered through two more nights of first aid training with Erin and Tim looking increasingly cozy. They all sat together again both nights, so Gable had to listen to the two of them debate at length where they should eat and what movie they should see on their upcoming date.

And Erin, of course, picked Gable again as her partner for all the exercises, so Gable had the added torture of being able to touch her, but only in a clinical and detached way...splinting her arm and bandaging burns, immobilizing her neck and back. Then the tables were reversed and she had to try to remain relaxed and calm while Erin put her hands on her and did the same. *Can she tell how fast my heart beats when she's near?*

Gable couldn't wait to get out of there when the classes ended on Thursday evening. All she could think about was that the very next night, Tim and Erin would be alone together. Anything could happen, and probably would.

It was eating her up inside. Somehow, it sort of felt...*final*. Even though Erin was straight, Gable hoped and believed she occupied a special place in her heart. But she wasn't sure there'd be room in Erin's life for their friendship once she and Tim became an item.

Gable just wanted to go home and crawl into bed with a box of Russell Stover chocolates. Her cure for the blues. But Erin wouldn't let her charge out of there with a quick good-bye, intercepting her as she was getting in her Jeep.

"Hey, Gable!"

Gable rolled down the window and Erin put her hands on the sill and leaned down to talk to her.

"Are you all right? You were kind of quiet tonight."

"Sure. I'm fine. Just got a lot on my mind."

"Anything I can help with?"

"No. Thanks. Mostly work and family stuff." She hated lying, especially to Erin. But she couldn't admit the real reason she wasn't behaving like herself.

"Okay. Well, if you change your mind, you know I'm here for you." Erin smiled at her, such a sweet smile that Gable's heart ached all the more that this woman would always be out of reach.

"Thanks, Erin."

"Hey, I stopped you because I wanted to ask if I could get you to come over on Saturday and help me."

"Help you?"

"Yeah, they're supposed to deliver my new furniture that morning. I know I'll be wanting to move it around, see what works best." She leaned closer to Gable. "I'll fix you lunch if you say yes. Please?"

Gable couldn't refuse. She was secretly very pleased that Erin had asked her and not Tim. Even though it was getting more and more unbearable to be near Erin, she couldn't say no.

"Sure. What time?"

"Noon? They should have come and gone by then."

"Okay. See you then. And have fun tomorrow with Tim." She said the right things and forced herself to smile.

She went through half a box of Russell Stover that night. A new record.



Friday was one of the longest days ever. The pharmacy was aggravatingly slow all day, giving her far too much time to relive every moment she'd spent with Erin and think too much about the dreams that had been keeping her awake.

By evening she was pacing the floor like a nervous father whose daughter was on her first date. She tried to watch television, but nothing held her interest. And she was too keyed up to focus on a book. She

settled for eating the other half of the box of chocolates, then tried to go to bed early so the night would pass more quickly.

It was all futile. Thoughts of Erin consumed her.



Saturday Gable awoke groggy from another restless night of erotic dreams and downed four cups of coffee on her porch, waiting impatiently for noon so she could head over to Erin's. She got so tired of staring at her watch that she decided to ride her bike so she could leave her house at eleven fifteen and work out some of her nervous energy.

You're a masochist, you know, she told herself forty minutes later as she pedaled over the rise that led down to Erin's place. *Why are you so anxious to hear about her date with Tim?*

Erin greeted her with her usual bright smile and pulled her into the cabin's great room by one arm. "I can't wait to see how everything's going to look once it's all put in place. Thanks for coming."

"Glad to help," Gable said.

The furniture that Erin had bought during their shopping expedition—bed, futon for the guest room, dresser, desk, bookcases, nightstands—lay scattered around the large space. The only thing missing was the piano, which was special ordered and would take weeks to arrive.

Gable couldn't stop herself. Wondering about Erin and Tim had kept her awake all night, after all. She could think of nothing else. "So how was your date?" She tried to keep her voice steady, but her blood was pounding in her ears.

"Nice," Erin said. "Tim's a very sweet man. Just like you said. We ended up going to that theater in Cadillac that has those classic movie festivals—you know the one I mean?"

"Uh-huh." Her stomach was tied up in knots.

"They're showing *The African Queen*, complete with original trailers and interviews with the actors and John Huston."

"That's a great movie."

"Yeah, Tim likes a lot of the same movies we do. They're showing a bunch of the Hepburn-Tracy movies next month. *Desk Set*, *Pat and*

Mike. Woman of the Year. We're going to go back."

"So...you hit it off, eh?" The knots in her stomach twisted tighter.

"Too soon to tell. He's a nice guy, and we have a lot in common. So we'll see where it goes." Erin smiled and shrugged. "I've not been real good at picking who to get serious about. It's made me pretty skittish, I guess."

"Well, I'm not one to talk, because I haven't had much success in that department, either." Gable spoke from her heart, knowing Erin wouldn't suspect what she really meant. She took a deep breath and let it out. "I can't say whether Tim is or isn't the right guy for you, but I do hope you find someone who really makes you happy."

"I hope the same for you, Gable. What about you? Ever come close to getting married?"

Erin was looking at her in a way that made Gable feel vulnerable and exposed. She was desperate to change the subject. "Nope. So... shall we get going? Where do you want to start?"

Erin looked around. "I thought we'd get the hardest stuff over with first, okay? Getting that dresser upstairs is going to be the worst, even with the drawers out. I probably should have had the delivery guys do it, but they were in a hurry and I thought we could probably handle everything ourselves."

Gable had good upper-body strength, but the dresser was solid oak and oversized, and getting it up the stairs might be a bit of a challenge. "Well, we can lean it on its side and slide it. It helps that the stairs are carpeted."

They got the drawers out and hefted it over to the bottom of the stairs in stages, moving it a few feet each time before resting. It was a heavy sonofabitch, even if it was a gorgeous piece of furniture.

"This is going in your room?" she asked, catching her breath before they tried to haul it up the steps.

"Yes. Other end of the hall," Erin was winded too, and Gable tried not to stare at the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

They leaned the dresser on its side on the stairway and Erin positioned herself on top, Gable on the bottom.

Gable got a firm hold on the dresser and bent her legs. "You ready?"

“Ready.”

“Okay. On three. One...two...three!” Gable pushed upward with all her might, and Erin pulled, and the dresser rose...two steps, three, four. But Gable had to bear the weight of the piece with her legs and back while she repositioned herself to clear the final distance. It was awkward. Unwieldy. She put her all into it to push it up that last slight rise, and when she did, a muscle in her back snapped and burned, extended too far. She cried out in pain and collapsed where she was on the stairs.

“Oh God, Gable, what is it? Did you hurt yourself?” Erin scrambled down beside her.

“Pulled a muscle.” She gritted her teeth. Her back burned as though someone had stuck her with a hot poker. “Not a big deal. I’ll be fine in a minute.” She slowly rolled her shoulder to try to work out the pain.

Erin got behind her and began to massage the area with her fingers. “Here?”

“Ow!”

Erin gentled her touch. “That sounds bad. Maybe you should see a doctor?”

Gable shook her head. “I’ll be all right. Just need to put some heat on it and rest, I think.”

“Come on, lie down on the couch. We can do all this moving another day.” Erin helped her to her feet and led her toward the couch. “Try to relax. I’m going to take care of you,” she said once Gable was lying as comfortably as possible.

“I can make it home to my own bed,” Gable protested.

“Nonsense. You hurt yourself trying to help me. The least I can do is try to make you feel better. And besides, you rode your bike over. I’ll be right back.” Erin disappeared up the stairs, then returned a couple of minutes later. “Come on up and sit in the whirlpool for a while. It’ll help loosen up those muscles some. And then I’m going to give you a massage.”

Gable’s breath caught in her throat. *A massage?* “Uh...uh, that’s not necessary.” She felt almost faint at the thought of Erin’s hands on her. “I don’t want to put you out.”

“Don’t be silly.” Erin laughed. “I want to. Come on.” She helped Gable to her feet and led her up the stairs and to the bathroom, where

the tub was already filling.

There was a light scent in the air—lavender, maybe, Gable thought. The room was lit by candles, and soft classical music played from a boom box near the tub. It was so romantic that she forgot completely for a moment about her sore back. She couldn't stop staring at Erin. Lit by candlelight, she was mesmerizing. Gable felt a rush of heat between her legs.

"There's a robe behind the door," Erin said. "When the tub is full, here's where you start the jets." She pointed to the controls and glanced at Gable, but Gable looked away, afraid her desires were all too apparent.

Erin crossed to the door. "Take your time," she said softly, as she closed the door between them.

The hot water and powerful jets did Gable's muscles a world of good, and she lingered there a long while, thinking about Erin and trying to regain her equilibrium. It wasn't easy.

In a few minutes, Erin would be touching her, and Gable would be doing all she could to act as if it was nothing at all but a therapeutic, friendly gesture. She wasn't sure she could handle it. Just imagining it made her incredibly hot. She closed her eyes, and Dream Erin appeared in naughty lingerie. Tempting her. Teasing her. It was too much.

She turned her body so that one of the powerful jets shot its pulsating spray right where she needed it. Her hand followed to finish the job. She couldn't stop herself. She thought it would help ease the building pressure in her loins. But it was as unsatisfying as her dreams.

She emerged sheepishly from the bathroom, suspecting that what she'd just been doing would be obvious.

But Erin gave no sign to suggest that was true. "Go on in and lie down." She gestured toward the guest bedroom, a few steps away. "Off with the robe, and under the covers. I'll get the boom box."

Pausing at the threshold, Gable felt a sense of déjà vu sweep over her. Candles lit this room too, casting it in a soft buttery glow, and the bedcovers on the futon bed had been neatly pulled back. Inviting. Exactly like the setting of her dreams. She was suddenly weak in the knees again. Worse, she felt a gentle push against her back.

"Go on," Erin urged. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

Gable turned to Erin to protest. She couldn't do this. She'd never survive it. But when she looked at Erin, only inches away... When she

saw Erin's sweet smile, she caved. She could deny Erin nothing. She nodded dumbly and started for the bed.

Erin thoughtfully turned her back, busying herself with plugging in the boom box while Gable stripped off the robe and slipped under the covers. The sheets were cool against her heated skin, and she welcomed the slight shock to her system. She felt as though she would burst into flame at any moment.

She lay down on her stomach, her arms cradling the soft down pillow Erin had thoughtfully provided for her head. She tried to calm her racing heart, but when she looked up at Erin, it only began beating faster.

How is it, she wondered, that you look even more enticing every day?

Erin was dressed in faded jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt. The sleeves had been pushed up, because she was evidently going to use that bottle of baby oil she had in her hand. She squirted some into a warming ramekin, like the kind you get butter in when you order lobster in a restaurant, and lit the candle beneath it.

Gable stared at Erin's hands as she rubbed them together to warm them. She had imagined those small, delicate hands on her many times, just not quite like this. She willed herself to be strong. But as soon as Erin touched her, massaging the warm oil into her back and shoulders in long, liquid strokes and circles, a soft moan escaped her lips. She couldn't help it.

"So you like that, eh?" Erin leaned over to whisper softly in her ear, with what was surely one of the most seductive tones Gable had ever heard.

"Mmm-hmm. Very much," was all she could manage. It was hard to keep her voice even. "You have great hands." It came out before she realized what she was saying, but Erin clearly wasn't offended.

"Glad you think so. You should learn not to fight me when I want my own way."

"I'll try to remember that," Gable croaked.

"Now relax," Erin encouraged. "This where it hurts?" She found the sore muscle and began working it gently.

"That's it."

After a few minutes, Erin began pressing more firmly, working the muscle until it relaxed. "Better?"

"Much. That feels wonderful."

Erin didn't stop there, and Gable could not encourage her to. Once the pain was gone, she felt only a growing arousal.

Her skin was hypersensitive everywhere that Erin touched her. She could feel the moisture building between her legs.

Erin pulled the blanket back farther, to massage Gable's lower back.

Fingers danced enticingly along the very top of Gable's ass, and she bit her lip to stifle a groan. *God help me.*

Erin's hands worked their way along her sides, fingertips barely touching the soft swell of her breasts where they lay pressed against the sheets.

Another soft moan escaped her lips. She prayed Erin hadn't heard it.

It was forty-five minutes of sheer, sweet torture. Finally Erin pulled the blankets back up, and rested her hands momentarily on Gable's shoulders. "All done. Don't move for a minute. I'll get your clothes."

Somehow she spoke. "Thank you, Erin."

"Any time. Be right back."

Gable closed her eyes and took deep breaths, savoring the last moments of a most memorable massage.

Erin came back with her clothes, neatly folded, and set them on the edge of the bed. "Take your time getting up," she said in a soft voice. "Slowly—so you don't pull anything again."

Gable swore she felt the lightest touch of Erin's hands through her hair. But then she heard the door close, and she was alone again.

When she pulled back the blankets and reached for the clothes, she could smell the heady scent of her arousal, thick in the air. *Uh-oh.* She was suddenly very glad they'd done this in Erin's guest room, and not in the bed Erin slept in.



Erin fussed over her the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. She got Gable comfortably ensconced on the couch and waited on her hand and foot, fetching drinks, a lap robe, and pillows for her back. While Gable surfed through TV channels, luxuriating in the unaccustomed pampering, Erin fixed them both a nice supper, topped off with a homemade cherry pie. Finally, at nine thirty, when Gable reluctantly announced she should be heading home, Erin insisted on

driving her, hoisting Gable's bike into the back of the red pickup.

"Are you sure you can manage everything all right?" she asked later when they pulled up in front of Gable's. "I can stay if you want me to."

An offer Gable nobly ignored. "I'll be fine," she said. "My back's feeling a lot better."

They got out and Erin hefted the bike out of the truck and wheeled it onto the porch, Gable falling into step beside her. "I want you to rest tomorrow. All day! No heavy lifting! And if you need anything, call me."

"I will," Gable promised.

"So do you think you'll be able to go to the picnic Monday?"

"Oh sure. I'll probably have to sit out some of the events, but I can certainly pitch in with the food and stuff."

"I'd hate for you to miss it because you got hurt helping me out," Erin said.

"Would you stop apologizing already?"

They were face-to-face on the porch, lingering outside the door, as if both were reluctant to part company.

"Well, I better let you get inside and get some sleep," Erin said, taking a step to plant a quick peck on Gable's cheek. "Sorry you hurt your back. Sleep well. And do call me if you need anything at all."

Gable nodded, relishing the unexpected, brief caress of Erin's lips and the way it had seemed to warm her from within. "Drive safe, and I'll see you Monday."



Despite her sleep deprivation of late, Gable still had trouble dozing off that night. She lay awake for hours, staring at the ceiling. The massage had helped a lot, but her back was still bothering her and she couldn't get comfortable. It didn't help any that she couldn't stop thinking about the way Erin touched her—delicate hands caressing her face, her stomach, her ass. Her imagination was fueled by the massage. Now she had intimate knowledge of how it felt to have Erin really touch her.

She managed to doze off finally at two a.m., and so was still asleep at nine when loud knocking at her front door awakened her. *Erin!* her hazy mind wished, still seduced by her dreams. Throwing on a robe,

she stumbled to the door and threw the bolt.

Her brother Stewart stood there holding a cardboard tray with two large Styrofoam cups and a paper bag.

"Morning," he said, grinning as he pushed by her and headed to the kitchen. "I brought bagels. Baked this morning. I know you can't get them up here. And you look like shit, by the way."

"What are you doing here, Stewart?"

"I've been trying to call you for a week, and you're never home." He sat at the table and took the bagels and cream cheese out of the bag. "I thought I might have acted a bit...well, insensitive when you called me."

Gable got plates and knives and sat opposite him. "I check my machine every day. I haven't had any messages from you." Stewart passed her one of the coffees. "And I just got out of bed, how do you expect me to look?"

"Like you got some sleep. Which I seriously doubt from the look of those impressive bags under your eyes. And I never left a message. I wanted to talk to you."

"What about? Has something happened?"

"That's what I want to know. What's happening with Erin?"

"You drove all the way up here to ask me that?"

"No. Yes. Well, I came up to see how you were doing. I hadn't heard from you for a few days, and I knew you were having a hard time. Just wanted to see if you needed a shoulder to cry on or wanted to bend my ear for a while. I won't make fun of your feelings this time, I promise."

"That's very sweet. But I can handle this."

"So you say. Then why aren't you sleeping?"

"Who said I'm not sleeping?"

He gave her a look she knew well, that told her he didn't believe a word she was saying.

"All right. So it's taking me a while to get okay with this. It's gotten a little more complicated." Gable sipped her coffee. "Erin is dating a guy at the fire station."

Stewart gave her a sympathetic frown. "Sorry, honey. I know that must be tough, seeing her with somebody else."

"Not just tough. Almost impossible." She leaned back in her chair and ran her hand through her hair. "Tomorrow is the big picnic at the firehouse. I just know it's going to be more of the same. Erin and Tim

will both be there.” She let out a big sigh. “I keep thinking I should put some distance between us for a while. I just can’t seem to get over feeling the way I do when I’m around her so much. It’s only making it harder. Maybe with some time apart we can just be friends and I can handle that.”

“Have you got any time off coming? I can take a few days and we can go camping or kayaking or something.”

Gable shook her head. “I used it up when I went down to see you after the tornadoes. And I probably shouldn’t be doing anything too strenuous. I pulled a muscle in my back yesterday.” She stretched, testing it. Still sore, but better. “Getting away isn’t a bad idea, though. Maybe we can go somewhere next weekend?”

“Cool. Just let me know,” Stewart said. He leaned across the table and put his hand on her arm. “You just have to give it time, sis. And try to keep your mind occupied. That’s the best remedy I know.”

Stewart did his best to help her do just that until he left for home early that evening. They spent the day together, hanging out and watching TV, and he kept up an endless chatter about family and work in an effort to keep her mind distracted. None of it really helped much. Erin invaded her thoughts at every turn. Gable felt powerless to stop the constant flurry of images and sensations from the massage the night before: Erin’s fingers skimming along the edge of her breasts, the top of her ass. The way she looked in the soft amber glow of the candlelight.

Gable knew she had to try to bury her attraction for Erin if she was to ever keep her as a friend. But her mind and body simply refused to obey. Erin made her feel *alive*. How could she willingly give that up?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Fourth of July picnic at the Plainfield Township Fire Station was one of the major community events of the summer, drawing in hundreds of locals from the surrounding area and a good number of holiday tourists. They came largely for the food—a massive outdoor barbecue of chicken and burgers and hot dogs, accompanied by several tables of salads, side dishes, and desserts, provided by the firefighters and their families and friends. There were also the usual family-style games—piñatas, a three-legged race, water-balloon toss, tug-of-war—with blue ribbons and bragging rights going to the winners. The finale was a fireworks display, the biggest one for several miles around.

It was a fun day for all and a worthwhile event for the firehouse, which used the proceeds to purchase firefighting equipment, as well as smoke detectors for low-income and elderly residents.

The year before, Gable had been a brand-new rookie with the department, which had guaranteed that she'd be drafted for every event and introduced to half the surrounding populace. This year, she knew, it would be Erin's turn.

The day started out pleasantly enough. Gable had originally been tapped to help set up the hose and ladder demonstrations that would later entertain the gathering, but the chief reassigned her to the food area when she confessed that she'd hurt her back. It just so happened that Erin was assigned there as well, so they worked side by side the first couple of hours, dishing out food and helping senior citizens and small children carry their plates to their tables.

She wasn't crazy about the way that a few of the single guys looked at Erin as they went through the food line, but for the most part, she enjoyed watching her interact with the steady stream of visitors. She envied the way Erin could engage nearly anyone in easy conversation, especially the kids from her school.

"Lee, is that you?" Erin feigned wide-eyed wonder as she greeted a fair-haired young man of about eleven. "I hardly recognized you, you've shot up so much since school ended! If you don't watch out, you'll be taller than I am by September!"

The boy blushed, and Gable could see how delighted he was with the comment. *Bet you have a crush on her too. Who doesn't?*

"I can't believe how big this event is," Erin said, plopping down onto a folding chair beside Gable to catch her breath during a rare lull at the food tables. "I didn't think there were this many people in the entire county."

"The chief says it gets bigger every year. This time the proceeds are going toward a new pumper."

"Well, I was hoping to get to spend some quality time with you today," Erin said, looking right at Gable with such a sweet grin that her heart turned to mush. "But we've hardly had a chance to breathe, let alone get a chance to chat."

"Should get easier now, since most everyone has eaten and the games will be starting soon. We'll just get the stragglers and the teenaged boys who never seem to stop eating." *And who keep coming by for another look at you*, Gable thought, admiring the way Erin's tank top and denim shorts showed off vast expanses of smooth, inviting skin. Her eyes lingered on the hint of cleavage she could see. *No one would ever guess you were thirty-nine.*

And Erin's appeal went far beyond her youthful face and figure. It was in the warm and familiar way she interacted with the people she met, extending an arm to steady a frail senior citizen, hugging one of the teachers she worked with in greeting. *She's much more physically demonstrative than I am.*

Gable recalled Erin's frequent hugs good-bye and last night's peck on the cheek. *I wonder what makes some people more touchy-feely than others.* She certainly enjoyed being the recipient of Erin's tactile hellos and good-byes, though each made her mourn its brevity.

"I still feel so bad that you hurt your back," Erin said. "Frankly, I was counting on you to be my partner in the three-legged race. I thought

we'd make a great team."

The thought of being tied to Erin, their arms around each other, brought a flush to Gable's cheeks. "My back really is feeling a lot better, but I probably *should* play it safe today."

The chief silenced the gathering with an announcement on the bullhorn. "We're ready to start the games, everyone. Pick a partner and line up for the wheelbarrow race!"

Gable turned to Erin, reconsidering her negative response, but before she had a chance to speak, Tim appeared with an outstretched hand.

"What do you say, Erin?" he said. "It's tradition—the rookie has to be in every event."

Erin glanced at Gable, who gloomily confirmed, "I had to do the whole lot last year."

"Well, all right, then. I hate to break a time-honored tradition." Erin allowed Tim to lead her away, with a backward glance at Gable that looked like genuine regret.

Nah. Couldn't be.

Erin and Tim didn't make it even halfway to the finish line. First they tried using Tim as the wheelbarrow, but Erin couldn't support his weight for long so they switched positions, with only marginally better results. Though Erin had good upper-body strength, she kept collapsing in laughter, and they gave up after several efforts, along with a half dozen other laughing pairs of contestants.

Gable brooded from behind her sunglasses, oblivious to everything but the way Tim looked at Erin and the way that he was making her laugh.

Once the ribbons were handed out for the event, the chief announced that next up was the water-balloon toss.

To Gable's surprise, Erin trotted back to the food tables as pairs of combatants began lining up.

"C'mon, you can do this one with me," she urged. "I think those Jell-o salads can watch themselves for a minute or two."

Uncommonly pleased that Erin had ditched Tim for her, Gable followed her to the double row of paired contestants, and they faced each other, grinning, a scant ten feet apart for the first toss. Gable was handed a filled red water balloon, slightly bigger than a softball, the elastic stretched taut.

"Ready?" she asked.

“Ready.”

Gable gently tossed the balloon underhand the few feet that separated them. Erin caught it without difficulty, as did all the other contestants on either side of them. They moved ten feet farther apart, and repeated the process, with Erin successfully tossing the red balloon back to Gable. Four other couples weren’t so lucky and were eliminated when their balloons broke.

Next they moved to twenty-five feet apart, a distance which eliminated more than a dozen other pairs of contestants. But Erin gently scooped the balloon into her outstretched arms, and they advanced to thirty feet.

“Great catch!” Gable encouraged, seeing there were only four other couples left.

Thirty feet looked incredibly far, but as they set up for the toss, Erin gave her a grin and a wink of reassurance. The balloon sailed through the air, and Gable cradled it like a baby, breaking its fall with her large hands, and suddenly they were one of only two pairs still in the contest. The other was a duet of tall teenaged boys Gable recognized. They were fraternal twins, and the stars of the local high school basketball team.

“Nice hands there, Gable,” Erin hollered. “We can do this!”

They moved another five feet apart, a seemingly impossible distance, and the crowd began to cheer on their favorites.

“Okay, Gable, put it right here.” Erin cupped her hands in front of her chest.

Gable was distracted by the cleavage displayed just above those wonderfully delicate hands, and perhaps that was the reason she tossed the balloon a tiny bit too hard. It burst with an impressive splash, dousing Erin’s tank top. Erin gasped in surprise at the cold soaking, failing to notice that her top was now clinging to her, outlining her breasts and her suddenly rigid nipples. Gable, on the other hand, couldn’t pry her eyes from the sight until Tim came up behind her and slapped her on the back.

“Aw. You almost had it there, you two. What a shame,” he commiserated.

Erin finally noticed that Tim and several of the other men standing around them were staring at her, and she glanced down and saw why. “Oh my.” She crossed her arms over her chest as color blossomed in her

cheeks. "I think I better go and try to dry off some."

"Here, take this," Gable slipped off the long-sleeved denim shirt she had on over her T-shirt and offered it to her.

"You're always saving me, aren't you?" Erin said as she took the shirt with a smile and headed off toward the restrooms.

"Dang," Tim whispered under his breath as they both watched Erin leave. He turned to Gable and grumped, "Spoilsport."

Despite herself, Gable had to laugh.

Things went steadily downhill after that.

When Erin emerged from the firehouse wearing Gable's shirt, she was immediately intercepted by Jerry DeYoung and led off toward the next event—the tug-of-war, which pitted the volunteer firefighters against men and women from the community they served.

Gable knew it was another event she'd better pass on, so she returned to the food tables to watch.

The thick rope was stretched over a muddy trench, six feet wide, which separated the two sides. Erin, as the rookie, was given the spot on the rope nearest the trench. If the firefighters lost, she'd be the first one to get filthy, just as Gable had been the year before.

It was a slightly closer contest this time, despite the fact that the townspeople had drafted the same two big bricklayers who routinely anchored their team to victory. It lasted a full three minutes before the firefighters began slipping slowly but surely ever closer to the mud pit. Erin dug in her heels all the way, the strain showing on her face, but when the inevitable happened and she was pulled into the quagmire, she took it with the same good humor with which she seemed to take everything.

After the tug-of-war came three events for the kids—the watermelon seed-spitting contest, the egg-in-spoon race, and the piñatas—one for the little kids, and one for the older ones. Gable was hoping that Erin might come over and watch with her, but she had obviously been corralled by the four men who were now crowded around her, vying for her attention—Tim Scott, Jerry DeYoung, and two others Gable didn't recognize. Every now and then, she glanced through the crowd in Gable's direction, but she seemed to be having fun if her smiles were anything to go by.

I should go home, Gable thought, her mood darkening further when a fifth admirer joined the group around Erin. She didn't know

his name, but she recognized the rather attractive fifty-ish bachelor as the proprietor of the Pine River Lumberyard, where she shopped on occasion. *He's got money*, she thought, recalling the gossip when the village's first Hummer had appeared on Main Street.

The chief announced it was time for the three-legged race, and Gable could see from a distance that Tim had somehow won the animated five-way discussion over who would get to be Erin's partner.

They lined up side by side at the edge of the field near the food area. Gable had a perfect view. She felt a sudden twitch of jealousy as she watched Tim curl his arm around Erin's shoulder, and it grew into a gnawing ache in the pit of her gut when Erin's hand snaked around Tim's waist. She frowned, holding back tears that sprang from nowhere.

"On your mark..." the chief hollered through the bullhorn.

Erin looked directly at Gable.

"Get set..."

The smile on Erin's face evaporated as she registered that Gable didn't look quite right.

"Go!"

Erin stumbled briefly as Tim lurched their joined legs forward, but her attention snapped back to the race and they quickly joined the other competitors dashing toward the other end of the field. Couples tripped and fell, but Tim and Erin had a steady, smooth rhythm going that edged them just ahead of the others. The firefighters in the crowd roared approval as the couple lunged toward the finish line and collapsed in a laughing heap of arms and legs on the other side.

Gable didn't have a great view when Erin and Tim got their blue ribbons—they were too far away for her to read their expressions. But she was seeing much more than she wanted to, anyway. After the ribbons were handed out, Tim scooped Erin up in his arms and twirled her around, then planted a big kiss on her to the cheers of the crowd.

Why are you torturing yourself? Gable decided it was time to leave. She would be in no mood for fireworks tonight.

That night, she stared at the ceiling for a long while, unable to sleep. Seeing Erin with others was killing her. She needed some distance. Maybe she should avoid her for a while. The prospect only made her feel even worse.



When she got home from work the next night, Gable found a message from Erin on her answering machine.

“Hi, Gable! Sorry I didn’t get a chance to say good-bye yesterday, hope everything is okay. I know you’re not home yet, but I wanted to call and invite you over for dinner. Nothing fancy. Just lasagna and garlic bread. And I promise I won’t make you move furniture! Tim helped me, so it’s all done. Call me.”

Tim was at her house. Helping her move her bed into her bedroom. Gable could picture it with all-too-vivid clarity. The two of them together, getting more and more comfortable with each other. *Did he kiss you some more? With all that privacy, did he make a move?* That thought led her mind to a dangerous place. She closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like to kiss Erin, to feel those soft lips beneath hers. It would be wonderful, she had no doubt. An ache blossomed in her chest with the realization it could never be.

Gable debated with herself a full ten minutes on whether to return the call at all, but her ingrained sense of common courtesy wouldn’t allow her to ignore it. So she had to call. And she would have to lie. She hated that part. But there was no alternative. *Distance, remember? You can’t see her. It will only drive you crazy.* Maybe she’d wait a couple of hours, so Erin couldn’t talk her into coming over. *You can say you stayed to have dinner in Meriwether with some people from work.*

The phone rang a half hour later as she was munching on a tuna sandwich. She let the machine get it. “Hi again, it’s Erin. Thought you’d be home by now, and maybe just missed my message. Anyway, call me!”

Gable felt like a heel. Her appetite gone, she tossed the remainder of her sandwich out the door for some lucky raccoon or possum to find. *It’s all for the best. You can’t go on like this.* But she was unable to convince herself it was the right thing to do. She was deliberately hurting Erin, and there was no way she could feel good about that.

She forced herself to wait two hours before calling Erin back. *Keep it short and sweet.* Her hands trembled slightly as she dialed the number she had memorized. She had actually rehearsed what she would say, afraid her voice would betray her, afraid Erin could tell she

was lying.

After they exchanged hellos, she said, "Sorry, I just got home and got your message. I stayed to have dinner with some friends from work."

"No problem. I kind of figured you must have done something like that. It's okay, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing anyway."

"I appreciate the invitation."

"How about tomorrow?"

Gable hadn't foreseen this possibility.

"Come to dinner tomorrow," Erin blithely continued. "I have tons of lasagna left, and it's always better the second day anyway."

No excuse at the ready, Gable stammered. "Uh...well...Let me think...oh, wait! I promised one of the women I work with that I'd help her with something tomorrow when we got off. I'm not sure what time I'll be home. Maybe late." *Brilliant. Just brilliant.* It sounded like such a terribly lame excuse that Gable was certain Erin would see right through it. But if she did, she gave no indication.

"Oh, well, that's all right. How about Thursday?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. "Sorry, I've got plans on Thursday." *Now she knows I'm lying.* Gable didn't even try to come up with a reasonable excuse. She just wanted to get off the phone.

"Oh. Okay."

She heard the hurt in Erin's voice and hated herself for causing it. "Look, I've gotta run," she said. "I'll talk to you soon, okay?" *But not too soon.*

"Sure. Good night, Gable. Sleep well."



Being apart from Erin didn't work. If anything, it was worse. She had a powerful imagination, and it worked overtime wondering how much time Erin was spending with Tim and what they were up to.

Erin hadn't called her again all week, and Gable wondered whether she'd put so much distance between them that their budding friendship would be irrevocably harmed.

On Friday morning as she fixed herself breakfast, she glanced at Erin's training schedule, tacked up on the refrigerator door. Erin had a session with Tim from two to five that afternoon to go over portable

extinguishers and fire inspection practices. *They get off at five. It's natural they'd go out to dinner somewhere after. Then maybe a movie. And back to her place. That's what I'd do.*



There was a message on Gable's machine when she got home from work shortly after six that night. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the red number one on the digital display. Maybe she'd been wrong, and it was Erin calling.

Much as she feared having to make more excuses, she missed hearing Erin's voice. She pressed the button and held her breath.

"Hi, sis. Just calling to confirm I'll pick you up at nine." Stewart's voice. "I've got all the camping gear we need. Just bring your clothes and fishing gear and we can catch breakfast on the way up to the bridge."

They were going to spend Saturday fishing on a lake Stewart knew near Saint Ignace. Then on Sunday they would take the ferry to Mackinac Island and poke around the fort and the fudge shops before heading home.

On any other occasion, Gable would have looked forward to spending some time with her brother. They always had a blast when they went fishing together. But all she could think about was how far away she'd be from Erin. She stared at the answering machine, wishing she hadn't erased Erin's messages, so she could play them again.

There was a knock at the door.

It's her. Gable knew it was. She wasn't sure how she knew. But she was certain of it. Her resolve flew out the window and she couldn't get the door unlatched fast enough.

"Hi." Erin had a look of uncertainty on her face, as though expecting to be turned away. She held a large paper grocery bag in her arms.

Gable wanted to hug her, she was so happy to see her again. She managed to restrain herself, but she couldn't stop grinning like an idiot. "Come on in, I just got home."

Erin's uncertainty dissipated and she smiled back at Gable as she crossed the threshold. "I took a chance and brought you dinner."

"You shouldn't have done that."

Erin had started toward the kitchen but she froze at Gable's words and looked at her. The smile disappeared. "Why? Do you have plans?"

I don't want to hurt you anymore. And I don't think I can lie to your face. "Nope. No plans. I only meant you shouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

Erin's face brightened. "No trouble. I missed you!" She continued on to the kitchen. "Go on and change," she called out over her shoulder, "and I'll get dinner started."

"God, I missed you too," Gable whispered, watching her go.

She decided then and there that it was useless to try to distance herself from Erin. It would do nothing to change the way she felt about her. It would only hurt Erin, and that was simply unacceptable.



Gable couldn't decide what to change into for dinner. She'd tried on half her wardrobe. *In my own home, for Pete's sake. And for what is probably a hamburger and fries from a fast-food joint.* She'd paid no attention to the bag Erin had been carrying, having been too busy admiring how well Erin's rust-colored blouse complemented the color of her hair. Not to mention how nicely it hugged every contour of that beautiful body.

Gable herself would never wear a form-fitting blouse or a tank top like Erin had worn at the picnic. But Erin was more comfortable with her body than she was—that was obvious not only in what she wore, but in the way she carried herself. *She certainly wasn't self-conscious when she was trying on clothes.*

Gable closed her eyes and swallowed hard, remembering the way the dressing room mirror had gifted her with three Erins, in cream satin bra and panties, all smiling at her. *Oh yeah.*

There was a soft knock at her bedroom door. "Gable? Everything's ready."

"Be right there." The navy button-down shirt and faded jeans would have to do. Gable ran her hands through her hair, took a deep breath, and steeled herself for an evening of impossible temptation.

It was immediately apparent it was going to be far worse than she imagined. A spicy aroma filled her nostrils as soon as she opened the door. She couldn't identify it, but it sure as hell wasn't burgers and

fries.

Erin had set the round oak table with Gable's best plates and china. Two wineglasses held a burgundy liquid. Merlot, she guessed. They had discussed their favorite wines the night of the tornado. Daisies overflowed a petite crystal vase that Erin had tracked down from under the sink. Brass candlesticks taken from the mantel had new red tapers in them, which cast the table in a soft, hazy light.

Erin sat waiting for her. Watching her. Smiling at her.

You look so wonderful by candlelight. Gable wanted to freeze that moment in her mind's eye, so she could replay it over and over. It would be fodder for dreams to come, she was certain. There was such joy in Erin's face, and such open affection...*and she looks so damn irresistible...*that Gable—just for a moment—considered telling her everything.

Her indecision must have been written on her face, for Erin's smile faded.

"Gable? Is something wrong?"

She pasted a smile on her face. "No, not at all. I'm just surprised. You really shouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"It's not much. Come sit."

Gable took a chair next to Erin and watched her ladle up two big bowls of chili, thick with chunks of tomato and beef and garnished with cheddar cheese and red onions. Her breadbasket was filled with slices of a crusty French baguette, and there was a small mixed-greens salad with mandarin orange segments and glazed almonds, dressed in a sweet-and-sour vinaigrette.

"This is quite a spread," Gable said.

"I just warmed up some chili I made last night," Erin said. "It's better the second day too." She smiled as she said it, but she looked at Gable as if hoping she would comment on the reference; would somehow explain why she was so busy she couldn't see her all week. It wasn't a hard push, more of a nudge, but it was a sure sign that Erin knew she wasn't hearing the whole story.

Gable dug into the chili, grateful for the distraction. She didn't know what to say.

Erin wasn't going to let it go. Her voice was subdued. "Gable, did I do or say something to upset you?"

Gable took a sip of wine and tried to show no reaction at all to the question. "No, why would you say that?" *Just because I've been acting*

like a total basket case since the first time I laid eyes on you?

"I thought maybe you were avoiding me."

"No, I..." Gable cleared her throat, buying time to try to think up an excuse that wasn't really a lie. "I've had a lot going on, that's all. A lot on my mind."

"Anything I can do? Would it help to talk about it?"

"Not really. But thanks for asking."

"I'm not just saying that, you know," Erin pressed. She put down her fork and reached across the table to place one hand loosely on Gable's forearm. "You've done so much for me. Been such a good friend. Not only the night of the tornado, although that was certainly a hell of a how-do-you-do." She looked into Gable's eyes and smiled. "I want to be there for you every bit as much as you've been there for me. You can tell me anything, you know. Anything. I'm a good listener."

"Thanks, Erin," Gable managed, too acutely aware of the small, soft hand on her arm. "I know you mean that, and I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. I hope you do." Erin withdrew her hand and resumed eating with a more relaxed demeanor, apparently satisfied with the exchange.

"So how has your training been going?" Gable didn't want to come right out and ask about Tim. A part of her didn't want to hear explicit details about how their relationship was going. But another part couldn't stand *not* to know, either.

"Real good. I think I'm catching on okay. I was supposed to get my gear this week, but everything they had was too big. The chief had to special order it."

"I'm not surprised. You're such a tiny thing."

"I hope I can do my part when the time comes."

"You will. Don't worry." Gable reached for another slice of baguette. "So what did you learn this week?"

"Well, let's see. I did forcible entries with Chief Thornton and Jerry. That was fun. Yesterday Cliff showed me where everything was on the trucks. Today was portable extinguishers and fire inspection practices with Tim. Pretty boring, actually. I'm looking forward to the physical stuff—the ladder drills, seeing what it's like to work with the hoses."

Gable nodded. *Don't do it. Don't. It'll just eat you up.* She shoved aside her better judgment. "Have you been out with Tim again?" She said it as off the cuff as she could, but she held her breath waiting for the answer.

"Yeah, we went to dinner Wednesday. Just to that pizza place in Pine River. It was nice." Erin shrugged noncommittally. "He's going to come over next week and help me put a fence up so I can have a garden next year."

Gable poured herself a second glass of wine. She held the bottle over Erin's nearly empty goblet. "Care for some more?"

"Please."

When the glasses were full again, Erin raised hers for a toast. Gable clued in and hoisted hers as well.

"To you and to us. To a very special friendship. Thank you for being there for me."

"To our friendship," Gable agreed.

As they clinked glasses, Gable reaffirmed her decision to remain close to Erin regardless of how painful it was for her at times. Erin was absolutely right. They were developing a rare friendship, a special blessing in their lives, and she would do whatever she had to, to preserve it.

They chatted about mundane things as they washed and dried the dishes, regaining the easy familiarity that had seen them through the long night of the twister. Erin didn't mention Tim again, and neither did Gable.

As Erin dried her hands on the dishtowel, she glanced at the clock on the stove. "You know, *Gone with the Wind* is on TV tonight. I haven't seen it in ages." She looked at Gable with hopeful expectation.

"I haven't either."

"Starts in ten minutes."

"Better go warm up the TV while I make us some popcorn, then."

Erin shot Gable a big grin and threw the towel at her before heading off toward the living room. She pivoted on her heels at the doorway. "Hey, it doesn't end until midnight. Mind if I stay over? We can have a slumber party!"

Oh God. "Sure," Gable muttered, turning away toward the pantry so that Erin wouldn't see the blush coloring her cheeks. *And what kind*

of dreams will you have tonight with her in the next room?

She remembered then that Stewart was picking her up in the morning, and picked up the phone on the kitchen wall.

Stewart answered on the second ring.

"Hey, bro," Gable greeted him as she stuck a bag of popcorn in the microwave. "Would you be pissed off if we did our weekend getaway another time?"

"No, of course not. Did something come up? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Erin showed up with dinner kind of out of the blue, and we're going to watch a movie that runs late."

"Ah. Erin, eh? How are you doing with that?"

"I'm dealing with it. You know what they say. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

"I hate to see you unhappy, Gable."

"I'm not unhappy. Actually, I'm the happiest I've ever been, when I'm around her. It's just very frustrating too." She kept her voice low, and shot a glance into the living room to make sure Erin couldn't hear her. She had settled onto the couch and was flipping through channels on the TV.

"Call me if you need to talk," her brother said. "Love you."

"I will. Thanks, Stewart."



Except for the fact that she wanted to reach out and touch Erin all night but couldn't, Gable had a great time. They shared popcorn out of a big bowl, sitting side by side on the couch, exchanging trivia about the movie and reciting their favorite lines along with the characters.

She was not at all tired when Rhett told Scarlett he frankly didn't give a damn, but Erin was fading fast.

"Come on, to the guest room with you, sleepyhead." Gable got to her feet and extended a hand. Erin took it, and Gable pulled her up.

She felt so light, a slightly firmer tug would have brought their bodies together. The very thought of it made Gable take a step back, letting go reluctantly, memorizing the warmth of Erin's hand in hers.

She led the way to the spare bedroom and turned down the coverlet. "Would you like a big T-shirt or something to sleep in?"

Erin yawned and stretched. “Nah, that’s okay. I’m fine. Just don’t be shocked if I meet you coming out of the bathroom in the middle of the night. I sleep in the buff. Can’t stand pajamas.”

Oh. Shit. There goes any chance at all of my getting any sleep tonight. “Uh...all right, then. Sleep well, and I’ll see you in the morning. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks.”

As Gable turned to go Erin’s voice caught her at the doorway. “Gable?”

“Yeah?”

“I had a good time tonight. I have more fun with you than anyone.”

“Me too. Thanks for coming over.”



Gable finally did doze off, but slept fitfully, awakening at every tiny sound, imagining it was Erin. Around three a.m. when she awoke, she realized it really *was* Erin this time; the water was running in the bathroom between the two bedrooms. Gable couldn’t help herself. She slipped out of bed and went to the door and opened it an inch, as quietly as she could.

She had put a nightlight in the guest room to ease Erin’s fear of the dark, and plugged another into an outlet in the hall so Erin could find her way to the bathroom. The latter gave Gable enough light to get a real good look at Erin’s incredible body as she stumbled back to bed.

There would be no more sleeping after that.



Gable got up at six, threw on a robe, and made a pot of coffee to wake herself up. She was channel surfing with the volume turned down when her emergency radio blared the signal for a callout. She was on the first-response team.

Gable jotted down the address and hustled to her bedroom, running headlong into Erin in the hallway.

“Was that your radio?” Erin had dressed hurriedly; her blouse wasn’t buttoned right.

“Yeah, a house fire. Not far from here.” Gable continued to her bedroom without further elaboration, threw on her clothes, and was back in the living room in seconds.

Erin had her shoes on and was waiting by the door. “I’m coming with you. I may not be able to help much yet, but I want to go.”

“Okay.” There was no time for discussion.

They got into Gable’s Jeep, and Gable turned on the emergency flasher as she hit the gas and sped toward the fire.

“I wish I had my gear.” Erin looked enviously at Gable’s fire coat, turnout pants, helmet, and boots, piled in the back of the Jeep.

The smoke was visible from a couple of miles away—a dark column billowing upward into a clear, cloudless sky. They were first to arrive. The top floor of the two-story home was nearly fully involved. Flames leapt from the south side windows and curled upward, charring a wide black swath to the roof.

As the Jeep screeched to a stop on the gravel drive, a middle-aged woman came running out from behind the house. The turquoise housedress she was wearing was half burned off her, and much of her frizzy blond hair was gone on one side, the charred ends black.

“Help!” she screamed. “My son Peter is up there! I couldn’t get to him!” She ran up to Gable as she got out of the Jeep and grabbed at her arm. “Help him! He’s only seven!”

“Where is he? Where did you last see him?” Gable scrambled into her gear. She cursed the fact she did not have her SCBA. The air packs stayed with the trucks.

“He’s in his bedroom.” The woman pointed at the only corner of the second floor that was not engulfed in flames. “I couldn’t get to him. The stairs were on fire. Hurry! Please!”

“Do you have a ladder?” Gable asked.

“Behind the house.” The woman broke down crying.

With no time to comfort her, Gable and Erin darted around the house, found a tall aluminum ladder, and hurriedly set it under the bedroom window. “I’m going up for the boy,” Gable told Erin as she pulled her gloves out of her pocket and put them on. “You wait for the pumper and tell them where I am.”

“Please be careful,” Erin urged, positioning herself to steady the ladder.

Gable raced up the rungs, mentally going through the checklist that had been drilled into her during her training. *Stay low and go.* The temperature of a burning room was three hundred degrees just a foot off the floor, five hundred degrees five feet up, and twelve or thirteen hundred degrees at the ceiling.

The window wasn't locked. She opened it but kept her face turned away as thick black smoke billowed out and up. She hyperventilated, holding her last big deep breath as she crawled inside and dropped to the floor. She kept one hand on the wall to orient herself.

The smoke was thick, but she caught a glimpse of the door to the hallway across from her—it was closed but on fire, fed into a hot sheet of flame by the rush of air from the open window. *You don't have much time.*

"Peter!" she hollered. She inhaled a lungful of the thick acrid smoke and immediately began coughing.

"Peter! Where are you?" she managed between coughs. The smoke stung her eyes, causing them to water profusely. She had to keep them closed much of the time, taking quick, squinting glances to try to see. "Peter! Answer me if you can!"

There was no response, so she began to search. Crawling along the floor, one hand on the wall, the other extended in front of her. *Children are most often found in or under the bed or in closets.* She came to a dresser and skirted around it. Came to a corner of the room. Beyond it, a nightstand. *The bed!* She searched it quickly but thoroughly, then sprawled flat to grope beneath it, both hands outstretched. Nothing but boxes. Comic books. Toys.

Her eyes were burning and her lungs ached. She sucked in more smoke. *Taking too long,* her mind thought fuzzily as she went into another coughing spasm. But she forged ahead, around the bed. Another nightstand.

She was so close to the fire now she could feel the heat of it and hear the roaring, crackling sound as it consumed the door and spread up into the ceiling above her. *You have to hurry. Not much time.*

She left the safety of the wall to scramble around the door, keeping her face averted from the flames. She groped her way to the opposite wall, her hands finding shoes and toys and discarded clothes...and then, another door. *Closet!*

Please, God, she prayed as she turned the knob. She could no longer see, her eyes raw and burning from the smoke. Her heart fell as she groped her way through the deep closet, finding only clothes, a hockey stick, roller skates. She had almost given up hope when she finally came upon the boy, curled into a fetal position in the back corner.

He wasn't moving.

She grabbed him and backed out of the closet.

The fire was spreading rapidly now, closing in on them—one wall and half the ceiling were aflame. The heat was intense, searing her face and neck. She tried to shield the child as she dragged him across the floor in the direction of the window.

"Gable! Answer me, damn it! Gable!" Erin was at the window, standing on top of the ladder.

Her voice helped direct Gable where to go, and in another moment, she was there. She handed the boy over the sill to Erin and groped her way down the ladder after them. She collapsed at the bottom, struggling to breathe, unable to see.

Gable recognized the sound of tires skidding on gravel as more firefighters arrived, then the wail of the fire engine, growing steadily louder.

"I'm going to move you, Gable. Try to relax." Carl's voice, just above her. He reached beneath her shoulders and dragged her several feet, then slid off her helmet. "You all right?"

"Okay," she managed to rasp out between coughs. "The boy?"

"He's alive. Erin and Tim are working on him. You done good, Gable." Carl had to shout to be heard over the siren on the pumper as it pulled up near them. "Oxygen's here."

The siren died, and a minute later someone set an oxygen mask on her face. Gable still couldn't open her eyes, but it was a bit easier to breathe. All was controlled chaos around her. She could hear Chief Thornton shouting instructions, and recognized the clang of the ladders coming off the truck. Another siren. The ambulance, she guessed. The other sounds around her began to fade as it wailed louder and louder, stopping very near where she lay. The siren died, car doors slammed. She could hear the voices of the paramedics as they tended to the boy a short distance away.

"Gable, are you all right?" Erin's voice, nearby. Kneeling over her.

Gable pulled the oxygen mask away from her mouth. "Yeah. Peter?"

"He'll be okay, they think. They're getting him in the ambulance now. Then they'll bring the other gurney over for you."

Gable shook her head. "Hate hospitals," she rasped.

"It'll be all right. I'll be right there with you. But I'm going to have to drive your Jeep and meet you there. They won't let me ride along, there's not enough room."

"No," Gable protested. She started coughing again, and Erin replaced the oxygen mask.

"Leave that alone, and stop talking! Damn it! Don't be so stubborn!"

"Don't need..." Gable tried to talk through the mask, but it muffled her words.

Erin took her hand and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Please, Gable. Please don't fight this. Okay? For me?"

Gable absolutely loathed hospitals. Her mother had died in one, three days after her car went off an icy road and struck a tree. But Gable could see it was pointless to try to argue with Erin. She nodded her head reluctantly, and Erin squeezed her hand. "Good. Thanks."



The paramedics flushed out her eyes with saline at the fire scene, and they repeated the procedure at the hospital, so Gable was able to get a good look at the cluster of familiar faces crowded outside the emergency ward as they wheeled her to a semiprivate room. Erin, Tim, Carl, and a half dozen more of her firefighter friends, some still in their turnout gear.

Two nurses fussed over her, getting her an extra blanket, fluffing up her pillows. The other bed in her room was vacant. She was still on oxygen and they'd hooked her up to an IV. She had to move the mask to be understood.

"What's Peter's condition?" Her voice was still raspy, and it hurt to talk.

"Put that back," said the matronly nurse whose nametag read Amy. But she smiled at Gable as she said it. "He's going to be fine. We're keeping him overnight too. Just for observation. You're the one who got him out, right?"

Gable nodded.

"Nice work." Amy smiled at Gable as she loaded a syringe from a small bottle. "I'm going to give you something to help you sleep." She injected the syringe into Gable's IV.

"Can I talk to her a minute?" asked a voice from the doorway that Gable didn't recognize. She turned her head to see the woman from the fire, still in her charred housedress, but with bandages and ointment covering the burns on her face, neck and hands.

"Sure," Amy told the woman. "But I don't want her to talk." She looked directly at Gable. "You just listen. All right?"

Gable nodded as the woman approached the bedside.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough." The woman had tears in her eyes. "Risking your life that way to save my son. I don't know how to thank you. I would've died if anything had happened to him."

Gable reached out her hand. The woman took it, and squeezed hard.

"You've got a lot of other people out there who want to see you too," Amy said. "But you can only have two at a time."

"I'll leave. So your friends can come in," Peter's mother said. She leaned down to kiss Gable on the cheek. "God bless you," she whispered before retreating.

Gable risked incurring Amy's wrath by removing the oxygen mask. "I'll see Erin and Carl," she requested, before dutifully replacing it.

"You got it." Amy signaled the other nurse. "But I'm going to stay right here so you don't try to talk."

Carl and Erin came in, both their faces etched with worry until Gable waved at them with both hands to assure them she was all right. Erin pulled a chair near the bedside and took Gable's hand. Carl stood behind the chair.

"Hey there. How you feeling?" Erin asked.

"She's not supposed to talk," Amy said from the other side of the bed.

"Oh, right." Erin winced.

Gable gave Erin's hand a squeeze and winked at her, and that brought a relieved smile to her face.

"Since they won't let everyone in, I'm supposed to tell you that everybody sends their love and prayers," Carl said. "We're all real proud

of you, Gable. That was a gutsy thing, going in there alone without your mask.”

She shrugged. It had all happened so fast she really didn’t have time to be afraid.

“I felt so helpless,” Erin said. “You were in there so long.”

Gable reached up for her oxygen mask, but Amy cut her off at the pass, grabbing at her arm to stop her. “Don’t you dare,” she admonished.

Gable let her hand drop back to her side. “Your voice saved me,” she rasped through the mask to Erin, drawing a frown from the nurse.

“If you’re going to talk,” Amy said. “I’m going to ask them to leave.”

“No! She’s not going to talk anymore, are you, Gable?” Erin’s expression beseeched Gable to agree.

Gable flashed Amy an okay sign.

“All right.” Amy turned to Carl and Erin. “Make sure she doesn’t. I’m going to check on a couple of other patients, but I’ll be right back. She’s had a sedative, so she’ll be dozing off on us pretty quick.”

As soon as she was out the door, Gable pulled the mask off. “Go home,” she told them.

Erin slapped gently at her hand and replaced the mask. “Stop that. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Gable reached for the mask again, but Erin held her arm down.

“I mean it,” Erin said more sternly. “Don’t make me get tough with you.”

Gable rolled her eyes, and Carl chuckled.

“I’m going to go tell everybody you’re okay and send them home,” Carl said. He patted her arm. “You did us all proud, Gable. Let me know if you need anything.”

She gave him a thumbs-up sign, and the room fell quiet for a moment after he’d gone. Gable could feel the sedative taking effect. Erin took her hand again.

“Go home,” she repeated through the mask, although she rather liked Erin sitting there, holding her hand.

“Not a chance. Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Gable yawned. “Stubborn,” she said drowsily.

“That makes two of us.”

“Not going to sleep until you leave,” Gable vowed. She was fighting to keep her eyes open.

“Wanna bet?” Erin smiled as she said it, but then her expression grew serious. “You had me scared for a minute there, Gable.” A tremor shook her voice.

“I’m fine. Go home. Stop worrying.” Gable needed to close her eyes. *But just for a minute.*

“Stop talking! I can’t help worrying, Gable. You’re important to me. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Important to me too,” Gable mumbled, fading fast. *So very important.*

CHAPTER NINE

When Gable next opened her eyes, sunlight was streaming in through the window of the hospital room and Carl was seated where Erin had been, engrossed in the sports pages of the *Charlevoix Courier*.

Gable felt a small pang of disappointment.

Her oxygen mask was gone, replaced by a nasal cannula that wrapped around her ears and supplied a gentle air flow into her nose. She had a headache, and her throat felt like she had swallowed sandpaper. Sooty, ashy, *nasty* sandpaper. *Yuck*.

“Hey, Carl. What time is it?”

“You’re awake!” Carl grinned, set the paper aside, and looked at his watch. “A few minutes before eight.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Thought I’d stop by and see how you were feeling.”

“Thirsty.”

“I can fix that.” Carl poured a cup of water from a pitcher on the bedside table and handed it to her. “How’s your head?”

“Hurts.”

“Carbon monoxide,” he said. “You might feel it a couple of days. Aspirin will help. Any nausea?”

“Yeah.”

“Want me to get the nurse?”

“In a minute. When they gonna let me out of here? Do you know?”

“Erin said the doctor was supposed to see you at eight thirty and decide then.”

“Erin? Erin was here?” Her pulse quickened. Only then did Gable realize she was hooked to a monitor that was beeping out her heartbeats.

Carl had heard the change too. He glanced at the digital read-out on the monitor. It read 79. 80. 81. An odd smile came over his face. He studied Gable intently for a moment, then said, “Erin is *still* here. I made her go and get coffee. I think she bribed the nurses to let her stay overnight since they kicked me out at ten.”

He was smiling at her like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, and Gable didn’t like it one bit. “Well, you can both go home. I’m fine,” she said. She could feel her embarrassment beginning to color her cheeks. She looked over at the monitor. Beepbeepbeepbeep. 83. 84. 85.

“Oh, I doubt you can get her to leave.” Carl smirked.

“There’s no reason either of you need to stay.”

There was a long silence.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” he asked gently.

Gable froze. “Doesn’t know what?” She tried to inject innocent conviction into her tone, but he wasn’t fooled. They both knew he had it figured out.

“You can talk to me, you know,” he said. “I understand better than you think I do.”

She looked at him then.

“My niece Ruthie is a lesbian. She’s twenty-one and goes to Juilliard. Brilliant girl. Gifted. She’s educated me, you might say.”

“I see,” was all Gable could manage.

“Ruthie didn’t tell anybody in the family until she turned eighteen, though she knew long before that. She said she was worried about how everyone would react, but at the same time, she hated keeping it from all of us. Felt like she was living a lie—not telling the people closest to her.” He paused, a trace of hurt evident in his eyes. “She said it was like they couldn’t really know who she was.”

“Carl, I’m kind of a private person,” Gable said. “I don’t feel the need to share that information with a lot of people.”

“I understand that. But I think there’s a difference between telling the squad you’re gay and telling your best friend, who seems to be open-minded enough to understand.”

“You don’t know that about her.”

He shrugged. "Maybe not. It's just a feeling. We chatted last night a good long while, and I got to know her. She obviously thinks the world of you. She talked about you practically nonstop."

"We're close."

"But you'd like to be closer."

Gable sighed. "She's *straight*, Carl."

"Yeah, I know. So maybe you can't have the kind of relationship you'd like to have with her. But I think you'd be happier if you at least told her you were gay."

Gable shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't know."

"Will you at least think about it?"

"Yeah. I can do that. Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Ask a nurse for some aspirin, will you?"

"You bet."

"And get them to take me off this heart monitor before Erin comes back!" she hollered after him.



Erin stuck her head around the door a few minutes later as the doctor was finishing up his visit. Politely, she hovered a few feet into the corridor as he removed the oxygen tube from Gable's nose.

"Okay, I'll sign you out," he said. "I want you to take a couple days off work and rest. Take the antibiotics and call me if there are any complications."

"I will, Doc. Thanks."

"You have someone to drive you home?"

"Yes, she does." Erin stepped into the room.

"Good." He scribbled on his prescription pad and gave the paper to Gable. "Get that filled at the hospital pharmacy before you leave. Lots of fluids, lots of rest. Bland food for a while. Nothing spicy."

"All right."

The doctor departed and Erin hurried to the bed, smiling at Gable, wearing the same clothes she'd had on for two nights running with the exception of a brand-new navy sweatshirt that had *Michigan* embroidered on it in gold. Her hair was slightly mussed. Gable thought she looked adorable.

"I thought you got your bachelor's at Western and your master's at Michigan State. When did you go to U of M?"

Erin glanced down at her sweatshirt and shrugged. "All they had in the hospital gift shop. I was getting chilly."

"Why didn't you go home?"

Erin shrugged. "Thought you might like to have a friendly face nearby when you woke up. I know you weren't keen on coming here."

"I hate hospitals."

"I figured. And I hate confined, dark spaces and you helped me with that, so here I am."

"You know, you're probably going to run into a lot of confined, dark spaces when you start going out on callouts and get trained to go into buildings," Gable said. "Have you thought about that?"

"Yes, I have," Erin said. "I'm optimistic I can deal with it when there's a job to do and I'm focused on that. Whenever there are distractions in a situation like that—like when you talked to me the night of the tornado—that really makes it easier."

"You know if you run into a touchy situation and I can help, don't hesitate to ask."

Erin grinned at her. "I know that. And I want you to know the same goes for me."

An attractive nurse with short hair the color of copper came into the room with a clipboard in one hand. "Hi, hero," she greeted Gable as she approached the bedside. "Just got done signing out the boy you saved. You're next."

She handed the clipboard to Gable and raised the head of the bed until Gable was sitting up, then she leaned forward until she was close enough to point at the paperwork. "I need you to sign here," she turned a page, "and here."

The nurse didn't move away while Gable signed; her proximity seemed somehow *familiar*, enough so that Gable looked directly at her when she handed the clipboard back.

The nurse gave her a big smile and held her eyes a little too long as she took the clipboard. "My name is Sheri," she said. She was not in a hurry to leave. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you, won't you? If you need a ride home, I get off in a couple of hours."

What the hell? Oh my God, this woman is hitting on me! Gable couldn't find her tongue for a moment. She blushed, which only made the nurse smile more.

"I'm fine, really." She shot a glance at Erin, who was watching the exchange with an unreadable expression. "I have a ride."

"All righty. Well, if you change your mind, I'll be at the nurses' station." The nurse headed for the door. "Hit your buzzer when you're ready to leave, and I'll wheel you out."

"I can take care of it," Erin said coolly. "If you'll bring a wheelchair by."

"I can walk out," Gable said.

"Hospital policy," Sheri informed her. "Your friend can take you out. I'll get the chair."

"Need help getting dressed?" Erin asked Gable after the nurse had gone.

"No!" Gable said, a bit too quickly. "Uh...I can manage. Where are my things?"

"Carl took your turnout gear with him. Said he'd get it to you later. The rest of your things should be here." Erin went to a tiny closet and opened it. "Whew!" She grimaced as she brought Gable's jeans, shirt, bra, socks, panties and shoes to the bed.

Gable could smell it too, from several feet away. Her clothes absolutely stank of smoke. But she didn't have many options if she wanted to get out of there. She eased her legs off one side of the bed and slipped to the floor. One hand held her clothes tight to her chest. The other held the hospital gown closed over her bare bottom. She padded slowly to the room's tiny bathroom and went inside to change.

Would you still offer to help me get dressed if you knew I was gay? she wondered as she pulled up her jeans. Her thoughts strayed to the nurse. *Maybe I just need to get laid. Maybe that will put out this fire that's been burning inside me since I first set eyes on Erin. Maybe.*



They didn't talk much on the ride home in the Jeep. Erin insisted on driving, and Gable was happy to let her. She was preoccupied thinking about what Carl had said. *You'd be a lot happier if you at least told her you were gay.*

Would she? Attempting to be rational, she weighed the pros and cons of coming out to Erin.

If you tell her, it could change things. That was her greatest fear—that telling Erin would irreparably harm their friendship. *No matter*

how cool she appears to be, you just never know how someone's going to react. She might treat you very differently once she knows you're gay. Gable didn't think it was likely that Erin would completely turn her back on their friendship, though she'd heard of that happening to others. But she might stop confiding in you. Start keeping you at arm's length. Do you want to chance that? Risk the closest, dearest friendship you might ever have?

She stole a glance at Erin, who was singing along with the radio, which was tuned to a station that played familiar classic pop tunes. It was easy to tell she was musically inclined—she always sang harmony to the theme, usually a perfect fifth below or above the melody.

If you tell her, you're going to have to work even harder not to let on how you feel about her. You'll have to be on guard all the time. Gable stared out the window. *But not forever, she amended. Just until you get over wanting to rip her clothes off.*

She glanced at Erin again. Erin felt eyes on her, and turned to smile.

The longer you keep this from her, the harder it will be to tell her. And you will have to tell her someday. You know you will. You can't dance around it forever. Your evasions will trip you up, or she'll find out some other way—maybe by accident. Gable's mind flashed again to the flirtatious nurse.

If you wait to tell her, or if she finds out on her own...she'll be really hurt. She'll think you didn't trust her. Gable sighed. *The bottom line is, you just hate lying to her. Carl was right about that, wasn't he? You won't feel right until you're honest with her.*

They pulled into her driveway.

Okay, so you're going to tell her. Now you just have to decide when. And how.



"I appreciate your staying with me," Gable said as they stopped in front of the house, next to Erin's pickup. "And your driving."

"Don't mention it." Erin cut off the engine and handed the keys to Gable. "And you're not dismissing me. I'm coming in to fix you something to eat, and then I'm going to tuck you in bed."

Gable got out and shut the door of the Jeep but didn't go inside. "That's not necessary. You can go home now. I know one kitty who's going to be pretty pissed at his mommy."

"Earl Grey will be fine. He has plenty of dry food, and I'll give him extra Fancy Feast when I see him." Erin started walking toward the house. "You're supposed to be resting, not arguing with me," she called over her shoulder.

Gable really didn't have the heart to protest further. She wanted one more night of Erin not knowing. One more night where she didn't have to worry about whether Erin would pick up on her feelings. One more night of the way things were. Because even though it wasn't all that she wanted, it was so much more than she'd ever had before.

She headed up the walk after Erin. *Better enjoy it while you can. Nothing will be the same after you tell her.*

Erin got her comfortably settled on the couch, feet up and pillows behind her back, then warmed up some chicken soup and made a pot of tea.

"Don't forget to take your pills with your food," she said as Gable sampled the soup.

"Erin, I'm a pharmacist."

"Oh, right. Brilliant, Erin." A slight flush infused her cheeks, and Gable thought it quite endearing. But she could see that Erin also had circles under her eyes from having stayed awake half the night at the hospital. It was time to send her home.

"You really don't have to fuss after me anymore, you know. I can manage to put these in the sink and get into bed by myself."

"You sure?"

"Positive. Go! And thanks again for everything."

"Any time." Erin got up but detoured to the back of the couch before she left to hug Gable around the neck. "Get some sleep. Call me if you need anything."

"I will."

"I'll check on you tomorrow. What do you want for dinner?"

"I've got stuff here I can cook," Gable said.

"The doctor told you to take it easy for a couple of days, and I'm going to make sure you stick to that. I'm going to Cadillac tomorrow, so I can bring back any kind of takeout you like. What sounds good to you?"

Gable smiled. "Whatever. I'm easy."

"I'll surprise you, then."

No, Gable thought. I'll be the one surprising you.

CHAPTER TEN

Erin, there's something I should tell you. Not that it's any big deal, but we're good friends and getting to be better friends all the time, and I just think it's something you should know about me that you probably don't. I'm gay."

Erin didn't say anything right away, but her eyes got big and Gable heard the sharp intake of breath at the news. It was clear the announcement was a total surprise. Her stomach was tied up in knots.

"You're gay?" Erin repeated after a full minute had passed.

"Yes."

"I see." Erin got up and walked to the window and looked out. She didn't say anything more for the longest time, and she didn't look at Gable.

"I...I had no idea. None." Erin still wouldn't look at her, and there was something about the tone in her voice that Gable didn't like.

"Gable, I...I don't know what to say to you. It's just...*wrong*. I can't condone it. I can't be your friend anymore." She shook her head. "I have to go." She was out the door and in her truck almost before Gable could blink.

Gable hurried after her and caught up with her as she started to pull out of the driveway. "Erin, wait!" She ran alongside the pickup, tapping desperately on the window, but even though she was certain Erin heard her, the truck only picked up speed.

"Erin! Come back!" she screamed. "Please come back!"

Gable sat bolt upright, coming awake in an instant, her heart thumping loudly in her chest. She looked at the bedside clock. It read

4:12 a.m.

She prayed the dream was only her anxieties working themselves out in her subconscious, and not a premonition of things to come. There would be no more sleeping until she talked to Erin.



Gable paced back and forth, glancing out the front window every now and then, listening for the sound of Erin's truck. She was wound up tight.

The woods outside her home were alive with birds—bright yellow goldfinches and indigo buntings, rose-breasted grosbeaks and her favorite of all—ruby-throated hummingbirds, mesmerizing in their aerial acrobatics. But today Gable was oblivious to all of it.

When she finally heard the familiar rattle of the red pickup as it bounced up the rutted two-track driveway, a rush of anticipation skittered through her, a mixture of fear and excitement.

"Hi there! How you feeling?" Erin said when Gable opened the door.

"Better. But bored. Come on in."

"I brought you something for that." Erin stepped through the doorway and held up a DVD. "I rented us *The Terminal* since we both like Tom Hanks. Have you seen it yet?"

Gable shook her head.

"And I know the doctor told you to keep to bland food, so I got us macaroni and cheese for dinner. Some rolls, and cottage cheese and fruit. Hope that's all right." She held up a paper bag.

"Sounds great. Can I at least pay you back for all this?"

"Yeah, right. I'll put it on your tab." Erin rolled her eyes. She was wearing a low-cut V-neck blouse that hugged her breasts much too provocatively for Gable to keep her mind entirely on the task at hand.

Why do you do this to me? She groaned inwardly, and for a brief moment considered delaying her revelation for a day when Erin didn't look quite so delectable. *Yeah, right. Like that's gonna happen any time soon.*

"Are you hungry?" Erin asked. "Or do you want to wait a while?"

"Let's wait, if you don't mind. How about I make us some tea?" Gable couldn't eat until she got this over with.

"I'd love some, but let me make it. I know where everything is. You go sit and relax."

"Erin, I can boil water."

"Indulge me for another day. I want to play Florence Nightingale." Erin headed for the kitchen and Gable took a seat on the couch.

They made small talk as they sipped their tea, sitting a few feet apart on the couch. Chief Thornton and Carl both had called to check on Gable. Erin had run errands in Cadillac, picking up more essentials for the house. Gable waited for the right opening, gathering her nerve, but it was a good half hour before she steeled herself for her leap-of-faith pronouncement.

"Erin, there's something I've been meaning to tell you." She was forced to take a sip of tea; her mouth was parched.

Erin seemed to sense something was up. She set her tea down and gave Gable her full attention.

"I don't want to make a big thing out of it," Gable continued as offhandedly as she could. She took a deep breath and let it out. "And I hope it won't in any way hurt our friendship, which means an awful lot to me." She heard a slight tremor in her voice and took another sip of tea. *Damn, this is hard.*

Erin stiffened.

"Look, I'm making a bigger deal out of this than I should. It's just that you never know how someone is going to react."

"Gable, what is it?" Erin was looking at her curiously, her body rigid, tense.

"I just thought you should know that I'm gay." *There it is. You've done it. You can't take it back now.* Gable held her breath. She couldn't look directly at Erin. She felt too vulnerable. She watched Erin out of the corner of her eye.

Erin didn't immediately respond, but her posture relaxed slightly as the news sank in. Gable took that as a favorable sign.

"I know it's got to be difficult to share that information with someone you haven't known very long," Erin said. "So thank you for trusting me with it." She sipped her tea. "And I want you to know—and I only say this because I'm sure you've had some bad experiences—it makes no difference to me whether you're gay or not."

Gable let out a long breath as relief washed over her. "Good. Glad to hear it." *I hope that's the truth, Erin.*

There was a short awkward silence.

"Do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?" Erin said.

"Sure." *As long as you don't ask me how I feel about you.*

"Have you always known you were gay?"

"Pretty much. I tried to ignore it when I was younger. I dated boys the first year or two of high school, trying to fit in and be like everybody else. But I knew something was wrong...missing."

Erin tilted her head in thought. "I haven't really known anyone who was gay. Or if I did, I didn't *know* they were gay." She poured them both more tea. "But I guess I'm pretty dumb in that regard. I had no idea you were."

"It's not something I volunteer right off the bat. I'm pretty private by nature, and I've always found it hard to talk about real personal stuff unless I know somebody well." Gable felt as though a huge weight had been lifted. Erin seemed more curious than disturbed by her revelation.

"Gable, was that nurse at the hospital hitting on you?"

Gable could feel herself blushing. "Yeah, I guess she was."

"I wondered. I thought so...but then I didn't think you were gay, so it really seemed kind of odd to me." She looked at Gable and cocked her head in confusion. "How did she know you were, if I didn't? She'd barely met you."

Gable shrugged. "Beats me. Some lesbians have a kind of 'gaydar' and can pick out another gay woman a mile away. But that's sure not the case with me. I'm usually pretty clueless."

"That's got to be rough. I mean, not knowing whether someone you're attracted to...whether they..."

"Play for your team or not?"

"Yeah, something like that." Erin grinned.

You have no idea. "It's not easy," Gable admitted. "Particularly when you're shy. I've always had a problem approaching women I was interested in."

"So who else knows? Do the guys at the firehouse?"

Gable shook her head. "Carl guessed, but he's the only one. Otherwise, pretty much only family, and friends back in Tennessee. I haven't told anyone since I moved here."

"Then I feel especially privileged that you felt you could share it with me," Erin said. "You know, Gable, I don't think there's anything you could tell me that would make any difference in how much I care about you and respect you."

Gable could tell she meant it. “Thanks, Erin.” *Thank God.*

Just as Carl had predicted, she felt suddenly a lot happier and less anxious. It had been a freeing experience to come out to Erin. One less secret to keep from her. Even though she would have to be even more careful now not to let her feelings show, she was very glad she’d made the decision to tell Erin.

“Ready for some dinner?” Erin asked.

“Sure.” Gable’s stomach had calmed considerably. She was suddenly ravenous.



The evening reassured Gable that she had done the right thing. She and Erin had their usual great time, sharing a bowl of popcorn and exchanging obscure film trivia as they watched the movie. Erin was every bit as warm and sweet as she’d been before.

In fact, as they chatted over decaf lattes after the movie, she opened up more to Gable than she ever had. It was as if a barrier between them had gone, and that in revealing the most private parts of herself to Erin, Gable had deepened their level of trust. It seemed this encouraged Erin to expose some of her own innermost feelings.

“Hasn’t it been hard for you?” she asked, setting down her cup and turning sideways on the couch so she could look at Gable. “Not telling anyone here that you’re gay, I mean?”

Gable shrugged. “Sometimes, I guess. I started to tell June—she’s a woman I work with—well, I started to tell her once or twice. And I’ve been tempted a few times to tell some of the guys at the station. But then I start blushing like crazy even *thinking* about telling them, and I always put it off. I am *way* too shy, I know. I often wish I was more outgoing, like you are.”

Erin shook her head. “Don’t wish to be like me.” Her expression grew serious. “I’m okay in social situations, I guess because of my teaching background. I can mingle in a crowd just fine. But it’s an entirely different thing when it comes to one-on-one relationships.” She paused and looked at Gable. “It’s easy with *you*.”

She frowned and fell silent, apparently chewing this over. There was a trace of bemusement in her expression, as if she had just discovered something she barely knew about herself. “Or a lot easier,

anyway,” she murmured, almost to herself. “But I have a really hard time talking about my feelings to someone I’m *dating*. It’s not shyness so much...”

Gable didn’t say anything, intrigued by Erin’s sudden need to draw close instead of drawing away. It was the last thing she’d expected, even after Erin’s insistence she was fine with Gable’s sexuality.

Erin’s gaze had turned inward, unfocused. “I’m not entirely sure why it happens, but I think it has a lot to do with my nightmare of a marriage.” She blew out a breath. “I think that kind of crippled me. I find it very difficult to really get close to anyone.” Erin glanced at her with an unreadable expression. “Tim is a sweet, attractive guy, and he’s really interested in me.”

He’d be a fool not to be.

“I like him. He’s got a great sense of humor and he’s fun to be with.” There was another long pause. “But it feels like something’s... *missing*. Like the chemistry really isn’t there. I don’t know, maybe I’m not really giving it a chance. Maybe my past is getting in the way.”

“You’re the only one who can figure that out,” Gable said gently. “My brother Stewart always says to go with what your heart tells you.”

“That’s good advice. Well, Tim and I are going out again next week. I’ll keep you posted.”

Not too much detail, please. Gable stifled a yawn. The lack of sleep the night before was catching up to her.

“I’m going to run so you can get to bed,” Erin said. She leaned over and hugged Gable before getting to her feet. “I had fun tonight. And thanks for trusting me enough to confide in me.”

Gable followed her to the door. “Thanks for...well, I guess just thanks for being cool about it...not letting it matter.”

“Gable? Can I ask you another personal question?” Erin was only a couple of feet away, looking at her intently.

Gable held her breath.

“Are you...seeing anyone?”

Gable shook her head, not trusting her voice.

“Ah,” Erin said, turning to go. “Just curious.”



For the first week or so, it seemed as though Gable's revelation hadn't altered their relationship at all. On Sunday she and Erin took a shopping excursion to Charlevoix for groceries and odds and ends. Two days later they shared a rented movie and home-cooked meal at Gable's house, and on Thursday they did the same at Erin's. And they talked on the phone nearly every evening they weren't together, catching up on events of the day.

It was still hard for Gable to keep her feelings for Erin hidden, but she was immensely relieved that Erin's behavior didn't change. So she was surprised when Erin didn't call her Saturday night as promised, after her date with Tim. Erin had planned to be home by nine; they were going to a late-afternoon movie and then dinner because Tim had an early EMT shift.

A change in plans; she got home later than she expected, Gable decided the next morning as she made herself a pot of coffee. Or maybe Tim stayed over. The thought depressed her. She should be getting used to the idea by now that she would never have Erin. But it just got harder and harder. *How will you fall in love with anyone else when you feel this way about her?*

Her doorbell rang. It startled her so much she jumped. She glanced at the clock on the stove. Seven forty a.m. Too early for a casual visitor. She belted her robe over her pajamas as she headed for the door. Early-morning phone calls always made her think *Someone's hurt! Someone's dead!* Early-morning visitors were usually tourists—snowmobilers or hunters or fishermen—who'd had a breakdown or accident near her remote home.

But it was Erin at the door of the screened-in porch, looking as though she hadn't slept much. Tousled hair and slightly puffy eyes, like she'd been rubbing them. She had a white paper bag tucked under one arm.

"Hi. You were awake, right? I saw your lights on."

"Sure, I just made some coffee. Come on in." Gable stepped aside and Erin came a few steps onto the porch and turned to face her.

"I hope you don't mind me coming over this early without calling first. I couldn't sleep, so I took a drive. I brought some donuts." She held up the paper bag.

"Great. Have a seat and I'll pour us some coffee."

Gable poured two mugs full and doctored Erin's with Equal and half-and-half. She set them on a tray with two small plates and napkins and carried them back to the porch.

Erin sat in one of the big wicker chairs, watching the profusion of wildlife outside the screen. The feeders Gable had hung from the eaves were crowded with birds, and a dozen squirrels chased each other for the seed that fell to the ground.

"So you couldn't sleep?" Gable asked, hoping it would start Erin talking. Something had obviously happened. Erin wasn't her usual upbeat, confident self. She seemed withdrawn. *I'll kill Tim if he's hurt her.*

"No. I just got to...thinking about things. Got my mind going and couldn't shut it off."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No." Erin shook her head. "Not yet, anyway."

"Okay. Well, I'm here for you if you change your mind." Gable hid her disappointment.

They sipped their coffee and munched on donuts in silence. Gable caught Erin surreptitiously watching her a couple of times, but each time she glanced at her, Erin would quickly look away. It made her a little paranoid. *Is it Tim? Or is it me? Does she suspect how I feel about her?*

"Gable, have you ever been in love?" she asked abruptly. "I mean, where you thought...this is *it*!"

Gable nearly choked on her coffee. Her mind raced. *How the hell do I answer this?* She set her cup down on a small table between them. She didn't want Erin to see her hands were shaking, so she leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest.

"Well, I'm not exactly Miss Experience in the romance department. I had crushes, of course. Infatuations. And I've dated a few women, but I wasn't with any one woman for very long." Gable steeled her nerve. "I did...fall in love. Once. I mean, where it really felt...different. Special." She couldn't look at Erin. "But...she didn't feel the same. It wasn't reciprocated."

"So...you thought you knew. But you were wrong?" Erin asked.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"I'm sorry. That had to be very hard for you."

Gable shrugged, unable to answer. *Why are you asking me these questions?*

"I don't know that anybody can give me any answers." Erin set her mug on the table beside Gable's. "I told Tim last night that I wanted to just be friends with him."

Gable's pulse quickened at the news. "You did?"

Erin stood up and stepped to the screen. She stood there stiffly and stared out. "I may have made a mistake. Not given him enough of a chance. I don't know."

It has nothing to do with you. Don't get your hopes up. Gable bit back her disappointment.

"I'm so confused." Erin's voice was subdued. After a long silence, she said, "Tim's a marrying kind of guy. He was getting too serious too soon." She closed her eyes. "I don't think I can give him what he needs. But I don't know that I would recognize true love if it bit me on the butt."

Gable tried to dispel the erotic image that popped into her head. *Get your mind out of the gutter.* "I wish I knew what to say, Erin."

"There's nothing you can say, I guess. I just have to figure out what the hell is going on with me." She let out a rueful sigh and then turned to face Gable. "I'm gonna go. Thanks for listening."

"Any time." Gable got to her feet. She had an odd sense that Erin wanted something from her. She vacillated, trying to decide if she should delay her on some pretext.

In the end, Erin hugged her good-bye, as she often did, but Gable could have sworn something was different this time. Erin held on just a little longer, embraced her just a little tighter.

Gable felt vaguely ashamed of herself the rest of the day. She was *glad* that Erin wasn't seeing Tim anymore. She knew she shouldn't be. It was obviously upsetting Erin, and she hated to see her friend so morose and confused. Tim might have made her very happy.

But she couldn't help feeling relieved that for the moment, anyway, there would be no competition for Erin's time and attention.



They chatted on the phone several times during the next few nights, but Erin's mood did not change. She was subdued and withdrawn, reluctant to share any more of what she was going through, though Gable tried her best to draw her out. Their conversations were brief and

focused only on mundane things. Gable proposed they do dinner and a movie one night at her house, but Erin declined, saying she hadn't been sleeping well and was going to try to turn in early.

There was a growing distance between them, and by the end of the week Gable wondered whether Erin might be reconsidering her decision to stop seeing Tim. There was no answer when she tried to phone her Friday night.

She got her answer on Saturday, when she drove to the fire station for a day of drills with the ladders and hoses. She was looking forward to seeing Erin and getting a firsthand look at how she was doing, but it was Tim who intercepted her as she entered the building.

"Hey, Gable. Have you talked to Erin?"

"Why? Isn't she here?"

"Not yet. Do you know what's going on with her? I'm kind of worried about her, frankly."

"Worried? Why?"

"Well, she told me last weekend she didn't want us to date anymore. I was disappointed, you know...I had a lot of fun with her and thought it might lead to something. But I told her I understood, and it was okay."

"I know that must have been tough for you." Gable commiserated.

"Well, she called the chief right after that and cancelled all her training this week. Said she wasn't feeling well. But I went by her house to check on her, and she wasn't there."

"This is news to me. I spoke to her on the phone a few times, and she didn't say anything about any of this." Gable got a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach with the realization that Erin wasn't telling her everything.

"Is she going to be here today?" Tim asked.

"I don't know. I presumed she would be."

"Gable, do you know why she broke it off with me?"

"You'd have to ask her that, Tim."

"I did. She told me she didn't want to get my hopes up that there might be a future for us...but I think there's something else going on."

"What makes you say that?"

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I don't know. She just was really withdrawn during our last date, from the moment I picked her up.

Like she was somewhere else. It was really weird, because she'd been just the opposite the week before—happy, relaxed.”

“You have no clue what’s happening with her?” Gable pressed. She wanted to know for herself.

“I tried to find out...That’s when she told me she thought we should just be friends. But I got the impression it wasn’t really about me. It kind of seemed like she was blowing me off just to get me to stop asking questions. I thought maybe she told you what was bothering her.”

Gable shook her head. “I don’t think I can help. I don’t know any more than you do, but I’ll try to talk to her when she gets here. *If* she gets here.”



Erin did, in fact, show up for the training, but she arrived just as they were getting things going, and there was no time for pleasantries with anyone. She waved hello at Gable, and Tim too, but kept to herself, standing off to one side, as the chief explained the drills they would do that day.

After the briefing, they split up into teams of three to rotate among the ladders and hoses. Gable started toward Erin at that point, but Erin quickly positioned herself with Carl and Don, as if deliberately avoiding her. They all suited up in their turnout gear and adjourned to the training grounds situated behind the fire station—a four-acre plot that contained several concrete block buildings and a small obstacle course.

Gable had a hard time keeping her mind on what she was doing the rest of the morning, her frustration growing each time she would catch Erin’s eye, only to have her look away.

I’m not imagining it. She’s avoiding me.

By the time they broke for lunch, she had convinced herself Erin was having a delayed and very homophobic reaction to the revelation that Gable was a lesbian. It made her heartsick. And quite unexpectedly, it also made her angry. She had worked up quite a head of steam by the time she cornered Erin in the women’s locker room.

“What’s up?” Gable asked.

“What do you mean?” Erin was stripping off her shiny new turnout jacket. She had on a T-shirt under the heavy fire coat, and it was drenched in sweat from the rigorous morning. It clung to her, outlining

her breasts. Gable couldn't tear her eyes away. A little of her anger dissipated.

"Erin, are you avoiding me?"

"No." But Erin wouldn't look at her. And Gable noticed her hands were shaking as she stripped off her turnout pants.

"Erin, what is it? Talk to me!" Gable reached out and put one hand on Erin's shoulder.

Erin shrugged off the hand and turned to Gable with tears in her eyes. "Talk to *you*?" She spit out the words. "That's a laugh. Like you talk to *me*, you mean?" She slammed the door of her locker shut and stormed out.

Gable remained rooted in place for several seconds, unprepared for Erin's sudden outburst and completely bewildered by it.

By the time she ran out to the parking lot, Erin's truck was gone.



She tried to call Erin several times that afternoon and evening, but her machine kept picking up and Gable didn't want to leave a message. She didn't know what to say. All she knew was that she was feeling empty inside, and desperate to reconnect with Erin, repair whatever it was that had caused this rift.

But you know what it is, don't you? Somehow she found out how you feel about her. And she doesn't like it one bit.



On Monday, after several more abortive attempts to reach Erin by phone, Gable finally left a message. "Erin, it's Gable. Please talk to me."

Her phone remained maddeningly silent.



On Tuesday, she drove directly to Erin's cabin from work. There were lights on inside—she could see Earl Grey's silhouette in the front window, but Erin's pickup was gone and there was no answer to her knock. She left a note tucked into the screen door that read simply:

**Please call or stop by. Any time. We need to talk.
Gable**

She left another phone message the next night. This one just said: “Erin, I miss you.”

Waiting was excruciating. She couldn’t sleep. It began to sink in that she might have lost Erin altogether.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day at work, Gable was so fatigued that she actually fell asleep for a moment in the back of the pharmacy. Fortunately, she was out of the view of any drugstore patrons. She dozed off at her desk, hunched over a pile of paperwork, and only came awake when the buzzer at the counter sounded, announcing someone needed a prescription filled.

She shook herself awake and yawned, and glanced over the half-wall partition that separated her from her customers. Erin stood alone at the counter, nervously biting her lip, holding a large plate of something covered with plastic wrap. Cupcakes, it looked like.

Relief poured through Gable as she stood. "Hey, Erin."

"Hey, Gable." Erin's eyes met hers, and the edges of her mouth twitched upward in an embarrassed smile.

"It's good to see you." Gable stepped around the partition.

Erin held out the plate. Her expression altered from embarrassed to hopeful. "The school band is having a bake sale to raise money for uniforms. I thought a plate of cupcakes might be a good way to say I'm sorry I bit your head off the other day."

"No need to apologize." Gable accepted the plate and set it down. Gently, she asked, "Are you all right?"

Erin leaned against the counter and brushed some nonexistent dirt off the top as she considered her answer. "Yes. I just...had some things to sort out. I'm sorry I haven't been in touch. I should have called you."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Erin looked at Gable for a long moment, and her eyes shone with tears. "Can you forget I've been such a jerk?"

"I never thought that in the first place. You're entitled to have an off day."

"Thanks for understanding."

An elderly woman pushing a walker came up behind Erin, interrupting them.

"Good morning. May I help you?" Gable asked.

The woman dug in her purse and pulled out four empty prescription vials. "I'd like these refilled, please."

"Certainly." Gable glanced at the labels. "It'll be a few minutes, if you'd like to take a seat."

"I'm going to let you get back to work," Erin said, once the woman had moved away. "I've got a training class soon."

Gable stuck out her lip in a disappointed pout, which drew the first genuine smile from Erin since she'd arrived.

"Come to my house for dinner tonight?" Erin asked with a hopeful expression.

Gable smiled back. "I'd like that. I've missed you."

Erin looked at her for another very long moment. "I've missed you too." Then she was gone.



That evening, Gable detoured home long enough to change into a T-shirt and jeans. When she drove up Erin's driveway shortly before seven, she spotted Erin waving to her from a portable gas grill set up a few feet from the cabin. It was a warm late-July day, but there wasn't much humidity, and the steady breeze and shelter of the trees made it seem much cooler than eighty-eight degrees.

"Perfect timing," Erin said as Gable got out of the Jeep.

Gable sucked in a big whiff of...steak? Her mouth started watering as she approached. "Something sure smells good."

"It's not Outback Steakhouse, but I splurged and got us a couple of filet mignons at the butcher shop. Medium rare, right?"

"Oh yeah, exactly right," Gable replied, pleased that Erin remembered.

"Go on in and help yourself to a beverage." Erin gestured with the tongs in her hand. "There's beer and soda in the fridge, and an open

bottle of wine on the table. These will be done in a minute.”

“Okay.”

Earl Grey had evidently been watching Gable’s approach from his perch in the window. He was crouched just inside the door and pounced on her as soon as she entered, then raced away, hoping she would chase him as she had when he was staying at her house. Gable’s eyes followed the cat until he passed the dining area, where her attention shifted to the beautifully laid table. White china and crystal stemware rested on place mats and napkins in a deep emerald green. Between the settings rested a pair of candlesticks and a vase filled with the delicate miniature daisies that grew rampant along Erin’s drive.

She always makes meals an occasion, Gable thought, recalling the other times Erin had prepared dinner for her. But she noticed there was a subtle difference this time, in addition to the extravagance of the filets mignons. The place settings were laid opposite each other, instead of at right angles as they had always been before. She and Erin would face each other tonight as they ate.

Erin was just flipping over the steaks when Gable joined her outside with a glass of wine in her hand. “How was work?” she asked, and Gable was struck for a moment by the pure, sweet domesticity of that moment—Erin in her oversized barbecue apron, grinning up at her and asking how her day went. Gable knew she was only indulging an impossible fantasy, but she would savor the moment nonetheless.

“My day got considerably brighter when I saw you standing at the counter,” she answered honestly.

Erin smiled broadly at the comment.

“The table looks great.” Gable gestured toward the cabin. “And I can’t believe you got us these steaks.”

“Well, I wanted to do something nice for you. And this happens to be one of those many wonderful indulgences that we have in common, so I benefit too.”

I wish we had more in common at moments like these, Gable thought, swallowing hard. It wasn’t getting any easier at all to be this close to Erin without being able to touch her. *You just look so damn kissable. How is it that you seem to get cuter every day?*

Over the course of their friendship thus far, Gable had greatly enjoyed being able to steal frequent long looks at Erin whenever Erin was preoccupied—cooking dinner, doing dishes, shopping, watching television. She relished every chance she got to admire, unobserved,

Erin's face, her hands, her body, and the way she moved. And ordinarily, she got plenty of opportunities to do just that.

But not tonight. Tonight, Erin seemed much more keenly aware of Gable's surreptitious scrutiny. Nearly every time she stole a glance as they ate, and cleaned up, and later watched a movie together on television, she found Erin was either already watching her, or else she would quickly seem to sense Gable's eyes and look up.

Gable always glanced quickly away, afraid that Erin would discover the depth of her feelings. Erin never said a word about it, but by the end of the evening Gable had severely curtailed her efforts to observe her in secret. She didn't want to risk putting distance between them again, though Erin acted as if everything was fine now.

"I'd like to reciprocate and invite you to dinner tomorrow," Gable said as the movie credits rolled. "Do you have plans?"

"I'm all yours," Erin said, a pleased smile lighting her face. "I've got training, but I'll get done before you do. What time should I come over?"

"Give me until six thirty to get home," Gable said, suppressing a yawn as she got to her feet.

Erin followed her to the door. "You got it."

Gable turned to say good-bye and found herself unexpectedly enfolded in a hug.

"Sorry again I was such a pain," Erin mumbled into her chest.

"Stop apologizing," Gable returned her embrace, then took a step back. "See you tomorrow, then. Sleep well."

Erin gave her a long look. "You too, Gable. Pleasant dreams."

As she drove home, Gable reminded herself not to get too used to spending evenings with Erin. Soon enough, she reckoned, some of the guys who'd been hovering at the picnic would ask her out. Just as soon as word got around that Tim was out of the picture. *Enjoy it while you can.*



"So what are your plans for the weekend?" Erin asked the next evening as they sat on Gable's porch after dinner, sipping coffee while watching the approaching dusk paint the sky with brilliant shades of pink and lavender.

"I have to work tomorrow until five," Gable said. "James took the day off for his daughter's wedding."

"James? Have you told me about him?"

"Guess I haven't," Gable said. "James is our part-time pharmacist. He's semiretired now, and just works Saturdays and whenever else I need an extra hand."

"Well, that bites," Erin said resignedly, the disappointment evident in her voice. "I have a training class tomorrow night, so Saturday's out altogether. What about Sunday?"

"No plans," Gable replied.

"Let's do something fun," Erin proposed. "Maybe take a drive up the Lake Michigan shore—hit a few antique shops, grab dinner somewhere?"

"Sounds great. Count me in."

They had another pleasant, relaxed evening together, and Gable was treated to another impromptu hug good-bye when Erin departed for home. Once again, Erin seemed to be much more aware of Gable's eyes on her than she used to be. *What's up with that?* Gable wondered.



Erin picked her up at ten on Sunday morning as they'd arranged, but begged a stop at her school before they set off on their excursion. "I lost all my lesson plans in the tornado," she explained as she pulled out of Gable's drive and headed toward Pine River. "I've got some stuff at school that will help me try to recreate them, and I realized this morning I better get going on it. School starts pretty soon."

She pulled into the school's empty parking lot a few minutes later. "Want to come in? Might take me a minute to find everything."

"Sure," Gable replied.

Erin had a key to the outside door of the band room, where she had a file cabinet and locker for her supplies. As she started going through files, pulling out what she needed, Gable took a look around. Wide shelves on one side of the room held an assortment of music cases, containing trombones and flutes, French horns and saxophones and a variety of other instruments.

"Do all these belong to the school?" she asked Erin.

Erin glanced up from what she was doing. “Mmm-hmm. Most of them have been donated over the years.” Her face suddenly lit up. “Say! I know what would be fun.” She joined Gable and scanned the shelves of instruments. “There it is.” She pulled down a black case shaped like a hatbox and unlatched the top. Inside was a snare drum. “As I recall, you said you always wanted to play drums in school, right?”

Gable smiled. “I did indeed.”

Erin took the drum out of the case and set it on a stand, then searched among the shelves for a pair of drumsticks. “Ah! 2Bs. Perfect. You’ll get a good bounce with these, and they’re a good weight for beginners. Okay, hold out your hands. Right one first.”

She stepped to Gable’s side and took Gable’s hand in hers, placing one of the drumsticks in her palm, cradled in the crook of her thumb. “Hold it loosely, like this,” she demonstrated, but Gable was finding it hard to concentrate with Erin holding her hand and standing so close.

“Now there are two ways to hold the left stick,” Erin continued, gesturing for Gable’s other hand. “There’s the traditional grip, like this...” She laid the drumstick in Gable’s upturned palm and showed her how to cradle it with her thumb and fingers. “Or the newer one is like this.” She demonstrated the second type. “Frankly, I prefer the traditional grip.” Her small hands enfolded Gable’s larger one, and she looked up into Gable’s eyes. “But you should go with whatever feels right to you.”

Whatever feels right? Gable’s mind repeated blankly, as her body registered how much it liked being this close to Erin—shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. A flush of warmth spread through her, and she froze, unwilling to break the contact.

When she didn’t respond immediately, Erin released her and stepped back a step, a playful grin on her face. “Gable? Something the matter?”

“Uh, no! Nope, everything’s fine,” Gable stuttered, as her attention snapped back to the sticks in her hands.

“Go ahead, give it a try,” Erin encouraged, and Gable hit the snare a few times, tentatively.

“You can do better than that,” Erin challenged.

Gable relaxed into it, then, and happily whaled away at the drum for a minute or two, getting a feel for the grip and trying to control how the sticks bounced off the drumhead.

“Very nice,” Erin said, watching her. “Want me to teach you a couple of basic strokes?”

Strokes? Gable’s mind repeated. *Why does everything you say sound sexual?* “Uh, sure. That’d be great.” She held out the sticks for Erin to take, but Erin shook her head.

“No, you hold them.” She stepped behind Gable and wrapped her arms around her waist, resting her hands lightly over Gable’s. “Ready?” she asked.

Gable nodded her head, not trusting her voice. She tried to keep her hands from shaking, but a shudder ran through her as Erin’s body pressed closer still. She stopped breathing for a moment.

“Now, when you’re learning how to do rolls,” Erin explained, “you want to try to control the sticks so that the bead at the end bounces off the drumhead twice. First one stick, then the other. If you go back and forth five times, that’s a five-stroke roll. Like this.” Erin lightly gripped Gable’s hands in hers and slowly tapped out the rhythm on the drum. “And this is a seven-stroke roll.” She demonstrated the difference.

Gable could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Their nearness was excruciatingly delightful.

“And a nine-stroke roll.” Erin demonstrated, her fingers cradling Gable’s hands with a gentle warmth. “Get the picture?”

Gable nodded again. Her mouth was dry. She felt a sudden twitch in her lower abdomen when Erin pressed slightly harder against her.

“Here’s a long roll.” Erin tapped it out. “You have good hands to play drums,” she added in a soft voice as she withdrew her hands and stepped away. “Nice strong hands, good dexterity, nice flexibility in the wrists.”

Gable felt herself blushing, so she pounded away at the drums to hide her embarrassment, practicing the rolls.

Erin stepped over to the shelves of instruments and pulled out a long case and laid it on the floor near the drum. Gable stopped playing to watch her.

It was a trombone, and Erin had it put together in under a minute. With a twinkle in her eyes, she held the instrument up and asked, “Ready?” then put the mouthpiece to her lips.

“Ready for what?” Gable asked, puzzled, and Erin launched into a driving riff that she recognized immediately. “*Wipeout*.” Like every other wannabe drummer in the world, she had played along with it on

many occasions over the years, but always with just her hands, or a couple of pencils on a desktop. *Oh cool.* A big grin splashed across her face as she waited for Erin to get to the drum solo part.

When it arrived, she banged away, right on cue and not too badly, truth be told. But she was not so self-absorbed that she failed to notice how brilliantly Erin played the trombone.

“God, that was fun,” she said when they finished. “And I have to tell you, I am really impressed! I’ve never personally known anyone who could play an instrument like that. You’re quite a musician!”

Erin smiled at the compliment. “Thanks, Gable.” She pulled the trombone apart and put it away.

Gable felt a pang of disappointment that their jam session was apparently over, and it must have showed on her face.

“You want to play some more, don’t you?” Erin smiled up at her.

“Kinda,” Gable admitted, in a singsongy voice like a child’s.

Erin laughed. “Okay. Hit away, and I’ll join you in a second.”

While Gable practiced rolls, she watched Erin pull several instrument cases down from the wall and line them up along the floor, assembling the instruments inside so she could play whatever struck her fancy. A piccolo, a French horn, a trumpet, an alto saxophone.

They played for half an hour, a variety of songs and rhythms. Marches and show tunes, TV theme songs and old pop standards. Erin would play a snippet of a song on one instrument, then switch to another, selecting the accompaniment that best fit the tune. “The Stars and Stripes Forever” on piccolo, the theme to *The Simpsons* on sax. Gable played along as best as she could, amazed at Erin’s versatility as a musician.

“I can’t believe how good you are on all of these,” she said as they put the instruments away.

“Well, if you want to see me at my very best, you’ll have to come over to my house tomorrow,” Erin replied. “They’re supposed to deliver my new piano!”

“Oh, I bet you’re excited! I know you’ve missed having one.”

“I really have,” Erin agreed. “I hated waiting so long, but I wanted the same kind of Baldwin upright I had before, and they’re made to order.”

“I look forward to hearing you play,” Gable said.

“Then I’ll expect you for dinner tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there.”



They spent the rest of the day poking around in antique stores and flea markets they stumbled across as they drove up the Lake Michigan coastline. The sky was a deep blue and cloudless, and the great lake shimmered silver in the sunlight. On their way back, they stopped for dinner at a charming seafood restaurant that had great walleye and a breathtaking view of the sunset over the water.

They lingered there over coffee until it was well past dark, neither apparently in any rush to end their time together. It was only when they realized the restaurant was getting ready to close that they headed back to Erin’s pickup.

They were on a deserted stretch of road a few miles farther down the coastline when Gable caught a shimmer of color in the sky out her window. “Erin, stop! I think I see northern lights!”

Erin pulled off onto the shoulder and cut the engine, and they both got out. They were miles from the nearest city, so they had an unspoiled view of the night sky, brilliant with stars. To the north, a shimmering curtain of green appeared, stretching from the horizon to the sky above their heads, faint at first, then all at once, alive with movement.

“Wow!” Gable breathed.

“Oh!” Erin gasped.

“Isn’t it incredible?”

The curtain grew, expanding as if unfolded by an unseen hand, and traces of yellow mixed with the green, then a flash of red. They watched for several minutes, awed by the phenomenon. Every now and then, a particularly vivid or startling manifestation would prompt an exclamation from one or the other.

“Cool!”

“Look at that!”

“Whoa! That one is amazing!”

Another car approached and slowed to a stop when it got to where they were standing. “Car trouble?” a man in the passenger seat asked.

“Nope, we’re fine, thanks. Just watching the northern lights,” Erin explained with a wave, and the car continued on.

It took a few moments for their eyes to readjust and regain some night vision. Gable rubbed the back of her neck, which was beginning to ache from looking up. “We’re going to feel this tomorrow.”

“You know, we’re still close to the beach. Want to go watch from there?” Erin asked. “I have a tarp in the back of the truck we can lie on.”

“Sure,” Gable answered, and they found a deserted stretch of public beach not far away and unrolled Erin’s small tarp near the water. It was just big enough for both of them, lying shoulder to shoulder.

The sky above was a dazzling display of color, changing from moment to moment. A curtain of green, then a large whorl of yellow, then streaks of pink and red. In the distance, a chorus of crickets lent a resonant counterpoint to the gentle constant lapping of the surf against the shore near where they lay. With Erin pressed up against her side, Gable could hardly imagine a more perfect moment.

“Have you ever seen anything this beautiful?” Erin asked, her voice soft and full of wonder.

“Never,” Gable answered in an equally hushed tone. “I’ve seen the northern lights before, but it was never like this.”

“Sure makes you feel kind of small.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Gets you thinking about things like, what’s our place in all this?”

As if in punctuation to her statement, a shooting star flashed across the sky, and they both gasped.

They watched in silence for another few minutes as the vibrant spectacle continued unabated.

“Gable, do you believe that there’s one person that we’re supposed to be with? Or do you think there’s lots of people out there who could make us happy?”

It took Gable a long moment to answer. “I’ve always kind of believed in the soulmate thing,” she admitted. “One special person for each of us. But I always expected that when it happens, it would hit you between the eyes, and you’d recognize it immediately. You know? Bam!” She took a deep breath and let it out. “But maybe it’s not like that at all. Maybe it takes a while sometimes to know it. And I wonder whether you can miss it when it happens, if it doesn’t happen just exactly like you always imagined it would.”

“So you think it does always happen...I mean, that you will eventually meet that right person...but you just don’t always recognize it?” Erin asked.

“Something like that, yes. Maybe they won’t look at all like you thought they would. Maybe they can’t fulfill every single one of your expectations. But that doesn’t mean they can’t make you happier than you ever imagined.”

There was a very long silence between them then, and Gable wondered whether she’d said too much, given too much away. But there was something about the magic of that moment under the stars that told her to speak from her heart.

The northern lights began to fade, and in a few moments there was only a mere hint of what had been—a thin transparent veil of green, near the horizon.

“It’s very late, and I know you have to work tomorrow,” Erin said, sitting up. “But I’m very glad we stopped and got to share this.”

Gable got to her feet. “Me too.”

Erin extended her hand in a silent plea for help getting up, and Gable happily complied. Once she was pulled to her feet, she hugged Gable around the waist. “Thanks for a wonderful day.”

“It sure was. Thank you for suggesting it.”

They gathered up the tarp and headed back to the truck, walking close together, saying nothing. They were mostly silent on the way home too, but it was a companionable quiet, neither strained nor awkward. More the result of their sharing such an awesome and rare celestial display.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow night, then?” Erin asked as she pulled up in front of Gable’s at half past eleven.

“I’ll be there. Can I bring anything?” Gable offered, turning toward her.

“Just yourself.” Erin paused. “Gable, I...I...” She opened her mouth, then quickly shut it again.

Gable waited, one hand on the door handle, but Erin gave an embarrassed laugh and shrugged. “Never mind. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“You sure?” It sure looked as though she wanted to say something else, and Gable’s curiosity was piqued.

“Go,” Erin said, giving her a playful shove and a smile. “I’ve kept you up too late already.”

Gable opened the door. “I wouldn’t have missed a minute of it,” she said, getting out.

Erin nodded thoughtfully. “Me neither, Gable. Good night.”



Erin had seemed so relaxed and happy during their Sunday together that Gable wondered what the heck must have happened in the hours since to make Erin so nervous and jumpy on Monday night.

It had been a slow day at the pharmacy, so Gable had had much time to reflect on their previous day. *I’d give just about anything for a lot more days like that*, she thought, as she pulled into Erin’s drive for dinner. She was becoming quite used to...and immensely fond of... Erin’s hugs, and rather hoped she’d get one tonight too.

But right from the get-go, it was obvious that Erin had something on her mind. She barely made eye contact with Gable when she answered the door, and she seemed harried and anxious about dinner, where she was usually the picture of calm.

“Go on in and make yourself comfortable. I’ll get you a glass of wine.” She gestured toward the couch, then headed off toward the kitchen. In a tone that fell short of humor, she called over her shoulder. “You may need it—dinner isn’t turning out quite like I planned. I shouldn’t be trying a new recipe.”

“Hey, I’m sure it’s fine,” Gable called after her.

Earl Grey came running full-tilt out of Erin’s bedroom at the sound of Gable’s voice and bounded down the stairs toward her. She scooped him up and scratched him under his chin while she glanced around, waiting for Erin to return. The dining table was set as before, with candles and flowers and carefully laid formal place settings. The house was spotless. And there against one wall of the great room was the new piano, beautifully handmade of mahogany and polished to a high gloss. Gable stepped over to it, admiring the craftsmanship. Erin joined her, a glass of merlot in each hand.

“It’s beautiful,” Gable said, setting down the cat to take one of the glasses.

Erin skimmed one hand lightly along the keys. “Yes, isn’t it? I am so glad I insured the other one, or it would have been a long time before I could have afforded this.”

“So, do I get to hear you play?”

“Later,” Erin said. “After I subject you to my first attempt at a soufflé. I should say first and last attempt, as it looks nothing at all like the photo in the cookbook, but I swear I followed every direction to the letter.”

It was true that the soufflé looked rather flat and unappealing, but it actually tasted all right, and Erin had made a Caesar salad to go with it so there was plenty to eat. But Gable could tell that Erin was unusually flustered that everything hadn’t gone according to plan.

“Well, I promise I won’t make you my new-recipe guinea pig anymore,” she apologized again as they did the dishes together.

“Will you stop? It was fine!”

“It wasn’t fine. I should’ve just gone with something I’d tried before,” Erin groused.

“Erin, please! It was fine!” Gable couldn’t keep the amusement out of her voice, and it seemed to relax Erin slightly.

“All right. I’ll let it go,” She dried the last plate and set it in the cabinet. “Thanks for washing.”

“Any time. Thanks for cooking.” Gable rinsed out the sink. “So now do I get to hear you play?”

Erin took a deep breath, as if gathering her nerve. She nodded her head. “Now or never,” she answered, almost to herself.

Gable took a seat on the couch while Erin settled onto the piano bench, staring down at the keys for a moment as if considering what to play. Gable liked her vantage point—she could stare unabashedly at Erin in profile from where she sat, seeing every expression, every graceful movement of those wonderfully petite hands over the keys.

Erin started off with a medley of Cole Porter songs, all Gable’s favorites: “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” followed by “You Do Something To Me” and “You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To,” and finally, “Easy To Love.” A few lines of each song, just enough for Gable to identify it.

She played with feeling, eyes closed, her hands skimming effortlessly over the keys, her face and body one with the music,

adding nuances and flourishes that told Gable she was indeed most accomplished on piano.

When she finished, she opened her eyes and looked toward Gable for a reaction, her face expectant and hopeful.

Gable smiled and politely applauded. "That was wonderful. Just wonderful. You play beautifully."

Erin smiled back, but Gable sensed her heart wasn't entirely in it—she almost looked...disappointed? But instead of saying anything, she launched into another medley of old standards—Gershwin this time, another favorite of them both. "How Long Has This Been Going On" was followed by "I've Got a Crush On You," a song Gable had thought of many times, thinking of Erin, in the past few weeks. "Our Love Is Here To Stay" was next in the lineup, then "Embraceable You." Gable had thought of that one a lot lately too.

A chill ran up her spine.

With the closing strain, Erin glanced her way again, the same expectant look on her face...and something else. Something in her eyes that wasn't there before.

Gable held her breath. She couldn't speak. *Is it? Could it...?*

Erin smiled like something in Gable's expression told her what she needed to know. Her eyes closed again, and her fingers danced over the keys. "Only You" gave way to "I Only Have Eyes For You," then "I'm In The Mood For Love," and finally, "All of Me."

Gable's heart was pounding in her ears. She didn't dare believe it.

Erin saved the best for last. It took Gable a moment to place it. An old Doris Day tune, from one of her movies. "Secret Love."

Oh my God. Gable began hyperventilating. When she looked up, she found Erin watching her. This time, neither one of them looked away. Gable felt exposed in that long, unbroken eye contact, as though Erin was looking right through her.

Tears came to Erin's eyes, and she smiled and nodded, and it was then that hope began to dawn in Gable's heart.

"Good Lord, Gable! I thought you were *never* going to get it." Erin turned on the piano bench to face her. "I've been trying to tell you for days."

"You have?" Gable asked dumbly. It still wasn't quite sinking in.

Erin let out an exasperated groan. "I *told* you I have a hard time talking about my feelings. And first I had to be sure how *you* felt.

Though I don't know why I didn't see it before. You wear your heart on your sleeve, you know," she said, almost matter-of-factly.

"Do I?" Gable tried to swallow. Her mouth was as dry as sawdust.

"Mmm-hmm." Erin's eyes sparkled. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long. I've been having a bit of a tough time figuring it all out."

"And you've figured it all out now?" Gable was glad she was sitting down.

"The important parts, anyway." Erin's cheeks colored. She got up and joined Gable on the couch. They sat a foot apart, facing each other, but not touching. "I think I figured out who you fell for. I hope I have."

"You have?" Gable hardly recognized her voice. Erin's face was so enticingly close, her eyes now full of mischief and mirth. Her mouth, so tantalizingly kissable.

"And you're wrong, by the way. About the reciprocal part."

"I am?"

"Yup."

Gable's mind went blank. Her head swam. "Golly."

Erin laughed. "*Golly?* Gable, no one says *golly*."

Erin was smiling at her—for her, *just* for her—and Gable felt an uncommon joy fill her, surround her, lift her. Her heart soared, and she realized how incomplete her happy life had been until that moment.

"How about..." She sighed. "I'm in shock?"

"I'll buy that." Erin laughed again. "There's a lot of it going around."

"So...let me get this straight...uh, I mean, about the reciprocal part," Gable stuttered. "Does that mean..."

"Does it mean that I'm lusting after you like I think you've been lusting after me?" There was amusement in Erin's voice. "The answer is most definitely *yes*. Oh, *yes*."

Lusting after me? As Gable's mind wrapped itself around the words, a flash of hot desire warmed her body. "So...how did you... *when* did you..."

"When did I realize it was you I wanted?"

"Yeah." *She wants me!*

"Well, I knew from the beginning that there was something special about you and me...I was really drawn to you, and curious about you. And I trusted you completely right away...which is really unusual for

me.” Erin’s voice shook, and she lowered her eyes while she searched for the right words.

“When you came out to me, it started me wondering what it must be like to be gay. I’ve never been with a woman, and honestly, I...I’d never even really considered it before. But once you told me...Well, I started thinking about how I felt about you...and how it would be if *you* and *I* got together... You know...like *that*...”

It was the first time Gable had heard Erin stammer so, and she found it reassuring that the younger woman was apparently as nervous about all this as she was.

“Well, I found *that* mental picture awful damn *hot*, to put it bluntly,” Erin confessed.

“Yeah?” Gable was seeing it too, in her mind’s eye...and the image of the two of them together turned her arousal up another notch.

“And then I couldn’t *stop* thinking about it.” Erin laughed. “I swear, sometimes I thought you had to be able to see it in my face! I couldn’t keep my eyes off you!”

“Well, talk about dense!” Gable shook her head ruefully. “I *thought* you were looking at me an awful lot, the last few days especially. But I was just worried you were catching *me* looking at *you*!”

They laughed, then Erin’s face grew serious. “Gable, why didn’t you tell me how you felt?”

Gable managed a chagrined half smile. “I didn’t want anything to muck up our friendship. I was worried it would make you feel uncomfortable around me—knowing I was mooning over you. It was terrifying enough just to tell you I was gay! I was afraid coming out to you might change how you feel about me.”

“Well, it certainly did *that*,” Erin admitted, her cheeks pink. “But not quite the way you thought it might!”

Gable reached out and took Erin’s hand in hers, and they shared happy, silly grins.

“So why didn’t you tell *me* right away?” Gable asked.

“Well, I was really confused about all those feelings at first. It was sort of like traveling to a foreign country. Exciting, but awful scary. You know that last time I went out with Tim? I did it because I thought maybe I should give that a real chance. That maybe my feelings for you were a phase or something. Did I really want to abandon the kind of life I knew...that was familiar...for something totally unfamiliar?”

"I remember that night. You didn't call me like you promised you would." She looked down at their enjoined hands. Erin's thumb lightly caressed her palm—Gable was amazed at how sensual such a simple touch could be.

"I knew right away that Tim wasn't for me," Erin said. "Once I'd considered how it would be with *you*...I knew I'd never be happy with him, and I didn't want to lead him on. After he'd gone home, I started thinking about whether I should tell you how I was feeling."

Gable didn't interrupt. Erin's thumb continued its gentle caresses as she spoke.

"I drove around a lot that night. I've always done that when I wanted to think." She paused. "First I had to decide whether I could *do* this...I mean, it's kind of a major deal to all of a sudden realize, at age thirty-nine, that you're apparently *gay*, when you never have even *thought* about it before. It's like someone secretly rewired me or something while I slept!"

They shared another silly grin. Gable thought the air around them seemed charged with electricity. *I want to kiss you so much.*

"Once I decided my feelings were too strong to ignore anymore, that I had to tell you," Erin cleared her throat, "then I considered how you might react to the news. Would you be happy? *I* didn't want to do anything to hurt our friendship, either."

Gable squeezed Erin's hand.

"Somewhere around three a.m., I guess, it occurred to me kind of out of the blue that maybe you felt something for me too. It was sort of like...looking back, I began to wonder if I hadn't been missing clues that you'd been sending me. I caught you looking at me kind of funny sometimes. You were constantly blushing that day in the dressing room...and you *really* got embarrassed when you caught me falling off the ladder."

"Well, I did often wonder how in the world you couldn't see how much I was just *longing* to be with you," Gable said.

"Were you? Are you?"

"Most definitely." Gable nodded with enthusiasm, and Erin blushed again.

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that."

"So, all this thinking you did...that was the morning you came over to my house real early, right?" Gable asked.

"Yeah. I had kind of decided that you probably *were* attracted to me and I'd just not picked up on it. But I wanted to be sure. That's why I asked you if you'd ever met somebody special."

"Ah." *Talk about clueless. How could I have been so incredibly blind? Am I that out of practice in the romance department?*

"I hoped it would prompt you to be honest with me, if you *did* feel something for me," Erin said. "I was disappointed you didn't."

"I'm sorry. I was afraid it would freak you out and make you start acting weird around me."

"Well, I got depressed after that. Kind of shut myself away for a while, wondering what I was going to do. And then I got pissed at you for not being honest with me."

"Which is why you were so angry at me in the locker room, and didn't answer my messages."

"Yeah. I guess I wasn't done stewing about it," Erin said. "You sure have left me all stirred up and frustrated, I can tell you!" The blush returned.

Gable laughed. "So what made you come to the pharmacy?"

"Well, I got to missing you somethin' fierce. I played back your phone messages a jillion times just to hear your voice."

"You did?" Gable's heartbeat filled her chest. She felt light-headed. This had to be a dream. Erin saying these things to her. *Lord, please don't let me wake up.*

"And I put your note on my refrigerator and read it about every two minutes! Anyway, I decided I was throwing away the best friend I ever had, and that I might have acted too hastily," Erin continued. "I was just so sure that you did feel something special for me that I had to find a way to tell you how I felt, and really give us a chance." She smiled. "Sorry it took a few days to work up the nerve to say anything, and even then I had to resort to song titles."

"Thanks for being brave."

"But I have to warn you, Gable. I want you like *crazy*—it's all I can think about! But it's still really scary to me." Erin looked away. "I'm a mess with relationships anyway. And I don't know how to... well...how to be with a woman, you know? I mean..." Her eyes met Gable's. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Gable relished the words. *She wants me like crazy!* She took Erin's hand in both of hers. "Erin, I've not been great at relationships either. If

it makes you feel any better, I'm probably just as terrified and nervous as you are. I mean, I don't want to disappoint you, either."

"Maybe we can just take this one step at a time, then?" Erin asked.

"We can do that."

"But not *too* slow," Erin added with a grin. Her blush deepened. "I mean, my fantasizing muscles have sure been getting a workout lately, and I'm afraid if we wait *too* long I might spontaneously combust!"

Gable laughed, but her body felt suddenly overheated too. "I'll let you set the pace, then," she said. "How's that?"

There was a short silence, and then Erin met Gable's eyes. There was mischief there, replacing the embarrassment that had tinted her cheeks. "In that case," she said, "I'd like to make a date with you for Saturday."

"Saturday?" Gable whined. "That's five whole days away."

"You didn't let me finish," Erin said. "I'll see you before then, but I'd like to make a date for Saturday as in...a *date*. As in, your next day off? When there's plenty of time?" Erin moistened her lips, and Gable's body heated up another ten degrees.

"Plenty of time?" she repeated weakly.

"Mmm-hmm," Erin gazed into her eyes with heart-stopping candor. "I want our first time together...like *that*...to be really special. Unhurried."

"You mean?" Gable stuttered, as Erin's face moved an inch closer.

"Is that too soon for you?" Erin moved another inch closer, then two. Three.

Gable shook her head vigorously as her pulse quickened.

Erin grinned. "You are *so* slow to take a hint sometimes, Gable. Will you please kiss me?"

She barely got the words out before Gable covered Erin's mouth with her own, their lips meeting in a sweet, soft kiss. She wanted so much to remember that moment that time seemed to stand still. The kiss was tentative at first, a gentle pressing together—then barely apart for a millisecond to reposition before they came together again, this time with much more certainty.

No one's lips can be this incredibly soft.

Gable extended the tip of her tongue to caress Erin's lips—slowly, languidly. Memorizing every centimeter of that oh-so-inviting mouth.

She had stared at it for hours and dreamed of kissing it for weeks. But the real thing far surpassed the fantasies she'd entertained.

Soon, Erin responded to her moist, gentle caresses by meeting Gable's tongue with her own, and the kiss deepened, igniting a fire in Gable's lower belly and making her head swim. When they finally parted to breathe, Gable found it hard to focus.

Erin looked equally discombobulated. "I get it now," she sighed happily.

"Get it?"

"Yeah. *Golly!*"

Gable exhaled a long hum of contentment. "It *is* pretty amazing—how it can feel so different with the right person."

"No kidding! I can't begin to tell you what you do to my body when you kiss me."

"I have a pretty good idea. Five days suddenly seems like an eternity!"

Erin grinned. "It'll pass before you know it. At least, I hope it will. You know I have training tomorrow night and Wednesday night, right?"

"Training?" Gable wailed.

"Yeah, I had to reschedule those sessions I cancelled. I probably won't finish until pretty late. And I have one on Saturday morning, but I'll be done by early afternoon."

Gable stuck out her lip in a pout.

"We can see each other on Thursday and Friday, though," Erin offered. "Maybe go out to dinner one night?"

Gable groaned. "Thursday and Friday are out too. We're doing inventory at the drugstore after we close."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah, major bummer. Gonna seem like a long time until Saturday afternoon."

Erin leaned forward to whisper in Gable's ear seductively. "Well, there is something to be said for anticipation, you know."

The warm breath against her skin sent a shudder through her. "I've already been anticipating for weeks," she said. "I'm not sure how much more anticipating my body can take!"

"Well, I'm right there with you," Erin admitted. "So much so, in fact, that if you don't get headed home pretty quick I may be very tempted to ask you to stay the night."

Gable's body temperature shot up several more degrees. "Oh, it is so not going to be easy to wait," she said, getting to her feet. "All right, I'll be on my way. It is getting late."

Erin walked her to the door, and drew her into a good-bye hug. They lingered long like that, reluctant to part, their arms wrapped around one another.

"Thank you for telling me how you feel," Gable whispered.

Erin nodded, her face against Gable's chest. "Kind of felt like I didn't have much choice." She pulled back to look up at her. "Pretty powerful."

Gable dipped her head to kiss Erin again, a gentle and sweet kiss good-bye, brief enough that it wouldn't leave them both any more stirred up than they already were.

"So...Saturday?" she said as they parted.

Erin smiled at her. "It's a date."

The words bounced around in Gable's head the rest of that night and all the next day at work, like they had a mind of their own. They became the words to any tune that happened to cross her mind, however ridiculous the fit. The William Tell Overture:

It's a date, It's a date, It's a date, date, date!

It's a date, It's a date, It's a date, date, date!

It's a date, It's a date, It's a date, date, date!

It's a daaaaaaaaate! Yes! It's a date, date, date!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Though they couldn't be together during the next few days, they spoke often on the phone—each call ratcheting up the sexual anticipation between them.

On Tuesday night, the phone rang just after Gable got into bed, intending to read until she got drowsy.

"Well, one day down," Erin greeted her when she answered. "Only four to go."

Gable laughed. "How was training?"

"I wore myself out rolling and unrolling hose, so I should sleep pretty good tonight."

"It took me a while to fall asleep last night, after everything," Gable confessed. She had driven home in a daze. *Is it really happening?* she'd asked herself over and over ever since. *Can you just wake up one morning and find that all your dreams...even the dreams you never knew you had...had all suddenly come true?*

"It took me a long time too," Erin said. "I kept thinking about Saturday. Picturing us together. It kind of put every nerve ending in my body on high alert."

"Oh, thanks a lot," Gable muttered. "Now I'll never get to sleep!"



The next evening's phone conversation turned up the heat even more.

"I would never have believed a day could drag on like this one did." Gable was in bed again, waiting by the phone, and answered it on the first ring. "I swear to God it's like time stood still."

"I know what you mean. I couldn't stop thinking about you. Just three more days."

"So what time do I get to see you on Saturday?" Gable asked.

"I'm supposed to be done at two. Why don't you come over at two fifteen? That'll give me enough time to get home and get changed."

"Can I bring anything?"

"Nope. Got it covered. Just bring yourself. Oh, and try to get caught up on your sleep between now and then. You'll need your rest."

"Will I?"

"Mmm-hmm. And don't expect to get home early. Or at all. I want to take my time finding out what turns you on."

Gable groaned as a rush of liquid heat infused her body. "You know what you're doing to me, don't you?"

"I sure hope so, because I'm dyin' here! I'm about ready to just come over there right now and ravish you!"

"Ravish me?" Gable gulped. "Oh, great. Thanks for that mental picture. There goes any chance of me getting any rest tonight!"



Thursday night she got into bed almost as soon as she got home at ten. But though she was beat from her long day doing inventory, she still had to talk to Erin before she could sleep. And she found that despite her exhaustion, her body responded to the sound of Erin's voice as soon as she came on the line.

"Just two more days until you get to have your way with me," Erin teased.

"You can be a cruel woman, Erin. You really like getting me all hot and bothered, don't you?"

Erin chuckled. "Fair's fair. You do it to me too. Guess what I did today?"

"Tell me."

"I did some searching on the Internet."

"For?"

"Lesbian literature. You wouldn't believe the stories I found online!"

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, very *explicit* stories. Let’s just say I have some new favorite authors. And I picked up a few ideas for Saturday.”

“You’re killing me, here,” Gable complained good-naturedly, throwing off the bedcovers to cool her overheated body.



“Just one more day,” Erin said the next night when Gable answered the phone. “Actually, only sixteen hours or so...not that I’m counting, mind you.”

“Worth the wait,” Gable said.

“I hope you think so. I hope I can please you...”

“Don’t be nervous about that. I *really* don’t think that’s going to be a problem, believe me.”

“You don’t?”

“Erin, I get so incredibly turned on just *thinking* about being with you that I’m more worried that I’ll...uh...let’s just say I’m worried that it will all be over much too fast!”

“Well, if that happens, we’ll just have to practice until you’re *entirely satisfied* with the timing.”

“Oh God, girl, you’re making me *crazy*.” Gable couldn’t help it. Her hand strayed to her nipple, rigid and sensitive, and began stroking it lightly. She could feel the dampness building between her legs. It wouldn’t take much for her to relieve this sexual tension.

“Good! It’s only fair that we suffer this deliciously *torturous* anticipation together.”

Suffer is right. Gable forced herself to stop. She knew only Erin’s hand...or mouth...could bring her any real satisfaction.



Finally, it was Saturday.

Gable was so excited she couldn’t sleep past seven. She got up and made coffee and showered and dressed. She went online and checked her e-mail, absently munching on a bowl of cereal. Then she decided she didn’t like what she had chosen to wear, so she went through her closet and tried on another half dozen outfits, finally settling on khakis and a caramel-colored shirt with a tunic collar.

Glancing at the kitchen clock as she poured herself a second cup of coffee, she was appalled to discover it was only just eight. She tackled every mindless chore she could think of to pass the time. She did the dishes and laundry, made out a grocery list, fixed a broken chair, balanced her checkbook, cleaned out the refrigerator, and filled bird feeders. But the clock mocked her efforts and slowed to a crawl. *Now I know where the expression killing time comes from. I'm about ready to throw that damn thing against the wall.*

She surfed through her entire roster of 100-plus satellite channels, but nothing could hold her interest. Grabbing her keys off the counter, she headed to the flower and gift shop in Pine River, where she stared at floral arrangements for several minutes before settling on a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses.

That took up nearly another whole half hour.

She fixed herself a fluffer-nutter sandwich for lunch but decided as she sat down to eat it that her stomach was in too much turmoil to get it down. By twelve thirty she was pacing, impatient as hell, unable to distract herself further from any thought but of Erin. Never in her life, she was certain, had she been so incredibly, *unbelievably* primed and ready to go. *I won't last two more hours.*

But the closer it inched toward two, the more nervous she got too. *I don't want to let her down. Please don't let her regret choosing this. Choosing us.*

Her phone rang and she nearly jumped out of her skin. *It's her! I know it's her!* She leapt for the receiver. "Hello?"

"I can't wait any longer. I'm going to explode."

Gable laughed. "Oh Lordy. Me too. Where are you? Aren't you supposed to be in the middle of something?"

"I'm home. I fibbed and said I didn't feel well and wanted to quit early. Wanna come over and make me feel better?" Erin's voice was so incredibly seductive that Gable's body was instantly atingle with anticipation.

"Don't think me rude, but I'm hanging up now." As she fumbled to put the receiver in its cradle, she could hear Erin laughing.



Gable checked her reflection in the rearview mirror when she pulled up to the last stop sign before Erin's cabin. Her pupils were dilated and she was grinning from ear to ear, like she'd lost her mind. She hardly recognized herself. She ran a hand through her hair to smooth down an errant strand, and took several deep breaths to try to calm herself. Her stomach was doing somersaults, and her senses all seemed hypersensitive, as if to fully appreciate the feelings swirling around inside of her.

In her forty-six years, she could not remember feeling this happy. This excited. And certainly never this *aroused*.

Erin was waiting for her in the open doorway, reclining against the frame, Earl Grey in her arms to keep him from getting outside.

Gable had, from the first moment, thought her an incredibly attractive woman. But she'd never thought her more beautiful than at that moment. Erin was barefoot, clad in faded jeans that had molded themselves to her and a navy T-shirt, left untucked, that was thin enough to let Gable know she wasn't wearing a bra. She had a glow about her, and Gable could see undisguised desire in her eyes.

They watched each other, smiling shyly but not speaking, as Gable slowly mounted the steps with the roses held at her side. Her whole body was trembling.

Erin moistened her lips as Gable neared, and in a moment they stood two feet apart. Erin made no move to step aside so Gable could come in.

Gable reached out with her free hand and scratched Earl Grey under the chin, but her eyes never left Erin's. "You know that I just *have* to kiss you first thing, don't you?"

"I sure hope so," Erin said, smiling up at her. "Because I'm not letting you inside until you do."

Gable lifted her hand to caress the side of Erin's face, just before she dipped her head and brought their mouths together.

Five days of anticipation fueled the kiss.

Erin moaned and opened her mouth, inviting Gable in, and the heat in Gable's belly became a bonfire. When their tongues met and began stroking...tasting...exploring...her head began to swim. Her body moved of its own accord toward Erin's, and Erin's moved toward her.

Earl Grey *rowled* loudly when he got pressed between them, and struggled to get free of Erin's arms.

They broke apart, chuckling at the cat. Erin tried to calm him while Gable struggled to focus. She put a hand on the doorway and leaned against it. Her breathing was ragged and she felt unsteady on her feet.

"Your kiss sure packs a punch," she said.

Erin blushed, but she had a very pleased smile on her face. "Does it? I'd tell you something along the same lines, but I'm finding it impossible to think coherently at the moment." She nodded her head toward the bouquet of roses at Gable's side. "Are those for me?"

Gable held them up, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, forgot all about them. You turned my brain to mush."

"Flatterer. Get in here and I'll find something to put them in."

Gable followed Erin to the kitchen on shaky legs.

"Would you believe I found this in the rubble? It was my grandmother's." Erin held up a large crystal vase for her inspection. "It was buried under a collapsed wall. Not a scratch on it." She ran her fingers over the etched surface. "It's amazing how a tornado can take a whole house and break it apart, and yet spare something so fragile." She loosely arranged the flowers in the vase and set it in the sink to fill with water.

Gable came up behind her and wrapped her arms loosely around her waist. "I just *have* to touch you," she said softly, resting her chin on Erin's shoulder so they were cheek to cheek.

Erin shut off the tap and leaned back into Gable, caressing the arms holding her. "You won't see me complaining." She sighed contentedly and they remained like that for a long moment.

Gable inhaled deeply and recognized the clean and slightly floral aroma she had come to associate with Erin—her shampoo, she realized now, nuzzling her way along Erin's neck, then lowering her lips to worship the softness of Erin's cheek.

"Mmm, that's nice," Erin hummed, arching her neck to invite more of the same.

"I want this to be perfect for you," Gable said, before nipping lightly on Erin's earlobe with her teeth. Her lips moved unhurriedly along the underside of Erin's jaw and along the silky expanse of neck, planting brief kisses along a winding, invisible path. Her arms drew Erin closer, until their bodies were pressed tightly together. She was

certain Erin could feel how hard and fast her heart was beating in her chest.

Erin made a whimpering sound that reverberated through Gable. "What you're doing is an excellent start." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Except I'm finding it hard to stand upright."

"Perhaps we should lie down, then," Gable suggested in a seductive whisper.

"Oh, Gable." Erin turned to face her, and their mouths met hungrily, shyness and nervousness melting away under the fierce heat of their attraction.

Gable's tongue explored the warmth of Erin's mouth while her hands sought naked flesh. Her fingers stole beneath the bottom edge of Erin's T-shirt and found the soft skin of her lower back. As her hands began exploring, dipping into the waistband of Erin's jeans to tease and arouse, Erin's hands grew bolder too, entwining in Gable's hair at the back of her neck and pulling their mouths tighter together, deepening the kiss.

The sudden blare of an emergency radio drowned out the pounding of her heart, and acted like a shock of cold water on her overheated body. Their lips broke apart, but she and Erin remained knit tightly together.

"Oh God, not *now*!" Erin grumbled, slumping against her chest. She was breathing hard, and so was Gable.

"Damn!" Gable agreed, as she struggled to regain her equilibrium.

"McCoy from dispatch. Respond, tree on power line. 48 Gilmore Street."

"A tree?" Gable moaned, throwing her head back in anguish. "They're pulling me away from you for a tree?" She gave a great sob as she reached for the radio on her belt, and Erin chuckled and hugged her in commiseration.

"I should go too," Erin said, grappling for her own radio. "Why hasn't mine gone off?"

"They won't call you. Not if they think you're sick. Not for something like this."

"Crap," Erin muttered.

They headed to Gable's Jeep.

"Look, I'll call you from my cell if we really need you," Gable said, reaching for the door handle.

Erin stopped her with one hand on her arm, and leaned up to plant one brief but passion-filled kiss on her startled lips. “Be careful. I’ll be waiting.”

Gable whimpered. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She got in the Jeep and sped to the callout address.



She was first on the scene. The address she was given belonged to a small summer cottage nestled in the woods about a mile and a half from Erin’s house. As the Jeep bounced up the rutted two-track driveway, she spotted a woman close to her own age standing propped against a shovel, staring up at the power lines that ran to her home. A hundred feet or so from the cottage, a huge tree had fallen on the dual lines, pushing the still-live wires into the branches of a row of pine trees.

The lines were throwing off sparks wherever they rested against a branch. And beneath the wires was a thick layer of flammable forest duff—pine needles and crispy dead leaves and tinder-dry underbrush.

The woman heard the approaching vehicle, and her face registered relief that help had arrived. Gable braked and exited the Jeep, grabbing her portable fire extinguisher from the back.

“Hi there,” she greeted the homeowner. “I’m Gable McCoy. Help is on the way. When did this happen?”

“I’m not sure. It got real windy and my power blinked a couple of times. I thought it was just the wind, but then I looked out my window and saw this. I called the power company, but I was afraid there might be a fire. My hose doesn’t reach this far.”

“You did the right thing.” Gable could hear the wail of an approaching siren. “That’ll be the pumper,” she told the woman. “We’ll hang out with you until the power company gets here.”

“Great.”

Carl was driving the truck. He positioned it as near as he dared and jumped down off the high seat.

“Hey there,” he greeted Gable.

“Hi, Carl.”

He took a look at the situation and keyed his radio. “Dispatch from Buckman. On the scene with McCoy. Additional units responding—we can handle this.”

"Dispatch clear," answered the dispatcher.

"Power crew should be here soon," he told Gable. "We get to babysit. Why don't we pull a handline off the truck in case we need it?"

"You got it."

Once they had it positioned, they leaned against the fire truck to wait.

"I'm going inside for a few minutes," the homeowner said. "I'll see if the power company can tell me when they can get here."

"So how's it going, Gable?" Carl asked when they were alone. "Last time I saw you, at the ladder drills, you didn't look too happy. Neither did Erin."

Gable felt her cheeks color. She couldn't suppress a grin. "You're awful damn observant, you know," she griped.

"That's why I'm a good 911 director. I have an eye for detail." He appraised her with a smile on his face. "Speaking of which, I'd have to say you're *blushing*, which I take to be a good thing?"

"I will *only* say that I'd rather be somewhere else at the moment," Gable admitted.

Carl laughed. "Good for you." He patted her on the shoulder. "You're a right egg, Gable McCoy. It's nice to see you happy."

The distinctive ring of Gable's cell phone pealed from the Jeep, and Gable hurried to answer it. She heard Carl's laughter as she grabbed for the door handle.

"Hello?" She got inside the Jeep and shut the door for privacy.

"What's happening?" Erin asked.

"Not much. Carl and I are waiting for the power company to get here. Then I can leave."

"Do you have any idea how incredibly turned on I am?"

Gable groaned. "Oh, that's great. Just great. Get me all lathered up again when we can't do anything about it."

"I think I'll wait for you in bed."

"Stop it!"

"With some nice lingerie on."

"Erin, please! You're killing me!"

"Or maybe nothing at all."

"You're a cruel woman. I'm going to hang up."

"Oh, all right," Erin said. "I just wanted to leave you with an image that I hope will get you to hurry back."

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Gable said. “You just worry about getting any sleep tonight.”



A half hour later Gable dialed Erin’s number again. “At the risk of your taunting me with more provocative images, I’m calling to tell you they still aren’t here yet.”

“Argh! I have never seen time *crawl* like it’s doing right now. It seems like you’ve been gone for *hours*.”

“Tell me about it.”

“If I have to wait much longer, I won’t be responsible for my actions when I see you,” Erin said.

“Promises, promises.”



It took the power company another excruciatingly long, maddeningly frustrating half hour to get a cherry-picker truck to the scene, turn off the power, and cut the tree off the line. Once the line was dead, Carl turned to Gable. “Get out of here. Go have some fun.”

“You sure?”

“Go!”

Gable didn’t need a second invitation. She ran to the Jeep and punched in Erin’s number on her cell phone as she headed back down the two-track to the main road.

“I’ll be there in two minutes,” she said as soon as Erin answered.

She heard a long sigh that was almost a whisper. The sound sent her body into sensory overload.

“I can’t wait,” Erin said.



Exactly two minutes later they were kissing hard in the doorway, hugging each other fiercely. It took no time at all for both of them to be right back where they had been before they were so rudely interrupted.

Erin’s tongue pushed into Gable’s mouth. Demanding. Insistent.

Gable's pulse tripled and the heat building between her legs spread through her body, coursing through her veins and dancing along the surface of her skin. Desire drove her and became all she knew.

Erin broke the kiss. "Bed," she said, gazing up at Gable with half-lidded eyes, her lips red and slightly swollen. "Now."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Erin led her by the hand to the bedroom, which had been thoughtfully prepared for the occasion. She paused just inside the doorway, and Gable took in the surroundings. Candles lit the room, casting a soft flickering light on the curved, polished wood of the new sleigh bed, covers pulled back to expose the soft Egyptian cotton sheets that Gable had helped pick out.

Without letting go of her hand, Erin took two steps to her left and hit the play button on her stereo. Soft instrumental jazz. “You Go to My Head.”

“This is lovely,” Gable murmured, pulling Erin into her arms again and dipping her head for another kiss.

Lost in a haze of desire, she didn’t immediately register that Erin was undressing her. Before she knew it, her shirt was unbuttoned and Erin was pushing it off her shoulders and down her arms. Erin broke the kiss to pull the shirt off and gazed longingly at Gable’s breasts, barely concealed by a thin white tank top that set off the deep tan of her skin. They were not overly large, but were nicely shaped and well proportioned to her lean and muscular body.

Erin placed the fingertips of her right hand on the flat plane of Gable’s stomach, and even through the sheer fabric Gable could feel the heat of her touch. Her stomach muscles twitched under the caresses, and when Erin’s fingers dipped inside her jeans and pulled her shirt free, her breath caught in her throat.

Erin pushed the tank top up halfway, both hands splayed across Gable’s abdomen for maximum contact with her naked flesh. She paused when her fingertips reached the curve of Gable’s breast, and

leaning forward, began to plant soft kisses on Gable's neck as her hands drifted upward.

Gable closed her eyes and sighed, relishing the feel of the small hands cupping her breasts, of Erin's delicate fingers as they played lightly over her nipples, which were already hard and sensitive. She wanted more, much more, but she forced herself to let Erin set the pace.

This is new to her. For God's sake, don't scare her off! It took every ounce of restraint she had not to rip Erin's clothes off and take her in a rush of frenzied desire. For though she had been with women before, it had never been like this. She had never felt so totally and thoroughly aroused, so out of control, so desperate to touch and be touched.

Erin seemed to sense her controlled impatience, or perhaps she was feeling an equal measure of need and want. She pulled off Gable's tank top and dipped her head to take her right nipple in her mouth, sucking, nipping lightly with her teeth, as her hands found the clasp and zipper of Gable's jeans and undid them.

Groaning, Gable threaded her fingers through Erin's hair, pulling her closer, encouraging a deeper touch. Erin's mouth sucked her harder, and Gable groaned again, then her jeans and underwear were being pushed down over her hips.

Erin's mouth left her as she stepped out of her clothes, putting one hand on Erin's shoulder for balance. She stood naked in the soft light of the candles.

Erin's gaze appraised her with wonder—and obvious approval. “You have a beautiful body, Gable,” she said in a hushed voice, as her eyes lingered on the soft brown triangle of hair at the apex of Gable's thighs.

“I'm awful glad you think so,” Gable reached for Erin's T-shirt. Her restraint was slipping. She *had* to touch her. And right *now*. She pulled the thin cotton garment over Erin's head, exposing the full, round breasts that had taunted her in her dreams. “Beautiful,” she whispered, her voice unrecognizable.

Erin trembled as Gable undid her jeans and slid them off, along with her cream silk panties. The downy fine hair beneath was a shade lighter than the hair on her head. Gable took her hand and led her to the bed, and they climbed under the covers and faced each other, lying on their sides.

“Tell me what to do,” Erin whispered, caressing Gable’s cheek with the back of her fingers.

“Erin, everywhere you touch me feels wonderful,” Gable replied, leaning in to cover Erin’s mouth with hers.

As they kissed, slowly and sensually, Gable slipped her arm around Erin and pulled their bodies together, hot flesh meeting hot flesh, breast to breast, belly to belly. She insinuated one of her long legs between Erin’s, and Erin released a soft, sweet whimper into their enjoined mouths when Gable’s thigh pressed hard against her.

The wetness of Erin’s desire bathed her skin, and it drove her wild. She slipped a hand down Erin’s back to cup her ass, and rolled, pulling Erin on top of her.

Now Erin’s leg was providing the same delicious friction to her heated core, and the kiss deepened as their desire grew, their bodies rocking against each other. Erin moaned again and dug her fingernails lightly into Gable’s shoulder. The roar of her blood in her ears drowned out everything else as their rocking grew more furious and unrestrained, and she worried she would come too soon, even before Erin touched her.

Erin broke the kiss, panting for air. “God, Gable. Oh, God. I can’t...Oh! Oh!” She closed her eyes and arched her back, and her body grew rigid as an immense orgasm tore through her.

Gable held her close, her own body trembling and on the brink, until Erin relaxed against her, her head resting on Gable’s chest.

“I didn’t mean...I wanted to wait...” Erin stuttered as she fought to regain her breath. “But I couldn’t...It was too...too much...too intense.”

“I know. It’s all right...it’s wonderful,” Gable answered, her voice gentle but strained. Her whole body thrummed with arousal, and when she caught the heady scent of Erin’s climax it drove her higher, pushed her beyond words.

She rolled them over until she was on top of Erin, resting her weight on her elbows.

Erin opened her legs and wrapped them around her, shuddering when Gable settled against her. “Oh, Gable,” she moaned, arching her back and rolling her hips for more contact.

A throaty growl escaped Gable’s lips as she began a slow descent down Erin’s body, kissing her way to the soft valley between those

exquisite breasts, then claiming one nipple roughly, sucking on it, nipping at it with her teeth. The same treatment to the other, then back again.

Erin's moans rang in her ears, urging her on, so she shifted her weight and brought her fingertips slowly up the inside of Erin's thigh as her mouth continued to pleasure Erin's breasts.

Touching Erin intimately for the first time, her hand sliding into the soaked silky folds, intensified her own sweet ache. Her body was on fire. She struggled to contain her orgasm.

"Gable! Oh! That feels incredible." Erin writhed beneath her, fingernails raking lightly across her back, as Gable teased and stroked her with increasing pressure. "Please! Oh, *please*, Gable. I want to come—I *need* to come."

The plea drove Gable down Erin's body to claim her wet warmth with her mouth. She massaged Erin's swollen clit with rapid strokes of her tongue and pushed two long, slender fingers against her opening. *So wet for me*, her mind crooned, as Erin opened and took her inside, muscles tightening around her fingers in spasms as she roared to climax.

"Gable! Oh God! Oh my God!" Erin screamed.

Gable gentled her strokes but did not stop, drawing another orgasm from her even before the last had subsided.

"Stop!" Erin panted. "I can't...Enough!" She was trembling with aftershocks as Gable reluctantly withdrew and kissed a slow, tender path back up her body.

"I've never...never like that," Erin gasped, clutching at Gable, holding her fiercely.

"It's never been like this for me either, Erin," Gable echoed, savoring the sweet taste of Erin's desire where it lingered on her tongue. She kissed the delicate hollow at the base of Erin's neck. Never had she felt so much while pleasuring someone else. Never had her blood boiled as it did now.

"Oh, I hope that's true." Erin's chest rose and fell with a deep breath. "And now..." She abruptly shifted her weight, rolling out from underneath Gable. "It's your turn, I believe." She pushed Gable playfully down onto her back, and Gable did not resist.

On her side, head propped up on one hand, she gazed down at Gable. "Tell me what I can do to please you. Tell me what you want."

She skimmed her fingertips over Gable's breasts in lazy figure eights that teased the rigid nipples on every pass.

Gable's body temperature shot up, and her heartbeat went into overdrive. "Everything you do pleases me," she said hoarsely. "I'm so close now it won't take much to make me come."

"Well, I don't want to rush you," Erin drawled. "But I can tell you need some attention." Her fingertips closed in on one nipple, pinching it hard, while her mouth descended on the other for equal treatment.

Gable's hips arched off the bed as a powerful rush of ecstasy tore through her, obliterating all thought. "I can't wait...can't...*please*, Erin..." Her body was screaming for release, and her stomach clenched in anticipation.

Erin was blessedly merciful. Her mouth continued to suck Gable's nipple while her hand descended to bring her to fulfillment. Gable spread her legs and held her breath as Erin's palm stole down her abdomen and across the triangle of hair—the caress firm, the intent clear.

Erin's teeth nipped at Gable's nipple roughly as her fingers slid across her clit and into the wet folds beyond. Gable cried out and pressed against Erin's hand, feeling three fingers slide inside, filling her, turning her body into molten lava. An unrelenting pressure was building inside her, a yearning so intense it brought tears to her eyes.

Erin pumped into her with slow strokes, bringing her higher and higher, and then Erin's thumb pressed hard against her clit and sent her reeling over the edge into oblivion. Her whole body spasmed and shook and her mind went hazy, and she collapsed back against the mattress, breathing hard.

"Golly," she sighed, after a very long moment, and Erin laughed—a throaty chuckle of satisfaction.

"Guess I did okay for my first time, eh?" Erin settled against Gable's side, resting her head in the crook of her shoulder and sliding her arm possessively across her stomach.

"Any better and you might have killed me."

"I never imagined it could be like this. Never." Erin's fingers played along Gable's hip, thigh, stomach. "I can't stop touching you."

A contented smile played across Gable's lips. "I like the sound of that. But it might be a problem when we're out in public. People might stare."

Erin chuckled, and the sound vibrated against Gable's chest. "If this is what it's like with us...I'm beginning to wish I'd figured

everything out a lot sooner.” Erin’s hand began to move with more deliberation, skimming over Gable’s breasts and down to the edge of her tangle of curls.

“You know what you’re doing to me, don’t you?” Gable groaned as the heat began to build again between her thighs.

“I certainly do,” Erin said, pinching one of Gable’s nipples back to rigid attention. “You came over for dinner, and I’m helping you work up an appetite.”



Gable stifled yet another yawn and tried to focus on the paperwork in front of her. It was an impossible task. Her body bore the complete exhaustion of a weekend of nonstop lovemaking, and her mind could think of nothing but Erin.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Eleven thirty. They’d been apart less than four hours—she’d left Erin’s about eight so she could detour by her house to change clothes. It felt like an eternity. *You are in such serious trouble here.* But she couldn’t wipe the smile from her face.

June Dunsmore, the sixtysomething cashier who tended to mother Gable, had noticed immediately that something was different.

“*Someone* had a nice weekend,” she commented when Gable showed up an uncharacteristic fifteen minutes late, with bags under her eyes and a jumbo Styrofoam cup of coffee from the gas station across the street.

Gable blushed a deep scarlet and took off past June toward the pharmacy counter in the rear.

“Aha! I knew it!” June’s voice trailed after her. “I want details!”

Fortunately, the place stayed busy all morning, keeping her from further interrogation. But Gable had been largely unable to focus on her work during the brief lulls between prescriptions.

She stretched and stood and stepped to the counter, intending to restock a display of informational brochures. But she had hardly begun the task when her hands stilled and her mind drifted, revisiting the myriad of times she and Erin had come together in the big sleigh bed. Her body warmed at the memories.

“Penny for your thoughts.” Erin’s voice, enticing and amused, from four feet away abruptly brought her back to the present.

Gable blushed but grinned broadly as she gazed into Erin's eyes. She saw the same hungry look of desire she'd seen there all weekend. "This is torture."

"Mmm-hmm." Erin nodded her head with enthusiasm, grinning back at Gable.

"I thought you had training until five."

"The chief had to end the morning session early to take care of some personal business. I've got almost an hour. Can you break for lunch?"

"Oh yeah."

They walked two blocks to the Slice of Heaven café, a popular hangout known for its pie menu—thirty-five varieties baked fresh daily by the quartet of elderly sisters who owned the place.

Meriwether wasn't very big, but the café was always crowded at lunchtime. People came from neighboring counties for one of the specialty pies they could get nowhere else...pies with names like Pennsylvania Dutch shoofly, and mocha java chocolate, and brandied peach custard.

Every table was occupied, and it looked as though everyone was either waiting for their food or had just gotten it. They wouldn't be sitting down any time soon, and there were no real alternatives within a short drive. They looked at each other with resigned frowns.

"We might be able to get pie and coffee," Gable apologized.

"I'm not really that hungry," Erin said. "I just couldn't wait until tonight to see you."

"Gable? Want to sit with us?"

Gable and Erin both turned toward the voice. Two women in their thirties waved at them from a table in the near corner. One was an attractive blonde, the other a striking brunette with a vaguely familiar face.

Gable looked at Erin. "Well, we won't be alone, but...what do you think? The one on the left—the blonde—is Emily Fairfield. She's the librarian in town."

Erin shrugged. "Sure. Fine with me."

They headed over to the table.

"Thanks, Emily," Gable said as she reached for one empty chair, while Erin took the other, across from her. "Erin Richards, meet Emily Fairfield."

"Pleasure to meet you," Emily said.

"And you as well," Erin responded. "Thanks for sharing your table."

"This is Lindsey Carter," Emily introduced her tall, attractive friend.

"Have we met?" Gable inquired.

"I thought you looked familiar too," Erin said.

"I'm on TV," Lindsey explained. "I'm a reporter with Channel 6 News in Traverse City."

"Oh! Okay, right," Gable said. "I've seen you. Nice to meet you."

"Same here."

The four women chatted amiably over lunch. Gable was a regular in the Meriwether library, and both she and Emily ate at the café at least three or four days a week, so they had chatted on occasion about their jobs, and gossip in town, and the latest novel that caught their interest.

Gable tried hard not to stare at Erin throughout the meal, but her eyes kept wandering over to her, lingering on her lips, drifting to her breasts. She caught Erin several times doing the same to her and wondered how obvious they were being to their lunch companions.

"So...how do you two know each other?" Gable asked Emily and Lindsey as they dug into dessert.

Each of them had ordered a different type of pie. Emily chose mile-high lemon meringue, Lindsey went with rosy red rhubarb, Erin selected Grandma's chocolate pecan, and Gable opted for Montmorency cherry.

Both Lindsey and Emily froze at Gable's question, their forks halfway to their mouths. The two women looked at each other; Emily smiled and Lindsey's cheeks colored slightly.

"Well, Lindsey detoured into town last spring for pie," Emily said. "Remember the day we got that big rain and the bridge washed out?"

"I do!" Gable said. "I had to stay with June for a couple of days. I couldn't get home."

"Well, Lindsey got stranded here too. She stayed with me." Emily turned toward Erin. "The library is that big white house down the street," she explained. "I live upstairs."

"We...uh...found we had a lot in common," Lindsey stuttered, her blush deepening.

The light dawned, and for the first time, Gable began to think she just might have this gaydar thing after all. "A lot in common, you say?"

she asked mischievously. "Erin and I have a lot in common too. I bet we *all* have something in common."

The table was silent for a moment as her words sank in.

"Really?" Lindsey looked much more comfortable all of a sudden.

"You don't say," Emily said.

"We do?" Erin asked with a puzzled expression, clearly not understanding.

"Mmm-hmm." Gable nodded, looking at Erin. "You just joined the club a few days ago."

"Oh!" Erin's hand flew up to cover her mouth. Now *she* blushed. She looked at Emily, then Lindsey, then back to Emily. "Well, whattaya know. Small world."

The others all laughed, and as they finished their pie, the four women made tentative plans to get together one night for poker or a movie or some other outing.

Gable and Erin had to hurry back to the pharmacy if Erin was to make it back to the fire hall in time.

"Well, that was sure an eye-opening lunch. You know, I've chatted on and off with Emily for months now, and I never had a clue," Gable said. "And I've even seen her sitting with Lindsey a few times."

"How did you figure it out?" Erin asked.

"It was just something about the way they were looking at each other. Kind of like how you and I couldn't keep our eyes off each other."

"Do you know how much I want to reach out and *take* you, right here and right now?" Erin asked as they neared her pickup, parked at the curb in front of the drugstore.

"Hold that thought until tonight," Gable answered. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I miss you already," Erin said, getting into her truck. She rolled down the window. "I've got it bad for you, Gable."

Gable put her hand on the sill and Erin covered it with her own. "I'm glad to hear that. Me too, Erin. See you later."



She thought about the evening the rest of the afternoon. And by the time she got to Erin's place at 6:40, she could feel the moisture

between her legs from her fevered anticipation.

Erin flung open the door as soon as she drove up, and bounded down the stairs and into her arms.

They kissed long and hard, pressing their bodies together, the heat between them scorching Gable, obliterating everything else. Erin's body fit perfectly against hers.

"Oh God, you feel so good," she murmured into Erin's ear.

"Inside," Erin answered breathlessly, tugging at her.

They stumbled into the house and to the bedroom, removing clothes as they went, kisses punctuating every other step.

The first time that night was frenzied and fast. After dinner they took their time.



Around midnight, Gable awoke, spooning Erin from behind, her hand cupped protectively over Erin's breast. She didn't move for a long minute, relishing the feel of her skin, the press of her body, the soft, reassuring sigh of her exhalations. *How can I ever sleep alone again?*

They had not discussed the future or their feelings for each other. It was too soon for that—Gable accepted that fact intellectually, and refrained from bringing it up. Erin had made it clear she had relationship and commitment issues, and Gable didn't want to pressure her or scare her off.

But she already knew in her heart that there would be no one for her but Erin. She was so head-over-heels in love she couldn't think straight, and she could no longer imagine living the solitary life she'd been content with for most of her adult life.

They certainly had passion and chemistry between them, there was no doubt of that. Erin had made it abundantly clear she couldn't keep her hands off Gable any more than Gable could resist touching her when they were alone. But as wonderful as the sex was, Gable prayed that it was more than that with Erin. Much, much more.

Plagued by her insecurities about the future, she found it difficult to fall back asleep and slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Erin. She put on Erin's terrycloth bathrobe. It was a little small for her, but it smelled vaguely of Erin's soap and shampoo, and Gable found it reassuring somehow. She went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, then sat staring out the window at the stars.

Her life felt more out of her control than she'd ever imagined it could be. Just a few months ago, she had a clear and certain future, or so she thought. She'd reconciled herself to the notion that the soulmate thing was a fairy tale and that she was meant to be alone. So she found satisfaction and meaning in her life by helping others.

But now Gable knew what profound joy there could be to every single day, when it was shared with someone you truly loved. She could never go back to her old life, her life without Erin.

Thank you for this gift, she prayed. May I be long worthy of it.

She returned to bed but remained by the bedside for a moment, studying her lover's face in the moonlight streaming in through the window.

I love you, Erin. With all my heart. Please love me too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sweat poured off Gable as she labored to widen the firebreak, turning over dirt at a furious pace. Her back ached and her hands were blistered despite her gloves, but it looked like they might succeed in containing the fire if the wind held off a while longer.

It was a cool October day, and the twelve volunteer firefighters on Crew 23 had gravity on their side. They were below the fire on a steep hill in the Manistee National Forest. Although it was a densely wooded area, the trees were mostly virgin white pines, tall and straight, the nearest branches ten to twenty feet off the ground. With no wind to blow it up into the high canopy, the fire was confined to the forest floor and it advanced at a walk, feasting on pine needles and dry bracken ferns.

But the weather service was predicting that brisk winds would move in off Lake Michigan, so the firefighters kept a close watch on the treetops as they moved up the hill, cutting a five foot breach with shovels, pickaxes, and chainsaws.

Gable also kept one eye on Erin, positioned twenty feet to her right. Despite her diminutive figure, she had proven to be a very capable firefighter in the weeks since her training, but today was pushing the limits of all of them. Gable could see that her lover was just as bone-tired as she was, and also as determined to continue on.

The fire had already consumed nearly 260 acres, and crews were working on all sides to bring it under control. It was the highest priority callout; Gable and Erin had both missed work to respond, and they were still at it seven hours later.

Crew 23 was the only thing standing between the blaze and a half dozen homes. They were cutting a firebreak from the creek at the bottom of the hill to the rocky ridge at the top, and were more than three-quarters of the way up when the wind began to rise. It wasn't much at first. The crew kept working.

The intermittent breeze quickly became a steady twenty-mile-an-hour blow, with gusts strong enough to send sparks and embers across the breach. The firefighters had their hands full trying to douse the spot fires springing up all around them. Their upward momentum ground to a halt.

Gable felt the heat of the fire increase as the wind sent the flames swirling up into the higher tree branches. She glanced to her right. A back draft sent a plume of smoke over Erin, momentarily obscuring her. Gable held her breath and gripped her shovel more tightly until she reappeared.

Their radios crackled to life. The voice, a shout, belonged to Carl Buckman, who was working at the tail of the line, farther down the hill. "23 off the hill! Move! Move! Another fire below!"

Gable spun around. Three hundred feet down the slope, thick smoke was rising in a column from the forest. They were in deep trouble, trapped between two fires. She hesitated only until Erin reached her. They were already breathing hard as they sprinted diagonally up the hill toward safety.

The fire below them was everything the one above them was not. It sprang to life with a burst of hot energy, fanned by the wind into a blast-furnace train that howled toward them with frightening acceleration.

"Drop your tools!" Carl yelled, and as Gable tossed her shovel she heard the clatter of several others directly behind her.

She didn't turn around. She had to watch every step as they raced upward over the rocky, uneven terrain. Erin kept pace beside her but was clearly struggling to match Gable's long strides. No one spoke. The world turned red around them, reflecting the firestorm. Everything shimmered in the heat, miragelike. It was difficult to breathe.

The heat was so intense the grass beneath their feet burst into flames. Erin stumbled and fell. Gable paused to help her, and Carl was suddenly there too. They hauled Erin to her feet, one on either side of her, as several of the others sprinted by.

They were running for their lives.

The two fires came together behind them, joining up into a wall of flame that extended from the forest floor to the top of the trees. It was a blowout—every firefighter’s worst nightmare. The crackling roar of the inferno was deafening, and embers rained down all around them, pelting their hard hats. The stench of burning hair assaulted Gable’s nostrils as the trio finally reached the crest of the hill and crossed into the sanctuary of a wide, rocky ridge where the fire could not follow.

Like the others ahead of them, Gable and Erin collapsed once they were safely out of harm’s way on the other side. Erin lay on her back, her face a grimace of pain, her chest rising and falling in exaggerated gasps for air. Gable was likewise panting, on her hands and knees, struggling to calm the pounding of her heart.

“Are you all right?” she rasped.

Erin nodded, unable to speak.

They had made it, all of them, but with only feet to spare. Erin and Gable looked at each other with the shared realization of their narrow escape. Gable crawled the few feet that separated them, and they embraced, both shaking in the rush of fear and adrenaline.

“Too close, that one,” Gable whispered. Her arms and legs felt leaden.

“Gable, your hair!”

Gable took off her hard hat and ran a hand through her hair. She’d lost a fair amount in back, and it was singed to crew-cut length just behind her left ear.

“You both okay?” came Carl’s voice from above them. They pulled reluctantly apart, heads nodding in unison.

“Yeah, we’re all right. Everyone else?”

“Yup. All accounted for.” Carl’s face was almost unrecognizable under a thick layer of dirt and soot and sweat. “That was one I don’t want to repeat. We better get moving as soon as we can.”

They made it down the other side of the hill and were relieved by firefighters from a neighboring county. The fire claimed four homes before it was finally contained, but no one was injured.

“Stay with me tonight?” Erin said as they were dropped off at the township fire department.

Gable smiled. “I’d like that.”

They had fallen into a routine in the weeks since they became lovers. Gable spent two or three nights a week at Erin’s, and Erin spent

two or three nights a week at her place. Earl Grey spent the night when Erin did, and now had a litter box, toys, and a hammock bed at each home.

The first couple of weeks, they'd spent every night together. But once school started, they were apart one or two nights a week so that Erin could do her lesson plans and correct schoolwork without interruption. Try as she might, if Gable was present, she said she rarely got anything done.

Tonight was to have been one of those schoolwork nights, so Gable was especially pleased she would not be sleeping alone. Her bed was too big and lonely without Erin, and after their brush with death, she needed the reassurance of her lover's body beside her.

They took a quick shower together when they got to Erin's place, then climbed into bed beneath her fluffy down comforter, too exhausted to eat, too weary to do anything but cuddle.

"I bet we're sore tomorrow," Erin said drowsily.

"That's a pretty safe wager, I think." Gable spooned Erin in their familiar way, her front to Erin's back. She loved the way Erin's smaller body fit within the curve of her larger frame, totally enfolded in her arms.

"That was scary today. Thanks for picking me up."

"We all watch out for each other," Gable said. "I was afraid too." She kissed the back of Erin's neck and hugged her closer.

"You make me feel safe," Erin whispered. "From the moment we met, you've been my hero, you know."

"I want to always be there for you, Erin," she murmured. "Always and forever. You mean everything in the world to me. Everything."

Gable could feel Erin stiffen slightly. *Shit. You and your big mouth.* She had been extremely careful not to say anything that might make Erin feel pressured about their future. But she was tired, and unguarded, and feeling particularly emotional so soon after their harrowing escape.

"What you said." Erin's voice was so soft Gable barely heard it, though their heads were nestled beside each other.

"Mmm?"

"Ditto, for me."

Gable's heart swelled, and tears came to her eyes. She kissed Erin's neck again, and her lover relaxed into her arms. They were soon fast asleep.



Gable lay awake in bed the next night, unable to get comfortable without Erin next to her and powerless to stop the images of the wildfire that had been replaying in her mind all day. She ran her hand through her hair, still unaccustomed to the length. She'd kept it fairly short for many years, but not *this* short. It was shorn in the back, to even out the section of hair that had been burned in the wildfire.

They had been very lucky—or very blessed—to have escaped both the tornado and the fire on the hillside. And Gable knew there likely would be more close calls for them as volunteers in the fire service. She had accepted that risk for herself when she decided to join the squad. But the thought of anything happening to Erin scared the living hell out of her. Terrified her far worse than any threat to her own life.

Like Erin's crystal vase, the fire had been a jarring reminder of the fragility of life, the capriciousness of nature. Gable knew all too well how quickly and unexpectedly loved ones could be taken from you. She ached to tell Erin how much she loved her. Needed her. How much she wanted them to share their lives for the *rest* of their lives. If anything were to happen to either of them, Gable wanted Erin to know exactly how much she meant to her.

Maybe I can tell her. Maybe if I just don't hit her with too much at once. Start with I love you and see how it goes. I know she loves me back, don't I? She admitted as much last night, didn't she? Gable sighed. *Tell her. And tell her soon. Don't let something else happen.* She hoped she was making the right decision. Now she just had to wait for the right opportunity. Or maybe *create* one.

Not certain how Erin would react, Gable decided not to make a big deal out of it. *Better to keep it low-key.* But she wanted it to be special. A moment to look back on. A memorable setting.

The best option, she decided, was right outside her window. The trees were at the peak of autumnal color. A brilliant array of fiery tones, nearly every shade imaginable in the spectrum from deep scarlet to brilliant orange to iridescent yellow, cast against the varied green palette of pines and hemlocks. A blaze of color carpeting the forest floor, and surrounding her on all sides. The evenings were cool, but not cold yet. Exactly the right time for a campfire in the big fire bowl she had dug in

a clearing near her house.

She and Erin both lived where they lived because they wanted to be close to nature, and nature was certainly putting on an amazing display for them. *It's perfect.*



The following Saturday afternoon, Gable spent more than an hour laying the fire, erecting a carefully built teepee of twigs—matchstick-sized tinder in the interior graduating to larger and larger branches—and then the whole structure surrounded by a square framework of split logs. It was a work of art unto itself, and Erin, watching the construction from a nearby lawn chair with a goblet of merlot in her hand, nodded approvingly when it was finished.

"It's lovely. Seems almost a shame to light it."

"Old habits die hard." Gable shrugged. "I can't build a fire unless it's a one-matcher."

"One-matcher?"

"Camp Fire Girls take a lot of pride in building a fire that will catch with just one match. Watch." Gable struck an Ohio Blue Tip wooden match against the side of its box and carefully inserted it into the narrow opening she'd left in the teepee, away from the wind.

The tiny flame caught the tight bundle of dry hemlock twigs in the center of the teepee, and the fire spread quickly upward. Soon they had a roaring fire.

Erin sucked in a deep breath. "Mmm. I love the smell of wood smoke."

"I've always been fascinated by fires," Gable said, taking a lawn chair beside Erin's and poking at the conflagration with a long stick. "I love building them, lighting them, watching them. Kind of ironic I now put them out!" She smiled and sighed contentedly. "I can sit by a campfire for hours."

"This was a nice idea," Erin agreed. "It's so pretty out here."

Gable reached for her wineglass, which she'd set on a makeshift table made out of a tree round, set on its end. "I think autumn is my favorite time of year, though spring runs a close second, with all the wildflowers and the baby animals running about."

Erin nodded. "I had two raccoons coming by regularly with their babies. They were *so* adorable, scampering up trees whenever something scared them. Oh! And the baby birds when they fledge and are fed by their parents. People who live their entire lives in a big city don't know what they're missing."

"There's a line in *Walden Pond* where Thoreau says something like... 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately. To see if I couldn't learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.' I like that. I think when you live in the woods you are somehow closer to the heartbeat of life."

"Nicely put," Erin said, reaching out to take Gable's hand in hers. "I'm so glad I'm here. With you. That we found each other."

Gable lifted Erin's hand to her lips and kissed it. "Me too. I can't remember ever being this happy."

A comfortable quiet settled over them as they enjoyed the fire and the autumn foliage, and a sky painted with the bright pinkish red of an approaching twilight. Gable fed the fire with split oak logs until they had a deep bed of hardwood coals. She buried two potatoes wrapped in foil into the embers and let them bake. When they were nearly done, she set up a grill over the fire bowl and cooked two rib eye steaks to medium rare.

"Quite the campfire cook you are," Erin commented as she dressed her potato with butter and sour cream. "Why does food cooked outdoors always taste better?"

"Wait until dessert. Have you ever had a banana boat?"

"Don't think so. What's that?"

"You cut a little trough in a banana, and insert marshmallows and pieces of chocolate. Then you wrap it in foil and cook it in the coals until everything melts together."

"Anything with chocolate in it, I'm pretty much guaranteed going to like it."

After they'd eaten, Gable took their plates inside the house and returned with a blanket. She spread it out on the ground near the fire, up against a low log bench she had built for visiting nieces and nephews.

As she gazed down at Erin as she approached her chair, Gable's heart stopped in her chest. "God, you're so beautiful," she whispered.

Erin smiled up at her, the firelight casting a soft warmth over her skin and accentuating the blond highlights in her hair.

And you get more beautiful every day. Gable held out her hand. "I want to sit with you," she said.

Erin allowed herself to be pulled to her feet and led to the blanket. Gable sat with her back against the bench and settled Erin between her legs, leaning against her chest. Wrapping her arms around Erin's waist, she slipped one hand beneath her sweatshirt and T-shirt, and gently caressed the warm, soft skin of her abdomen. "Mmm. That's better," she sighed, resting her head on Erin's shoulder.

"I'll say," Erin agreed, relaxing back into her embrace.

They stared into the fire and listened to the night noises: the *who-cooks-for-yooooou* lament of a barred owl calling for a mate, the sharp shriek of a nighthawk. The rustle of leaves from the dark forest beyond the fire that told them a deer or some other denizen of the night was watching them.

Now or never. Gable took a deep breath. "You're precious to me, you know," she whispered, her lips inches from Erin's ear.

Erin sighed, and caressed the arms enfolding her. "Same back atcha," she replied in a low voice.

Gable steeled her nerve. Her heart was racing. She wondered whether Erin could feel it, they were pressed so closely together. "Erin, I...I want you to know..." Her voice broke. "I just want you know that I love you. With all my heart." She held her breath.

Erin was silent for a very long time. Finally she turned her head slightly, so that she could plant a gentle kiss on Gable's cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

It wasn't exactly the response Gable had hoped for, but she was relieved her declaration hadn't made Erin pull away. She seemed contented, even if she hadn't replied in kind.

Give it time, she told herself. *Just give it time.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gable sat on her couch with her feet up, sipping coffee and staring out of her large picture window. Chickadees and goldfinches, woodpeckers and nuthatches darted back and forth from the trees to the feeders positioned about the yard and beneath the long overhang of eaves. A half dozen squirrels and a lone chipmunk scurried about, busily gathering acorns. The first snows of winter would be on them before they knew it.

Yet another reminder of the impermanence of all living things.

The changing of the seasons made Gable feel restless. She dreamed about the day when she and Erin would spend no more nights apart—the day they would share everything: one bed, one home, one plan for the future. And she wanted that day to be soon.

Gable was glad she'd told Erin she loved her, though Erin had made no reference to her declaration in the three weeks since. She felt more at peace with herself now that Erin knew the full measure of how she felt. And Gable was optimistic that Erin returned her feelings, even if she hadn't articulated them beyond her *Ditto for me* admission the night after they escaped the forest fire.

For Erin *showed* her how much she cared in a myriad of thoughtful ways. In the romantic dinners she labored over, in the small notes she stuck into her pockets, and especially in the ways she touched her and responded to her touch when they made love.

"Mind if I join you?" Erin yawned loudly from the bedroom doorway.

Gable glanced around. Her heart melted at the sight of her lover.

Erin's hair was sleep-tousled, and she looked even more delicately petite than usual, swallowed whole by Gable's plush fleece bathrobe. Earl Grey was perched on one shoulder.

When he spotted a new furry mouse Gable had given him the night before, he jumped down and set off on a hunting expedition. He pounced on the toy and batted it high into the air, purring loudly as it rattled.

Gable smiled and patted the couch beside her. "You're up early."

Erin settled next to her and kissed her on the cheek. "Very funny."

"Well, nine thirty is pretty early for you," Gable teased. "Want some coffee?"

"Oh, bless you. Yes, please."

Gable went to the kitchen and poured herself another cup—black, and doctored Erin's the way she liked it.

"What time did you get up?" Erin gratefully accepted the steaming mug, curling her hands around it to warm them.

"Oh, a while ago."

"That means a couple of hours at least. I'll never understand why you get up at the crack of dawn when you don't have to." Erin yawned again, and stretched like a contented cat.

"I'm a morning person, I guess. I love this time of day, when everything is just waking up. Seeing what critters are out and about. Going over in my head what I'm going to do that day."

"I prefer to remain in bed every single solitary second I can." Erin rested her head against Gable's shoulder. "Although it would be eminently more fun if you lingered there with me." She sighed a long, dramatic sigh, which got her a poke in the ribs from Gable.

"I know what happens when I linger in bed with you. We never leave the bedroom all day."

"And you're complaining about that?" Erin pulled back to look at her with mock horror.

Gable laughed. "Never." She put her arm around Erin and nuzzled her neck. "Although sometimes I need a little recovery time, like after last night. By the way, have I told you lately how incredible you are in bed?"

"Same back atcha, Hot Stuff." Erin closed her eyes and arched her neck to encourage Gable's gentle kisses.

She took advantage of the invitation and kissed, licked and nipped her way from Erin's earlobe, down her neck, along her collarbone, to the valley between her breasts.

"Mmm, that feels soooo nice," Erin said in a low throaty voice, running her hand through Gable's hair. "Are you sure you don't want to linger a while in that big ol' comfy bed of yours?"

Gable worked her way back up to Erin's neck, and then her cheek, and finally kissed her softly on the lips. "Well, I *might* could be *persuaded*..." she drawled slowly in the rich Southern accent she'd had as a child. "You *are* impossible to resist." She dipped her head to nuzzle again at Erin's neck. "We just have to remember to give ourselves plenty of time to get ready for the wedding this afternoon." Two of their friends from the squad were getting married, and all the firefighters had been invited.

Gable felt Erin stiffen. She drew back to look at her, but Erin wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Gable. I'm not going."

"Not going? Why not?"

"I'm just not." Erin shrugged. "I'm not into weddings."

"But it's not going to be a long service. Or a big one. They only invited their families and a few friends. We can skip the reception if you like."

"You can go, Gable," Erin said, still not looking her. "Just tell Billy and Therese I didn't feel well."

"I don't really want to lie to them, Erin," Gable said. "Why didn't you tell them...and *me*, earlier, that you didn't want to go? It doesn't sound like this is something you only decided this morning."

"I just don't want to go. It's not that big a deal," Erin snapped, clearly annoyed. She got to her feet. "I'm going to take a shower and get dressed. I've got some errands to run today."

"Erin, wait..." Gable started to protest, mystified by the sudden chill in the air. *What just happened?* But Erin was gone, back into the bedroom without a look back.

The atmosphere thawed only slightly when Erin reemerged fifteen minutes later, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She found Gable in the kitchen, stacking pancakes on a plate.

The table was set for two.

“Got time for breakfast?” Gable asked gently. She hoped she could get Erin to talk about what was going on—explain why she was suddenly acting so distant.

Erin paused in the doorway as if considering her answer. After a long moment, she came up and gave her a hug and a halfhearted smile. “That’s very sweet of you, but I better run. Have fun. I’ll call you later.” She gave Gable a peck on the cheek and left the room. Gable followed as far as the doorway.

“C’mon, Earl. Time to hit the road,” Erin called to the cat, who was sprawled on his hammock by the window.

Earl Grey remained where he was, staring at Erin to make sure she knew he had heard her just fine and preferred to stay where he was. Erin marched over to him and picked him up.

“Erin?” Gable leaned against the door frame and folded her arms. Something told her she was playing with fire, but she couldn’t stop herself. “Did I say something to make you angry?”

Erin took a deep breath before she answered. “No, Gable. I’m not mad. Let’s just drop it, okay?”

“Does this have something to do with your marriage?” Gable took a stab in the dark. Erin had volunteered only that she’d made a bad mistake when she had married. She’d never told Gable any more than that, although they had shared the details of most all the other noteworthy parts of their lives.

Erin left with Earl Grey without answering.

Gable was puzzled by Erin’s sudden mood swing, and unsettled by it. *But it’s not the first time it’s ever happened*, she realized, going to the window. *It’s just much worse today*. At every mention of marriage or commitment whatsoever, Erin changed. Usually it was pretty subtle. But it was like a chill came over her and she withdrew into herself. Gable watched her drive off without a wave good-bye. *What the hell happened to you to make you this way, Erin?*



She fretted about Erin’s abrupt departure all morning. She showered and dressed for the wedding in a simple navy pantsuit and white silk blouse, but still couldn’t calm her crowded mind. By the time she got to the church and slipped into a pew in the back, she was vaguely nauseous.

She had hoped that attending the wedding together might encourage Erin to talk about her feelings. Might get her thinking favorably about planning their future together. Instead, the occasion had split them apart.

The dull pain in her stomach grew as she listened to Billy and Therese exchange their vows. She ached to one day say those words to Erin, and to have Erin promise to love, honor, and cherish *her* until death parted them. She wondered again what had happened to make her so against marriage.

As she passed through the receiving line outside the church, she put on her best smile and congratulated the happy couple.

“What a wonderful ceremony. Therese, you are positively glowing. And you don’t clean up so bad, either, Billy,” she kidded the groom, a mechanic who’d managed to scrub away what she could have sworn were permanent grease stains on his knuckles.

“Thanks for coming, Gable.” Therese pecked her on the cheek.

“Erin couldn’t make it?” Billy took Gable’s hand in both of his.

Gable and Erin had made no public acknowledgement that they were seeing each other, but a couple of the guys at the poker table had caught on to the looks between them, and word had gotten around the squad. They’d been the subject of some good-natured ribbing after that, but everyone had been pretty cool about it—even the more conservative guys Gable had thought might create some problems.

“She sends her regrets,” Gable replied. She didn’t want to say more. She hated lying.

The reception was being held at the VFW Post a couple of miles from the church—Billy was a veteran of Desert Storm. Halfway there, Gable pulled off the road onto a side street and stopped the car. She took her cell phone out of the glove compartment and checked the display. No messages.

She punched in Erin’s number at home. The phone rang five times and then her answering machine picked up.

“Hi. Are you there? It’s me. I just wanted to talk to you and see how you’re doing.” She paused, hoping Erin was listening to her and would pick up. It didn’t happen. *Well, she did say she was going to run errands.* “I’m headed for the reception. I’ll try your cell. Please call me.”

She had talked Erin into buying a cell phone a couple of weeks after they’d started seeing each other. It hadn’t been too hard to do,

though Erin had sworn she'd never get one. With their jobs and Erin's training, they had been playing phone tag. It was much easier for them to reach each other on their cell phones.

"The cellular customer you are trying to reach is unavailable. If you'd like to leave a message, press one."

Gable hit the button. "Erin, it's me. Please call me on my cell. I hope you're okay." She took a deep breath. "Please don't be mad at me. I'm sorry if I upset you." Setting her phone on vibrate, she slipped it into the pocket of her blazer and headed to the reception.

She mingled for a while with a glass of Guinness in her hand, trying not to glance at the watch on her wrist. She lingered in small groups where someone was telling a story, so she could nod her head agreeably and feign interest, all the while obsessed with wondering what was happening with Erin. Her mind was so removed from the reception that she jumped out of her skin when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey! Easy there. I only wanted to ask you to dance." Carl had a hand extended, palm up. The reception music was provided by a local DJ, whose current CD selection was Glenn Miller's "In the Mood." A half dozen other couples were dancing.

"What will Alberta say?" she kidded him with a smile, setting down her glass and letting him lead her to the modest dance floor.

"She knows how much I love her," he said, sweeping her around the floor in a fast-fast slow-slow swing step.

The words tugged at her heart. "Your wife is a lucky woman," she told him. *I wish I could know so clearly how Erin feels.*

There must have been something in the tone of her voice. Carl led her off the floor and over to a corner away from everyone.

"What's the matter, Gable?" he asked.

"You're very perceptive, you know that?"

He shrugged.

"It's Erin...sometimes I have no idea what's going on with her," Gable said.

"Women are hard to understand, sometimes," he said, and got a smile out of her. "Anything I can do? Want me to talk some sense into her?"

"No. But thank you. I mean that. You've been a good friend and I appreciate your support."

"I think a lot of the both of you." Carl rested a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Let me know if I can do anything."

"You can lead me around some more on the dance floor and get my mind off my troubles for a little while."

He held out his hand. "I can do that."



Gable tried both of Erin's numbers again as she drove home at eight. The party was still going strong, but they'd gotten past the dinner and requisite toasts, and picture-taking, cake-cutting, and garter belt rituals. She had slipped away when the dancing and drinking had begun in earnest, knowing she would not be missed.

Erin was still not answering either phone. Gable started to leave another message, but stopped herself. *Don't pressure her. Give her some time.*

She held her breath as she pulled into her driveway, hoping against hope that Erin would be waiting for her. Gable had given her an extra key, and she'd used it a few times. She had one to Erin's cabin too, but she knew that now would not be the time to use it.

No red pickup was waiting for her.

Gable unlocked the door and let herself inside. The house was quiet. No messages waited on her answering machine. She shrugged off her coat and dropped her keys on the counter, wincing at how loud they sounded in the absolute stillness. The house lacked warmth without Erin and Earl Grey in it.

This is not like you, Erin. You're never out of touch this long anymore. Not since we've been together. She tried to shake off a nagging disquiet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

You look terrible. Are you ill?"

Gable glanced up from the phoned-in prescription she was filling to find June appraising her with a critical eye from the other side of the counter. The drugstore was empty but for the two of them and Max, a high school kid who worked part time stocking shelves and helping out at the cash register.

She knew the sleepless night spent staring at the phone had taken its toll. She noticed the dark circles under her bloodshot eyes when she was dressing for work, and she had been yawning nonstop all morning.

"I'm fine, June. I just didn't sleep very well last night."

"Ah ha! I *see*," June commented as she bent forward and rested her elbows on the counter, her posture and tone implying that she suspected there might be a good story behind Gable's excuse.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, June. I was all by myself. I just couldn't get to sleep."

June's face fell with the news there would be no good gossip arising out of Gable's tired countenance. "Oh." Then her motherly side took over. "Sure you're not sick?"

"No, really. I'm fine."

The bell over the front door sounded and June headed back to her register, sparing Gable further scrutiny.

The four cups of coffee she had ingested during the course of the morning felt like they were burning a hole in her stomach. And she could feel the tension building between her shoulder blades, knotting up the muscles in her back. She had tried Erin's numbers a few more

times last night, and again this morning, with no success. She'd begun to contemplate what it would be like to resume her old life. Without Erin. *What if she shuts you out permanently?*

It was unthinkable. Unbearable.

She had no real hope that Erin would be waiting for her after work, although they routinely had dinner at Gable's house on Monday nights. Still, her heartbeat picked up as she neared her house, and she said a silent prayer for the red pickup to be there.

To her profound relief, it was.

The lights were on; Erin had used her spare key and let herself in.

Gable rushed up the steps. Erin met her at the door and hugged her fiercely. "I'm sorry, Gable. I'm sorry I was such a brat."

"Not necessary," Gable hugged her back.

"Yes, it is," Erin insisted, not loosening her embrace. "I have some...some issues, especially on the subject of marriage," she explained vaguely. "I told you that. But I shouldn't have taken it out on you." She looked up at Gable with moist eyes. "Forgive me?"

Gable kissed the top of her head. "Nothing to forgive. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories, or pry. I really didn't. I just want you to know that if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here for you."

Erin hugged her tighter. "I know that," she said in a soft voice.

"I was worried when you wouldn't answer the phone."

"I drove around a long time. I ended up in Petoskey."

"Petoskey?"

"Yeah. I went to see my mother. I told her about us."

Gable drew back and looked at Erin with wide eyes. "You did?" Her heartbeat pounded in her chest.

"She wants to meet you."

"How did she react?"

Erin snorted. "My mother is never what you expect. She was fine with it. She just wanted to know if I was happy."

"And *are* you happy?" Gable's voice betrayed her and broke on the last word.

"I am happy, Gable. As happy as I can be, without some help."

"Help?"

"I'm going to start seeing a therapist. My mother recommended it, and I think she may have something."

Alarm bells went off in Gable's head. *A therapist? A therapist who will tell you you're really not gay, just confused. I bet that's what your mother is hoping for. She's not fine with it at all if she is recommending you see a shrink about it.* Her insides churned with worry. *Just wait. Give her a session or two with a psychiatrist, and Erin will be telling you she can't see you anymore.*

"Gable? Did you hear what I said?"

You can't tell her not to do this. It's not your place. It's her decision.

"Yes. I heard you. You think this will help you?"

"I do. I hope so."

Gable pulled her close. "I hope you're right."



From all outward appearances, things between them resumed as before. They remained virtually inseparable, spending most of their evenings and weekends together, and were certainly no less passionate with each other than they'd been.

They celebrated a quiet Thanksgiving at Gable's house with turkey and all the trimmings, and Erin spoke excitedly about how much she looked forward to spending their first Christmas together.

But Gable felt like she was living on borrowed time.

Erin was seeing a therapist named Karen twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays after school. She told Gable when her appointments were and said they were helping her, but she never shared any details of the sessions.

On those days, especially, Gable lived on tenterhooks, expecting the worst: expecting Erin to march in and announce she was straight after all.

It was on a Friday, three weeks before Christmas, that Gable got a phone call as she was about to leave the drugstore. Friday had become pizza night—Gable would pick up a large pepperoni and black olive pizza at the Slice of Heaven on her way home and they would rendezvous at her house. Erin's therapy went until five and Gable worked until six, so more often than not, Erin was waiting for her when she pulled in.

But Erin had other plans tonight.

"I'm glad I caught you," she began when Gable came on the line.

“What’s up?” Gable tried to keep her voice steady, but a feeling of dread pushed at her from all sides.

“Do you mind coming over to my house for dinner tonight instead of doing pizza?”

“No, whatever you like. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” Erin said. “I had a good session today and I want to talk to you about it. Karen thought I might be more comfortable if I was at home.”

“All right.” Gable couldn’t breathe. *Shit. Shit. Shit. This is it.*

“I’ll see you when you get here, then,” Erin signed off.

“See you soon.”

For the first time since they’d met, Gable was not anxious to see Erin. Her worst fears were about to be realized, she was certain. She was going to lose the woman she had come to love with all her heart and soul. It was going to be one lonely Christmas.

When she arrived at her destination, she cut the engine and sat in the Jeep a long moment, looking wistfully at Erin’s cabin. The warm, inviting glow of the light from the windows. She’d spent so many hours inside, in Erin’s arms, in Erin’s bed. It had become as much a home to her as her own. *Home is where the heart is, indeed. How cruel to find it, and then have it taken away.*

She forced herself out of the car and walked slowly up to the front door. Her hand trembled as it reached for the knob. “I’m here,” she announced, letting herself in.

The stereo was playing “It Had to Be You.”

The dining table was set for two, with Erin’s best china and sterling silver flatware set on linen napkins and place mats. Delicate crystal flutes, positioned just so. In the center, two slender candles in silver candlesticks flanked a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket.

Gable pulled off her coat and hung it from a hook next to the front door. Her nose caught a whiff of...*something wonderful*. She started toward the kitchen, but Erin’s voice from the bedroom doorway stopped her in her tracks.

“Hi. I was changing.”

Gable turned and wanted to melt on the spot. Erin was wearing the outfit that was absolutely, positively *guaranteed* to drive Gable wild—the black demi-cup bra and matching panties she had bought at Victoria’s Secret that memorable shopping day. *The bra and panties that*

Erin had been wearing when she haunted Gable's dreams.

Gable couldn't breathe. Perhaps she should never have told Erin about the dreams. That lingerie had become Erin's secret weapon. Gable could feel a roar of heat rush over her like a wave, settling between her legs. She was instantly wet.

"What's all this?" Her voice sounded quite a bit higher than usual, and Erin seemed pleased by that.

A big smile spread across her face as she approached and wrapped her arms around Gable's neck. Automatically, Gable gathered her close, arms around her waist, but she was too stunned to speak. This certainly was not at *all* what she expected.

"Gable?" Erin's forehead furrowed as she looked into Gable's eyes. "Is something the matter?"

"I...uh...well, I uh...wasn't expecting *this*," Gable stuttered.

"Why? I can't be romantic?"

"No! I mean, yes! Of *course* you can be romantic. I mean...you *are* romantic. Very. A lot. Like now. This." Gable sounded like her brain was short-circuiting, which wasn't far from the truth. *You can't think straight when she wears that.* "I just mean...I...never mind." *Why are you fighting this, you idiot?*

Her body took control, as it always did when Erin brought out the black bra and panties. She dipped her head and met Erin's mouth hard as her hands smoothed down over Erin's ass and pulled their bodies roughly together.

Erin whimpered and laced her fingers through Gable's hair as she deepened the kiss, thrusting her tongue into Gable's mouth and rocking against her, a slow easy roll of her hips that sent Gable's arousal into the stratosphere.

She had to come up for air. "God, what you do to me," she said hoarsely, as she matched Erin's movements with thrusts of her own.

"Clothes," Erin panted, breaking their embrace to grapple for the clasp and zipper on Gable's navy dress slacks. "You have far too many clothes on."

Gable fumbled for the buttons on her shirt, not about to disagree. She felt like a death row prisoner who had been given a last-minute reprieve by the governor.

Once Gable was naked, Erin quickly stripped off her lingerie and led her by the hand to the candlelit bedroom and into the big sleigh

bed.

Their mouths met again—impatient, hungry—as their bodies pressed against each other, breast to breast, pelvis to pelvis.

Erin rolled them until she was atop Gable, then she pushed herself up on her hands and opened her legs, so she was straddling Gable's abdomen.

Gable reached up and cupped Erin's breasts in her hands as she thrust upward with her hips. She could feel the wetness of Erin's desire paint her stomach, and it ratcheted up her arousal another notch. Erin threw her head back and groaned.

Their rocking against each other grew more frenzied, and Gable pinched Erin's nipples hard.

Erin groaned again, louder. Her breathing was ragged. "Oh God, Gable. Please. I need your hands on me."

Gable pinched the sensitive nipples again before sliding her hands down Erin's flat stomach and into the vee between her thighs. Her thumbs rubbed lightly against Erin's clit, and Erin let out a long, throaty growl that Gable felt to her core.

The fire in her belly flared white hot, and she could feel the moisture build between her legs. She'd never been so wet.

Neither had Erin.

Gable slipped two long fingers of her right hand into Erin as her left thumb circled her clit.

Erin gave a startled cry, and then her hips began rocking furiously against Gable's hand. "Oh! Oh, Gable!"

Gable could tell Erin was very close. So was she.

"Erin," she moaned in a ragged plea, her hands pleasuring Erin in ever faster, longer strokes.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Gable!" Erin arched her back and her hand found Gable's clit and rubbed it hard, sending them over the precipice together.

They collapsed against each other, their bodies trembling, both struggling to breathe.

Once their heartbeats had returned to normal, Erin shifted her weight and snuggled against Gable's side, her head in the crook of her shoulder and an arm and a leg thrown over her body. "How can it get better every time?" she whispered, her hand playing lazily with Gable's sensitive nipple.

"We're very fortunate," Gable said, kissing the top of Erin's head.

"Yes, we are. I'm lucky to have you, Gable. You're sweet, and kind, and generous."

Gable warmed at the reassuring words and hugged her lover closer.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to tell you how I feel about you," Erin continued in a low voice. She pushed herself up on one elbow so she could look down at Gable. "I've been working on that." She resumed her gentle caresses of Gable's breasts and stomach with her free hand.

"You have?"

Erin nodded. "And I'm making progress."

"You are?" Gable held her breath.

"Mmm-hmm." Erin looked away and cleared her throat. "Karen's really helping me to understand a lot of why I am the way I am. Why I have such a problem telling you the way I feel about you. I haven't gotten it all figured out yet, but..." Her eyes rose to meet Gable's. They were bright with emotion. She took a deep breath. "I love you, Gable. With all my heart."

Gable let out a whoosh of air. Relief flooded through her and warmed her from within. "You love me?"

Erin nodded. "Of course I do." A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and fell on Gable's shoulder. "Did you doubt it?"

"No." Gable pulled her into a close embrace. "No, I...I can feel how much you do, when we're like this." She sighed. "I was afraid that the therapist might...might convince you that it was just a phase you were going through or something."

Erin barked out a laugh. "A phase? You think this is a phase I'm going through?"

"No, of course not. *I* know it's not. I mean...I thought that you might be going to a therapist because you weren't sure you were gay. That your mom suggested it because she wanted you to be straight."

"Gable." Erin's tone was reproachful as she rose up again so she could look into Gable's eyes. "I told you my mother was okay with it. She *is*. She wants to meet you."

"Okay." Gable nodded uncertainly.

"I told her how much you mean to me." She caressed Gable's face with her hand. "I never, *ever* have doubted that. Or questioned whether we are supposed to be together."

Gable's heart swelled in her chest until she felt it would burst.

"I told my mother how *frustrated* I was that I couldn't bring myself to tell you how much I love you. I'd get close...but then, something would stop me. I was afraid you might..." Her voice drifted off.

"Might what?" Gable asked.

"Oh, that you might get tired of it...not hearing the words. That you might find someone else who *would* tell you."

"Erin, there is no one else for me. Ever."

Erin sighed and rested her cheek against Gable's chest. "I hope not," she whispered.

"I was terrified that you were going to break it off tonight," Gable confessed.

"What?" Erin exclaimed. "You're not serious!"

"I was afraid of losing you. Every time you went to see your therapist, I worried you'd come back and tell me you were straight. When you told me tonight you wanted to talk to me—here—about your session, I figured the time had come."

Erin shook her head in disbelief. Her eyes held Gable's. "I wanted it to be *here* because I wanted to fix you a nice dinner, have some champagne. Make it a real romantic evening. And Karen thought it might be easier for me to make my 'big declaration' here, where I feel the safest." She grinned crookedly as a soft blush infused her cheeks. "Of course, as six o'clock got nearer and nearer I decided I wanted to skip right to *this* part and do dinner later, and thankfully I was able to convince you." The smile faded. She blew out a sigh of regret. "I'm sorry, Gable. Sorry that you doubted me. I hoped you *knew*, even if I couldn't tell you."

She looked away, staring off into space as if she was gathering her thoughts. Her jaw set with determination and her eyes grew cold. "My...my *husband*"—she spat the word as if it were a curse—"he wasn't very nice to me, Gable."

Gable felt a sudden overwhelming anger toward a man she couldn't put a face to. "He...He really messed up how I function in relationships." Erin paused and took a shaky breath. "I didn't want to screw this up, Gable. *Us*, I mean. *That's* why I'm seeing a counselor. So that you and I can really have a future together."

"I can't imagine my future without you." Gable ran her fingertip along Erin's jaw.

Erin turned her head and kissed Gable's hand. "I'm glad to hear that." She lay back down against Gable's side, and they hugged each other in quiet contentment for a long while.

"So, tell me..." Gable abruptly changed position, moving atop Erin. She grinned mischievously down at her lover before lowering her head to put her mouth between Erin's breasts. Her tongue ran along Erin's cleavage. "What did you cook us for dinner?"

"Uh...Uh..." Erin shuddered, and her body rose to press against Gable's. "We're having baked potatoes, which are being kept warm in the oven. And, uh...oh, *yeah*...uh, salad. Which is in the fridge."

Her eyes glazed over as Gable's mouth closed around a nipple and sucked lightly, rhythmically. "Oh, God. And...ugh...pie. Cherry pie for dessert. Oh, Jesus, Gable."

Gable nipped the sensitive bud lightly as she trailed her hand up the inside of Erin's thigh. Teasing.

"Steaks," Erin was panting now, her body writhing beneath Gable's touch. "They're fast. Everything can wait."

"Not everything." Gable slid down to taste her lover, to soothe the raging inferno that enveloped them both. "I can't wait. And neither can you."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It started out as one of the best Christmas holidays Gable had had since she was a child and her parents had both been alive. She could remember the thrill of running downstairs and opening presents with her brothers, turning the living room into a disaster area of wrapping paper and ribbons, new toys and board games and sporting equipment and clothes.

In the thirty years since, she'd spent a Christmas now and then with one or another of her brothers, but most of the time she'd been alone. And she hadn't really minded it at all. She'd put up a tree, build a fire, fix herself a nice dinner, and open the presents her brothers had mailed to her while yuletide carols played in the background. No, she really hadn't minded it.

But everything was different now. Sharing the experience with Erin *more* than doubled the joy of Christmas. It made Gable feel like a kid again, excited and happy and more filled with the holiday spirit than she could remember.

Erin helped her decorate her tree, and she returned the favor. They played Christmas carols and drank eggnog and swapped stories of where their more treasured ornaments had come from. When Christmas Eve arrived, they ate snow crab at Gable's house and opened stocking stuffers, then adjourned to Erin's to spend the night.

"Can't we open just *one* of our presents tonight? Pretty please?" Gable looked longingly at the smattering of presents waiting under Erin's tree as they hung up their coats.

Erin chuckled. "I thought we agreed to wait until tomorrow."

"We did." Gable sighed dramatically.

Erin put her arms around Gable and squeezed her tight. “I’ll tell you what, my darling Camp Fire Girl. Light us a one-matcher in the fireplace and I’ll let you open one tonight and the rest tomorrow.”

“Deal!”

Once they had a cheery fire going, they changed—Gable into men’s flannel pajamas and Erin into light fleece loungewear—and curled up on the couch together under a lap robe.

“This is perfect,” Gable said, draping an arm along the back of the couch so she could run her fingers lazily through Erin’s hair while they stared at the fire.

“I’ll second that.” Erin closed her eyes and groaned contentedly. “Although if you keep doing that, you’ll put me right to sleep.”

Gable’s hand froze. “Well, I don’t want to do *that*, or I won’t get to open any presents!” She leaned over to nuzzle Erin. “Not to mention some other plans I have for you later that I really would rather you be awake for.”

Erin smiled. “You’re incorrigible. All right. You can open *one*.”

“So...which one?” Gable asked, eyeing the four packages with her name on them.

Erin sat up a little and pushed her hair back from her face, blinking drowsily. “You can open that.” She pointed to the largest one.

Gable hustled over to the tree and picked up the gift. It was lighter than she expected. She held it up and shook it gently as she carried it back to the couch. It made an odd sound she couldn’t identify. Tearing open the green and gold paper, her hands came to a large cardboard box. She opened it and found a sea of Styrofoam peanuts. Digging through it, she found a familiar-looking black case, shaped like a hatbox.

“A drum!” she exclaimed with enthusiasm. “You got me a snare drum!” She took the case out of the box and sprang the latches on the lid.

“I knew you had to have one that day in the band room,” Erin gave a satisfied smile. “It was you, as I recall, who told me it’s never too late.”

“Oh, this is so cool!” Gable shook her head in disbelief. Then realization struck. “You wrapped the drumsticks separately, didn’t you...so I won’t get them until tomorrow! Oh, you’re a cruel woman, Erin Richards.”

Erin laughed. “There’s other drum-related goodies among your gifts, that’s all I’ll say. I will let you open another present if you like,

but I get one first.”

“You’re so accommodating,” Gable pecked her on the cheek. She jumped up and returned with one of her presents for Erin. “I hope you like it.”

Erin pulled off the ribbon and bow and carefully undid the gold metallic paper beneath.

“Oh, Gable. It’s lovely.” It was a music box made of fragrant sassafras wood, and it had Erin’s initials carved in the top. When she opened it to reveal velvet-lined compartments for earrings and bracelets, it played “It Had To Be You,” the old standard that Erin had been playing the night she told Gable she loved her.

“How? Where did you get this?” Erin ran her fingers over the smooth polished surface of the box, lingering on the delicate carved initials. “The workmanship is wonderful.”

Gable blushed. “I’m glad you like it. I made it for you.”

“You made this?” Erin gazed at her with her mouth gaping open. “Really? Oh, Gable, it’s just amazing. You never told me you could do this.”

“Well, as I recall, I think I did tell you that my brother Mason taught me a thing or two about whittling and carpentry.”

“Yes, but you never told me you could do *this*.” She planted a kiss on Gable’s cheek. “How did you ever find the song?”

“Google. I found a company that sells the mechanisms. They had hundreds of tunes.”

“Well, it is an unbelievably cool present. Thanks so much. That took a lot of work.”

“Glad you like it. So...do I get another present? Hmm?”

Erin laughed. “Oh, all right. You sure you don’t want to wait?”

“Erin!”

“Okay, okay. You have a present up in the guest room you can open tonight.” Erin had a devilish grin on her face.

“The guest room?” Gable’s curiosity was piqued. She thought all of her presents were under the tree. “Why is it in the guest room? Is it too big? Does its shape give it away?”

Erin shrugged. “Guess you’ll have to go up and see.”

As soon as Gable started toward the guest room, she jumped up and followed at her heels.

Gable turned the knob and pushed open the door. Curled into a ball against the pillow on the bed lay a sleeping kitten: black except for

his four white socks and the stark white triangle on his chest.

“Oh, my,” she exclaimed in a low voice.

The kitten raised his head and looked at her and mewed a sleepy greeting. When she started toward the bed, he got up and stretched. Gable gently picked him up and held him against her chest, looking down into pale green eyes as she scratched him beneath the chin in the way that Earl Grey favored. The kitten leaned into her touch, closed his eyes, and started to purr, a raspy loud buzzing that seemed to vibrate his sleek body.

“He’s so adorable!” Gable gushed. “What splendid markings—he looks like he’s wearing a tuxedo and spats!”

“I got him from the shelter in Charlevoix,” Erin said, looking on approvingly. “Can you believe someone could abandon this little guy in the snow?”

“No way. He’s so *tiny*!”

“I had him checked out with a vet, and he’s had all his shots. So I take it I chose well?”

Gable crossed to Erin with the kitten in her arms and kissed her soundly. “More than okay. Does he have a name?”

“Thought I’d leave that to you.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about that a while. Hey! Has he met Earl Grey yet?”

Erin shook her head. “I didn’t want to hit him with too much at once. I’ve kept him in here since I got him a couple days ago. Thought we could introduce them after he’s had time to get used to both of us. I know they’ll become great buddies.”

“How long do you think it will take Earl to teach this one how to get up in the rafters?”

“Two minutes, I’m sure!” Erin laughed.

Earl Grey used the rafters that spanned Erin’s ceiling as his own private playground, racing up and down the logs at all hours of the day and night. He had first gained access to the rafters through a dramatic leap from a high bookcase. Erin had then facilitated his way up and down by covering one of the support posts with rough sisal rope, effectively turning it into a ten-foot-high scratching post.

“I have to admit, he’ll sure make it less lonely around my house when you’re not there,” Gable said. “I’ve gotten to where I almost can’t sleep in my big old empty bed anymore without you in it.”

The kitten yawned and slumped in her arms. “Back to sleep, baby boy,” she said, returning him to his spot against the pillow. “I’ll check on you soon.”

He curled into a ball and was soon fast asleep again. She and Erin retreated into the living room and resumed their places snuggled up to each other on the couch.

“I know it’s not always a good idea to get a pet for someone,” Erin said “But I was pretty sure you’d take to him, after watching you with Earl. And I love to see a precious little thing like that one in there get a good home.”

“He’s a wonderful present,” Gable assured her. “All the presents are great.”

They remained wrapped up in each other’s arms for several minutes, enjoying the Christmas tree, the fire, and each other. Earl Grey turned up from wherever he’d been hiding all night and settled into Erin’s lap.

“Well *there* you are,” Erin said. “Where were you this time, eh? Are you going to teach your new little friend where all your hiding places are?”

Although it was a relatively small cabin, Earl Grey sure knew how to disappear—curling into the corner of a closet, or hiding under the bed, or in a pile of laundry. Gable smiled, imagining how it would be with the two felines. Quite a family. It was such a serene and loving moment, there in front of the fire, that she decided the time had come to give the gift she most wanted Erin to have. As soon as she made the decision, she could feel the pounding of her heart in her chest.

“I’ve got something else I’d like you to open tonight.” The quaver in her voice betrayed her nervousness. Her palms felt suddenly clammy. She wiped her right hand on the lap robe that covered their legs before she withdrew a velvet-covered ring box from a pocket in her pajamas.

When she heard a sharp intake of breath, she knew immediately she’d made a mistake. Erin stared at the ring box with wide eyes, her face ashen. Gable never got a chance to say a word.

“Don’t, Gable. Oh, please don’t.” Erin whispered. “Can’t we keep things as they are?” She lifted fearful eyes to her, close to tears.

Gable put the box back in her pocket without a word and drew Erin into a cautious embrace. They didn’t move for a very long moment.

“All right,” she said finally, her voice choked with emotion. “We’ll leave things as they are. I won’t bring it up again.”



As the days passed, she tried to be grateful for what she had and as content with their arrangement as Erin seemed to be, and most of the time she was. Erin was everything she'd ever dreamed of in a partner. Kind. Giving. Honest. Funny. Passionate. When they were together, Gable was blissfully happy. And Erin seemed every bit as devoted to Gable as Gable was to her.

But on the nights she spent alone, Gable admitted to herself she wanted more.

And every morning, she started the day with a prayer that Erin would change her mind sometime soon.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On a bitter cold morning in late January, Gable found it more difficult than usual to extricate herself from Erin's warm body to drive to the pharmacy. There had been an ice storm overnight, and on top of the ice was three inches of new snow. Area schools were closed, and Erin had done her best to convince her to call in sick and stay in bed. She nearly succeeded.

The roads were treacherous. Snowplows and salt trucks had not made it that far out in the country yet. In fact, no other vehicles were out at all, and just a solitary set of tire tracks showed on the road ahead of her. The tracks fishtailed badly in several places—sliding off the edge of the road, or into the oncoming lane. *This is really stupid to be out in this. Maybe you should have stayed in bed with Erin.*

Gable drove at a crawl, especially as she approached the bridge across the wide Pine River, two miles from Erin's cabin. Her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the broken guardrail halfway across. There was a huge gap in it, and the tracks she'd been following swerved right to it and ended there. *Oh my God! That car's gone in the river!*

Horried, she pumped the brakes and slid to a stop at the edge of the road. Even before she shut off the engine, she heard screaming.

She got out and hurried as best as she could to the edge of the bridge and looked over. Twenty feet below her and several feet upstream, a boy of sixteen or seventeen was struggling, trying to pull himself from an enormous hole in the ice, but the ice was too thin to support his weight. He was right in the middle of the river, where it was fifteen to twenty feet deep.

"Help! Somebody help me!" he screamed.

“Hang on!” Gable shouted. Her heartbeat kicked up double time.

The boy’s head swiveled around and his eyes found her. “Help me! Hurry! Please hurry!”

“Hang on! Was anyone else in the car with you?”

“No!” the boy screamed.

“I’ll be right there!” Gable hurried back to the Jeep, slipping and sliding with every step, and switched on her emergency radio. “Dispatch from McCoy. Car off Peterson Bridge at Belknap Road. Driver in the river. Send ambulance and water rescue.”

She heard the dispatcher acknowledge her as she clipped the radio to her belt and hustled to the back of the Jeep. There was a pair of hundred-foot lengths of sturdy nylon rope there, neatly coiled. She grabbed them both. She also shoved a screwdriver from her tool kit into the back pocket of her jeans.

The bank was steep to the water’s edge, and she skidded down almost on her butt. The teenager had stopped trying to pull himself onto the ice. Now he was fighting just to keep his head above water. His ragged gasps for air sounded loud in the still morning.

“I’m going to throw you a rope! Try to grab it!” Gable anchored the end of one of the ropes beneath her foot and prepared for her throw.

“I can’t!” the boy sobbed.

She tossed the coil of rope, and it fell across the hole in the ice. The boy’s head slipped under, then popped up again. He started hyperventilating, desperate for air.

“Grab the rope!” Gable urged.

His arms and legs flailed about in clumsy, jerky movements as he tried for the rope.

It was then that Gable got a good look at the boy’s hands. They were clubs of ice. Useless. No way could he save himself, and he wasn’t going to be able to keep himself up much longer. She had to go after him.

She tried to calm her racing heart with deep breaths as she quickly prepared the ropes. The one across the ice would be the rescue rope; she tied off her end to a large sturdy oak at the water’s edge.

The other rope would be for her. One end around the oak, the other around her waist. A strong current swept down the middle of the river, and Gable knew that if she fell through, there was a good chance she’d get swept downstream under the thick ice.

She was quickly out onto the ice, crawling on her belly toward the teenager. The adrenaline rush energized her and brought all her senses into sharp focus. The boy's eyes were huge, pulling at her, beseeching her to hurry. His head slipped under again, and when it popped back up he was on the downstream edge of the hole. He coughed and gulped loudly for air. If he went under again, the current would take him under the ice.

Thirty feet away. Then twenty, halfway between the boy and shore. When Gable was fifteen feet away, she heard a cracking sound beneath her, and her heart began pounding in her ears. She went fully spread-eagle and froze, her face pressed up against the slick, hard surface.

The ice held. Inching toward him, she shouted encouragement. "Keep your head up! Hang on, I'm almost to you!"

Another sharp report sounded as the ice cracked again. This time she could clearly see the thin fissure of separation, directly under the right side of her body. Once more she froze, trying to keep her weight evenly distributed.

The moment Gable actually fell through seemed to take forever. Everything happened in slow motion. One crack became two, then six, then forty—a spider web of fractures beneath her.

The terrifying cracking sounds got louder and louder.

She watched in horrified fascination as the bottom dropped out and she was plunged into the icy water, still a body length from the boy.

The frigid immersion was such a shock to her system that it squeezed the air from her lungs, inducing a long moment of panic as she started kicking. She sucked in air greedily. Pinpricks of pain everywhere, like she had fallen on a bed of tiny nails. Then cold. A kind of cold she'd never experienced before: a numbing cold, relentless. It soaked through her clothing, weighing her down. *Damn. Got to be fast.*

She focused on the boy, taking great gulps of air as she fought through the broken ice to reach him, grabbing the rescue rope on the way.

Though he had seemed to be all done in, the teenager came to life when she got to him. With a final burst of energy he grabbed at her, desperately trying to use her to keep himself afloat.

Gable went under.

The boy tried to wrap his arms around her. They struggled, locked together, until she was able to turn him so his back was to her. She grabbed him over his shoulder in a lifesaving hold as she popped back to the surface, gasping for air.

“Don’t fight me!” she barked at him. “Let me help you!”

He went limp, whether in compliance or exhaustion she didn’t know or care. She managed to get the rescue rope wrapped around him, but she’d lost the dexterity to tie the right kind of knot. Her gloves were becoming stiff with ice and she was losing the feeling in her hands. She finally got the rope looped around in a couple of half hitches and let the boy’s own body weight tighten it. She hoped it was secure enough.

Her legs began protesting the lengthy struggle against the current. She felt as though twenty-pound weights were attached to her ankles, pulling her down. She concentrated all her energy on getting the boy up and onto the ice.

“Try to help me,” she gasped, but the teenager was barely conscious. She got under him and tried to boost him up, but the ice cracked away under his weight.

She took up the slack of the rescue rope and tried again, and then again. The ice kept breaking, and she weakened with each effort, but every attempt brought them a foot or two closer to shore, and onto thicker and thicker ice.

Finally, on the fifth try, the ice supported the upper half of the boy’s body, and Gable quickly hoisted his legs up as well. She knew better than to try to haul herself up right next to him. The ice would never support them both.

She was beginning to have trouble keeping herself afloat. She managed to kick her way to a spot far enough from the boy that she thought it was safe to try. *Get out. Get out right now.*

Propping herself up on her left elbow on the ice, she grappled for the rope around her waist that linked her to shore. It was slick and hard, covered with ice. She got a good look at her hands, and her blood ran cold. *Oh Jesus. This is bad.* Her gloves were stiff with a thick coating of ice too.

Gable could no longer move her fingers. She couldn’t feel them at all. In desperation, she slammed her right hand against the hard ice repeatedly, trying to regain some dexterity and circulation. She fumbled for the screwdriver in her back pocket so she could gain purchase on the ice, but it was useless. Her hands would no longer obey her. The

screwdriver sank to the bottom.

The current was relentless. The muscles in her arm and shoulder finally surrendered to it and she slipped back into the water.

Oh shit. Panic was sour in her mouth. Help is coming. Help is coming. Hang on. Swim. That's it. Just keep swimming.

Gable couldn't feel her arms, her legs, or her feet. She looked down and was almost surprised to see her legs still kicking away, albeit in the same scary, jerky way the boy's had. She was losing control of her body, and finding it more and more difficult to focus. It was all she could do now to keep her face above water.

The current pulled at her until she was against the downstream side of the hole. She clutched desperately at the edge of the ice to keep from being swept under it. *There's too much rope.* She tried to twist it around her arms to take up the slack but she had no coordination left.

The current was winning.

Her head slipped under and she sucked in a mouthful of water. It startled her and scared her so much she found the strength for one last desperate effort to survive. She fought her way back up, kicking and failing about with limbs she no longer had power over. She caught a glimpse of the boy, still unmoving on the ice.

If this is all for nothing, she thought hazily, Erin will be so pissed at me.

She tried to keep herself from going under by hooking her elbows on the downstream edge of the ice. The current held her there for a full minute or more, her head barely above water, long enough for her to feel a burst of hope she might be able to remain like that until help arrived.

But the ice she was leaning on abruptly gave way, breaking off and tipping sideways, throwing her back into the water. Gable managed to gulp a quick breath before she went under.

The current grabbed hold of her and took her under the ice, into the dark void beyond the hole. She drifted until a sharp tug cut into her waist. The rope pulled taut and the current pinned her, face up, against the ice, several feet downstream of the hole.

Gable opened her eyes, surprised at how well she could see, surprised that it was *beautiful*—the way the ice reflected the light from above; the bubbles trapped in the ice acting like prisms, shooting rainbows of color in every direction.

You can't get back to the hole. You have to break a new one. Her training told her what to do but her body was beyond her control now. Her arms flailed uselessly above her head, waving in the current.

Time seemed to stop then, and Gable drifted outside herself, no longer aware of her body, the cold, the river, the current.

How long does it take to die, when you drown? she wondered. *How long does your brain keep working?* It seemed like forever. She had time enough to think of each of her brothers. Her parents—would they be there at the moment of death, waiting for her?

Gable closed her eyes and saw Erin's face. *You made my life complete, my love. I just wish we'd had more time together.*

She fought it until the last—that final exhalation.

When Gable finally did surrender, she had Erin in her mind and in her heart.

She sucked in water, and then she relaxed. A feeling of euphoria poured over her. Lifting her, surrounding her.

Her heart stopped beating.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Shouldn't she be waking up by now?" Gable heard Stewart's worried voice fuzzily, as if from a distance. Much louder were the regular whooshing sound to her right and the steady beeping that was coming from her left.

"We need to give it time," an unfamiliar male voice said. "It's often hard to predict with these types of cases, because there are so many different variables—the temperature of the water, health of the patient, how long they're submerged, how quickly CPR is administered. I don't think we should be worrying quite yet."

The river, she remembered. Her head ached. And her chest. She tried to speak. *What the hell?*

"How long will she be on the respirator, Doctor?" Erin's voice, sounding as tense as her brother's.

"It's a bit too soon to say. There could be a buildup of pulmonary fluids—that'll be our chief concern over the next forty-eight hours. I'll be able to tell you more after we've gotten all the test results back."

"Thank you, Doctor." *Stewart.*

"I'll check in with you again later," the doctor said.

Gable tried to force open her eyes, but it felt like heavy sandbags were weighing down her eyelids. Her arms were heavy too; she couldn't lift them, couldn't signal Erin and Stewart that she was all right. *Just tired. So very tired.*



The next time she awoke, the first thing that hit her was how sore her throat was. She couldn't swallow. Her chest ached too. But that throbbing in her head was better.

She became aware of a gentle pressure in her palm. Another hand, holding hers. A gentle squeeze of comfort. *Erin*. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Gable? Can you hear me, sweetheart?"

Sweetheart? You've never called me sweetheart before.

Gable opened her eyes. Erin was leaning over the bed. Her eyes were puffy, and she had a gaunt, disheveled look, like she hadn't slept in a long while. But her eyes lit up and her face registered her immense relief. "You're awake!"

Gable squeezed her hand.

Erin burst into tears and squeezed back. "You're here with me, aren't you? You know who I am? You remember?" Her voice shook.

Gable squeezed her hand again and tried to nod her head. The respirator restricted her movements.

"Thank God," Erin said. "I'll be back in a second, Gable. Swear to God, just a second. Don't drift off—I'm going to get the doctor." She bent down and kissed Gable's cheek, then disappeared.

Gable glanced around as much as she could. In addition to the respirator, she was on a heart monitor. An IV fed the contents of a clear plastic bag into a needle in her left arm.

From a distance, she heard, "Stewart! She's awake! She remembers! Get the doctor!"

Erin was quickly back beside the bed, and took Gable's hand again. Tears tracked her cheeks, but she had a smile from ear to ear. "You had us worried there, Gable. Welcome back. I love you."

Gable squeezed her hand very deliberately, three times. *I love you.*

Erin's face brightened more, as she got the message. "I know, honey. I know."

Honey. I like it when you call me honey.

"The doctor's going to be here in a minute, and they're going to chase me out of here for a while. But I'll be right outside. Stewart's here too. He's been in touch with your brothers."

Gable wanted to ask about the boy she'd tried to save but didn't know how. She squeezed Erin's hand and blinked her eyes rapidly.

"Stewart? Do you want me to get Stewart?" Erin asked.

Gable shook her head slightly from side to side. It was all she could manage with the respirator, but Erin understood.

"Okay, that's not it. Are you in pain?"

Gable shook her head again.

"Want me to get you something?" Erin tried.

Gable's forehead furrowed as she shook her head once again in frustration.

Erin frowned. "I'm sorry, honey, I don't understand."

Gable pulled her hand out of Erin's and spread Erin's palm open so she could use it as a writing tablet. With her index finger, she spelled out b-o-y.

Erin's face lit up. "Oh! Of course! The boy! Mike Ester. He'll be fine. You saved him. He woke up right after they brought him in, and the doctors say he'll make a full recovery." She bent and kissed Gable on the cheek, then remained like that, with their faces touching, for a long moment before she whispered, "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

She straightened just as the doctor arrived with Stewart. Smiling, she released her hand and retreated a step so that Stewart could take her place by the bedside.

"Hi, sis," Stewart kissed her on the forehead. "Glad you're back with us. The boys all send their love."

"Gable, I'm Dr. Erickson," the doctor began, as he approached smiling from the opposite side of the bed. He was an attractive older gentleman with a gray-streaked beard who reminded her of Sean Connery, without the accent. "You've got quite a fan club lined up outside to see you, so we need to get you well in a hurry. Can you understand me?"

Gable nodded.

"Good. Do you remember what happened?"

She nodded again.

"The rescue squad responded about fifteen minutes after you radioed in, and pulled you out by your rope. They administered CPR on scene, but you didn't respond until you were en route in the ambulance. We ran a number of tests, including an EEG and CAT scan—and there was no evidence of brain injury. We warmed you slowly, and we'll keep the Bair Hugger on you for a while longer." He gestured toward an odd blanket that was draped over her: it looked like an inflatable mattress with holes in it. "Because you swallowed some river water, I want to

keep you on IV antibiotic therapy for at least another forty-eight hours or so.”

Gable grimaced.

“She hates hospitals,” Erin said.

The doctor smiled. “I would wager you’re going to get treated quite exceptionally well during your stay with us. Now I want to take you off the respirator, but we have to make sure your lungs are strong enough to stay off the vent. Do you understand?”

Gable nodded.

He put a meter on the tubing between the machine and Gable. “I want you to take a few deep breaths, so I can make sure you can pull enough oxygen on your own. Any time you’re ready.”

Gable took several long, deep breaths.

“Good. Very good.” The doctor reached for the junction of the tubing and unhooked it. “Okay, I want you to blow out a big breath for me.”

She exhaled, wincing as the doctor withdrew the tube that had been down her throat. She started coughing as soon as it was out, and a spasm of pain rolled through her chest.

“Easy,” the doctor said. “Try to relax.”

The coughing abated and she sank back against the pillow. Her mouth and throat were swollen and raw, and her chest felt as though someone were sitting on it. “Thanks,” she croaked.

“You’re welcome.” The doctor poured a paper cup of water as he pressed on a foot pedal to raise the head of the bed slightly. “Here, sip this. Just a little.” He put a straw in the cup and held it to her lips.

She took a few tentative sips, which eased the soreness in her throat.

The doctor glanced over his shoulder at a nurse who was hovering nearby. “Get some ice chips, will you, please?”

“How long...” Gable coughed again. The doctor gave her another sip. “How long have I been here?”

“The accident was yesterday morning. It’s”—he glanced at his watch—“about two-fifteen in the afternoon on Tuesday.”

I’ve lost a whole day and then some. Where was I all that time? Gable couldn’t remember anything beyond deciding to finally let go of that last breath.

“You’re out of immediate danger,” the doctor continued, putting on his stethoscope and warming it before he laid it gently against her chest. “But we want to keep you in here a couple more days and keep an eye on you. Make sure there are no complications with your lungs.” He listened for a moment, then took off the stethoscope with a satisfied expression. “Thank God the water was as cold as it was. You should make a full recovery.”

“Great,” she rasped.

“You got some frostbite on your hands,” he said, prompting Gable to glance down at them for the first time. The left one was entirely encased in gauze, the right lightly bandaged, leaving her fingers exposed. She wriggled them. They felt a little stiff but not too bad, all things considered.

“They’ll take a while to heal, but I expect no permanent damage. And you have some bruising around your waist from the rope.”

Pretty minor stuff when you really should be dead. She glanced at Erin, and her heart filled with joy and gratitude that she’d been spared yet again. *Thank you for giving us more time together,* she prayed.

“That was a very heroic thing you did.” The doctor rested a hand briefly on her shoulder. “If you promise not to talk much, I’ll let in a few of your visitors. But I’m going to tell them to keep it *very very* short. You need your rest.”



The doctor hadn’t been exaggerating when he said a crowd was waiting to see her. More than half of the fire squad was there, including Carl and Tim, and June had called in sick at the pharmacy so she could be there when Gable woke up. The most tearful visitors were the parents of the boy she saved.

The nurses enforced the doctor’s order and allowed them to visit only long enough to wish Gable well. Once the crowd had gone, Gable sent Stewart on his way too, under protest. He agreed to go home to Kalamazoo only because she insisted, and Erin promised to keep him informed of every development by cell phone.

Once they were alone, Erin sat on the edge of the bed and put her hand on Gable’s thigh. “How do you feel?”

"Mmm. Tired," Gable answered. Her eyelids were drooping.

"The doctor said you need to rest."

"Stay with me?"

"You just try to get rid of me."

"Wouldn't think of it," Gable replied. "Come up here beside me?"

"We shouldn't."

"Don't care. If you really want me to get some sleep..."

"What about your hands?"

"They're all right. We'll be careful."

Erin relented and climbed onto the narrow hospital bed next to Gable. She settled gingerly into her familiar position, lying on her left side with her head tucked into the crook of Gable's shoulder. Gently, she draped her arm across Gable's stomach.

"Sore?"

"S'fine. Thanks," Gable mumbled drowsily. She was nearly asleep when Erin whispered her name.

"Gable? You still awake?"

Gable answered but didn't open her eyes. "Mmm-hmm."

"All my life, I always dreamed I'd only get married once. Just once."

Gable struggled to rouse herself. *Erin's talking about marriage. This is important. You have to stay awake.* She wanted to encourage her to continue, but she didn't want to interrupt. Instead, she tilted her head and kissed Erin's forehead.

"My parents were married for fifty-one years. Devoted to each other until Dad died. And you know how it is, growing up Irish Catholic. No one we knew ever got divorced. It just didn't happen. That's the mentality I grew up with." Erin paused for a long moment.

"I guess I just always believed in the fairy tale that you find the person you're destined to be with, and you live happily ever after." She paused again. "But it didn't happen that way for me." She took a long, deep breath and let it out.

"I was right out of college and had just started teaching when I met Phil. I was thirty pounds heavier and hadn't dated much. Very inexperienced sexually—thanks to all those years of parochial schools. Phil was tall, charming, and a year older than I was, and I had no idea what he saw in me when he asked me out."

Gable could feel her tremble at the recollection.

"I didn't have any self-confidence at all, you understand, back then. I was still a kid, really. I was flattered by the attention, and I wanted so much to fall in love that I got swept up in the relationship. We got married less than three months after we met."

She trembled again. Took another long, deep breath.

"Things went downhill almost immediately. Phil was a very jealous guy. He hated to have me out of his sight at all, and if any guy dared talk to me... Well, he'd accuse me of all sorts of things for hours afterward. I didn't know it right away, but I found out later he followed me when I wasn't with him, spying on me to see if I was cheating on him. He even listened in on my phone calls."

Another long pause.

"What started out as gentle lovemaking became constant demands for sex. Rough sex. Whether I was up for it at that moment or not."

Gable was wide-awake now; her anger at the thought of what Erin had suffered was pouring through her.

"He told me from the beginning that he didn't believe in divorce." Erin laughed, but it was a laugh without humor. "I thought that was a good thing, at the time."

She took another deep, shuddering breath. Her voice, when she resumed, had the soft, fearful quality of a child's voice relating a nightmare. "He started drinking more and more. And then he started hitting me, about six months into the marriage."

Gable clenched her jaw. A tear slipped down her cheek.

"He broke my arm the first time. He cried and cried and promised it would never happen again. The second time he blackened both my eyes and gave me a concussion. That's when I left him."

Erin shifted her weight and hugged Gable tighter. "Phil refused to give me a divorce. He went to the school where I worked and made all sorts of crazy accusations, until finally they had to let me go. I don't blame them. They were worried about the kids, and he was clearly out of control."

She sighed. "Then he started showing up at the apartment where I moved. I wouldn't answer the door, and he'd pound on it and make all the neighbors crazy." Another pause. "One night he hid in the laundry room down the hall until I came home and pushed his way in behind me."

Erin was shaking again. "That was an awful night. And next day. During most of it, he kept me tied up and gagged and locked in a closet."

A tear fell and landed on Gable's chest.

"Oh, Erin." Gable's insides were twisted in knots.

"When he sobered up, he let me go, begging and pleading for forgiveness. I called the cops and got a restraining order and a lawyer. Phil was facing a lot of serious charges, but the prosecutor wasn't optimistic the jury would convict him. I was still married to him, after all." Another long pause.

"My lawyer worked a deal. Phil granted me a divorce and agreed to leave me alone, and I agreed not to press charges. I moved again the next day." She exhaled. A long, slow release of air, announcing her relief at finishing the story. "I looked over my shoulder for a long time, but I never heard from him again. So now you know," she concluded. "I haven't let myself think about those times very much. Too depressing. But Karen is helping me to get past the pain and move forward."

"I'm so sorry, Erin, that you had to endure so much," Gable whispered.

Erin shifted so that she could meet Gable's eyes for the first time since she'd started her story. "I'm sorry I've been living in the past. I've let it haunt me much too long."

She kissed Gable—a sweet, soft kiss on the lips.

"Ahem!" the duty nurse interrupted from the doorway. It was the same nurse who had flirted with Gable the last time she was hospitalized.

They broke apart, both turning deep red in embarrassment, but the nurse just chuckled. She checked Gable's IV and then turned to go. "Since you're the talk of the hospital today, I'll pretend not to notice that visiting hours ended a while ago. Call if you need anything. Although I would say you seem pretty content at the moment." She winked at them and pulled the door closed as she left the room.

"I should let you get some sleep," Erin said, settling back against Gable's side.

"Thank you for telling me," Gable whispered.

"I trust you, Gable. In a way I've never been able to trust anyone before."

"That's the way I feel about you too," Gable said.

"I know that, honey. You've been very patient with me, and I appreciate it. I know that you'd never do anything to hurt me." She began caressing Gable's stomach with her hand.

It was lulling. Gable's eyes closed.

"And I know I couldn't imagine life without you," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Gable replied drowsily.

"Still got that ring?"

Gable was instantly awake again. *Did I hear what I just thought I heard?* "Yes." She held her breath.

"I'm ready to talk about that now. Well not *now*, necessarily. Maybe we should wait until we have a little more privacy and all, and you've had a chance to think about whether you still want to. I mean, if you don't still want to, I'll understand..." She rambled on, uncertain.

"Oh, I want to, love. I want that more than anything," Gable said, her voice breaking as they held tight to one another.

"I love you," Erin said. "And I like saying it."

"Good." Gable kissed her very softly. "Because I want to hear it forever."

About the Author

Kim Baldwin is currently at work on the romance *Whitewater Rendezvous*, which will be released by Bold Strokes Books in May 2006. Her debut novel, *Hunter's Pursuit*, was a finalist for a Golden Crown Literary Society award for Best Lesbian Mystery/Action/Adventure/Thriller of 2004. She also has a short story in the new Bold Strokes Books anthology *Stolen Moments: Erotic Interludes 2* and *Lessons in Love: Erotic Interludes 3*, scheduled for release in May 2006. Nature, romance, and adventure are key themes in her stories. She lives with her partner in a cabin in the north woods.

Look for information about these works at www.boldstrokesbooks.com.

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WHITEWATER RENDEZVOUS

by

Kim Baldwin



2006

WHITEWATER RENDEZVOUS

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By the Author

Hunter's Pursuit

Force of Nature

Author's Note

This book is mostly set within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. While the Odakonya River and the village of Winterwolf are fictional, I tried to be as accurate as possible in my descriptions of the ANWR. This vitally important wilderness is under constant threat of being opened to oil drilling.

For more information on ways in which you can help to safeguard this national treasure for future generations, contact:

The Wilderness Society at:

<http://action.wilderness.org/>

The Sierra Club at:

<http://www.sierraclub.org/arctic>

The Natural Resources Defense Council at:

<http://www.savebiogems.org/arctic/>

Defenders of Wildlife at:

<http://www.savearcticrefuge.org/>

Two other sites of interest are at:

<http://www.arcticwildlife.org/home.htm>

<http://www.alaskawild.org/>

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And finally, to those wonderful and generous readers who buy my books and email me with words of encouragement. I'm eternally grateful.

DEDICATION

For M.

And her marvelous trained cats

CHAPTER ONE

Chicago, Illinois

Megan Maxwell pressed the first two fingers of her right hand firmly against the throbbing in her temple, as she pushed open one of the thick glass double doors that led from the World News Central newsroom to the executive offices. As soon as the door whooshed shut, blissful quiet enveloped her, the first respite in a stressful and very long day. It was 7:15 p.m. and the management wing was dark, but for the light spilling out from under her office door at the end of the hallway.

She made it halfway there before the BlackBerry on her left hip vibrated. Sighing, she reached beneath the tailored jacket of her navy pantsuit for the handset. The display read *911 control room*.

"Maxwell," she answered in a clipped voice as she returned to the newsroom.

"A small plane has entered the restricted air space around Camp David." The voice belonged to the executive producer of the sportscast currently on the air.

"Page Shelley to the studio," she told him. "Extension 7892. She's probably in makeup. I'm headed your way." Shelley Vincent and Ted Gilliam were her 8 p.m. anchor team, and of the two, Shelley was by far the better ad-libber with breaking news.

Megan strode briskly past the noisy assignment desk and the four large U-shaped communal writing pods where teams of writers, editors, and producers were preparing for upcoming new shows. She made a point of appearing oblivious to the eyes that glanced her way as she breezed through toward the control room, but she was well aware of the effect she had on her staff. No one had better appear to be idle when the vice president of news was around.

As soon as she entered the dimly lit control room with its intimidating array of monitors and switchboards, the executive producer she'd just spoken to wordlessly vacated his chair so she could slip into it. There were two rows of seats in the futuristic control center, both facing a wall of monitors. The operations personnel who controlled the massive switchboards, a mind-boggling array of lighted buttons and switches, occupied the front row: audio operator, technical director, robotics camera operator, Chyron and graphics operator.

In the second row, set on risers, were seats and computer terminals for the producer, executive producer, and director. The wall behind them was made of glass. On the other side was the studio, with its wide mahogany anchor desk and blue chroma-key wall for weather.

Megan quickly scanned the Associated Press bulletin on the computer in front of her. It said only that a small plane had violated the no-fly zone and was approaching Camp David, and that the Air Force had dispatched two F-16 fighters to intercept it.

"Two minutes out," the director announced.

Megan glanced at the monitors to make sure the other networks hadn't beaten them to air with the story, then swiveled around in her chair to see her anchor just entering the studio.

She punched the button that would key her mike to the studio speakers. "Less than two minutes, Shelley," she informed the anchor. "Get your IFB in so I can brief you."

The anchor took her seat and fumbled for her earpiece. The interruptible feedback system allowed on-air talent to hear both program sound and instructions from the control room.

Megan, meanwhile, keyed her mike to a small speaker on the assignment desk. "Nick, do we have confirmation?"

The disembodied voice of the evening desk manager answered, "Yes, but nothing beyond what AP has."

"What about a live shot?" she asked.

"From the Pentagon, roughly ten minutes away," he answered.

"One minute out," the director announced. "Camera two, tight on Shelley."

Megan keyed her mike to the anchor's IFB. "Another small plane has entered the restricted air space around the nation's capitol," she told Shelley, glancing at the monitor where the anchor's image was being framed up and brought into focus. "This one is approaching Camp

David, where the president is spending the weekend. Two F-16 fighters have been sent to intercept. We'll have a live shot from the Pentagon shortly."

The anchor nodded and began jotting down the information.

"Thirty seconds," the director said. "Coming back on camera two."

"Since nine-eleven, hundreds of small planes have violated Washington's restricted air space," Megan spoke quickly into the anchor's IFB. "Such incidents have become so routine that most go unreported. Four, however, have forced evacuations of lawmakers and others, the most recent of which was just two weeks ago, on April 18th. The so-called Air Defense Identification Zone comprises some two thousand square miles around the three D.C. area airports."

"Ten seconds," the director announced. "Ready camera two. Shelley's mike."

"Toss back to sports when you're done," Megan told the anchor as the floor director counted down the seconds.

The cut-in went smoothly, the anchor reciting the information Megan had fed to her as effortlessly as if it had been typed on the teleprompter.

They met two minutes later in the hallway outside the control room.

"Nice job," Megan said. "You should stick close. That live shot should be up soon."

"You know, it never ceases to amaze me," Shelley responded, as she plucked a dark brown hair from the front of her taupe designer suit with a frown.

"What does?"

"How you can recite off the top of your head the background information on just about any story that crosses the wires. Names. Dates. Places. Context. And you're *never* wrong."

Megan shrugged. "I've always had a pretty good memory."

"Phenomenal is more like it. I bet you can recite the names of every teacher you ever had, can't you?" Shelley studied Megan's face, clearly awaiting a response.

She considered the question a moment. "Honestly? I could probably name every classmate, too, if I had to."

"We really should do a story on *you*."

"No, what we *really* should do is get back to work. You have a newscast to prep for." She started to leave, but Shelley's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"By the way..." The anchor was looking at her with an impish smile and a sparkle in her pale blue eyes, like a child with a secret. "You...have some ink..." She pointed to Megan's right cheek.

"Ink?" Megan touched two fingers to her face as though she could feel the mark. "Is it bad?" She glanced around for a reflective surface: glass, chrome. Nothing.

"You have a blue Sharpie..." Shelley drew a short jagged streak in the air with a perfectly manicured index finger. "Kind of like that Harry Potter—Lord Valdemort scar thingie."

"Sharpie?" Megan asked, aghast. "I haven't had a Sharpie in my hand since..." She trailed off as she focused inward, remembering. *Since my department head meeting.* She knew immediately what had happened. She had nearly fallen asleep listening to the head of the sales department drone on and on about the latest ad revenues. Had sat at the conference table with her hand propped against her cheek, fighting back a yawn. Taking notes. *Oh, crap. That meeting was at four and it's after seven.*

"Since...?" Shelley's voice interrupted her mental recounting of everywhere she'd been and everyone she'd seen in the intervening hours.

"Never mind," she grumbled, but she felt her expression soften when she looked at the anchor. "Thanks, Shelley."

"Don't mention it."

She took the long way back to her office to avoid the newsroom and to make a stop in the expansive ladies' lounge adjacent to the bookings unit. Designed for visiting celebrity guests, it was the nicest of the restrooms on the floor, and, best of all, it was deserted at this hour.

The faint floral scent of hair spray assaulted her nostrils as she flicked on the lights and headed toward the long mirror where the hair and makeup artists worked. Her green eyes narrowed as she winced at her reflection. In addition to the three-inch-long jagged Sharpie tattoo, her normally impeccable façade was marred by an errant blond strand of hair that stood straight out of the side of her head.

"And no one bothered to tell me," she griped aloud. *No one* dared

tell me. Grace had already gone home. Her assistant certainly would have told her how foolish she looked. *And maybe a handful of others.*

The fact irritated her greatly. When she'd moved up the corporate ladder and starting making six figures, she began spending a good bit of money on her appearance, and as with everything else in her life, she paid attention to the details. Nice jewelry. Understated makeup. A \$400 salon stop every five weeks for a trim from Ritchie and a touch-up to the blond highlights she added to her straight, shoulder-length medium brown hair. A pedicure, manicure, and massage twice a month. A designer wardrobe of suits—twenty-four in all—size eight, except the pants always needed to be shortened slightly to fit her five foot six height because she refused to wear heels.

Not a single person said anything. Megan had learned to have a thick skin in her position, but it rankled to think that no one cared enough about her personally to spare her the embarrassment. *At least no one you ran across in the last couple of hours,* she tried to console herself. *Whose fault is that?* The question came and went like a whisper. She didn't dwell on such things.

It took a large dollop of cold cream, a couple of squirts of liquid soap, and vigorous scrubbing to erase the marking pen. Her cheek was beet red, like someone had slapped her, but that would pass. A spritz of hair spray tamed the unruly tuft of hair, and she felt almost presentable again. *Not too shabby. Back to business.*

A loud groan escaped her lips when she opened her office door. The chaos awaiting her was far worse than she'd expected. Her massive oak desk was piled high with anchor audition tapes, employee contracts awaiting her signature, the latest ratings, reports from her department heads, and a vast number of other scripts, tapes, documents, and letters. *Great. Just great. I'll be lucky to get out of here by midnight.*

She slipped off her shoes and sank into her high-backed leather chair, automatically reaching for her remote to turn on the six monitors set into the opposite wall. The one tuned to WNC she left barely audible; those showing the competition were muted.

It was only then that she noticed a space carefully cleared in the center of her desk so that her eyes would be drawn to the travel brochure placed there, isolated from the bedlam surrounding it—an enticing island in a hostile sea of paperwork. A yellow Post-it note on

top relayed a message penned in the familiar backhand slant of her best friend Justine Bernard, a reporter with WNC.

*Give it up, already. You are coming along.
I'm going to nag you until you do.*

Megan smiled for the first time that day. Justine was so damn persistent. *But that is why you're such a good reporter. Never take no for an answer.*

She started to toss the brochure into the trash, but stopped herself when she caught the picture on the back. It was breathtaking, a wide-angle photo of an endless caribou herd, tens of thousands of animals, set amidst a landscape of snow-topped mountains and lush, vibrant green valleys. She turned the brochure over and pulled off the Post-it note, revealing the words *Discover Alaska, Land of Endless Adventures*. Surrounding the header was a collage of happy tourists enjoying all the possibilities: dogsledding, whitewater kayaking and rafting, backpacking, fishing, whale watching.

Opening the brochure, she saw that Justine had circled the trip she'd been chattering about for the last several days. *Kayak the remote and scenic Odakonya River as it cuts through canyons in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and journeys across the coastal plain to the sea. Witness the magnificent spectacle of the annual migration of the Porcupine caribou herd. Fish for Arctic char and grayling. Explore the grandeur of the last great American frontier. An unforgettable experience that will change your life.*

There was a quote from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas about the refuge that read, "This is the place for man turned scientist and explorer; poet and artist. Here he can experience a new reverence for life that is outside his own and yet a vital and joyous part of it."

Those are some pretty hefty promises. She had to admit they really were striking photographs. And as a child, she had dreamed about traveling through an untamed wilderness, like the early explorers she had read about. But that had been too many years ago, and she'd long since given up her childhood fantasies. And her only real experience with the out-of-doors had been a nightmare. *Besides, there's no way in the world this place could get along without me for two whole weeks. Even one week would be disastrous.*

The phone on her desk rang. She snatched it up. “Maxwell.”

It was the evening assignment desk manager. “I wanted to let you know the plane turned out to be nothing, as usual. Just a guy with a new pilot’s license who was showing off to his girlfriend. She, apparently, was not amused.”

“Okay, Nick. Thanks.”

Almost as soon as she’d hung up the phone, it rang again. *I’m never going to get out of here.* This time she put the call on speakerphone.

“Why aren’t you here?” Justine’s usual velvet-smooth, reporter-trained voice was strained—she had to shout to be heard above the cacophony of raucous laughter in the background.

“Can’t make it tonight,” Megan said, her eyes skimming the mayhem of work on her desk, looking for a place to start.

“You haven’t made it in weeks. We’re going to revoke your membership card.”

A chorus of voices chimed in. It sounded like a goodly number of the gals had managed to make tonight’s impromptu gathering of Broads in Broadcasting. Megan could picture them tucked into one of the big circular booths at the Cool Breeze Tavern, a popular spot for local journalists and politicians.

“C’mon, Meg!”

“Party pooper!”

“Don’t make us come kidnap you!”

“There’s a cute brunette here that’s just your type!”

She couldn’t help smiling. It *had* been a long time since she’d seen most of the “Broads.” After the marking pen incident, she could use some time with her friends. And the thought of maybe hooking up for a quickie wasn’t altogether unpleasant, either. Maybe she *had* been working too hard.

“All right, already. I’ll be there in a while. Someone keep an eye on the brunette for me—and don’t let Elise anywhere near her!”

Fairbanks, Alaska

Chaz Herrick was having an impossibly difficult time keeping her mind on the pile of paperwork in front of her, despite the fact that it was the only thing standing between her and her liberation for the

summer—her return to the wilderness that fed her soul and enriched her spirit.

The halls outside her office were empty, the students scattered. She'd traded in her professorial khakis and button-down oxfords for the flannel shirt and jeans that comprised the bulk of her wardrobe. Already, in spirit, she was far from this place.

Her gaze kept straying to the fully loaded backpack in the corner of her office and then to the wall above it, crowded with photographs she'd taken during previous excursions into the backcountry of her adopted state. Some were of trips she'd taken with her parents: cross-country skiing near Denali, kayaking in Glacier Bay, hiking in the Brooks Range. Many solo adventures were represented as well—along with a number of more recent photographs taken during her summers as a senior guide with Orion Outfitters. One particularly striking picture she'd taken of the caribou migration had been chosen for Orion's brochure this year.

Gareth Rosenberg, the head of the Biology and Wildlife Department at the University of Alaska, stuck his head in Chaz's door. He was a big, barrel-chested bear of a man, with an untrimmed beard and long hair, held back in a braided ponytail. "I can't believe you're still here. I thought you'd be long gone."

"Well, I would've been, if it wasn't for all this administrative shit you give us to fill out. I swear you come up with a dozen new forms every year solely to irritate me."

He laughed. Although he was technically Chaz's boss, they were close friends, and they both knew he had been offered the job only after Chaz had turned it down.

"Boy, do you ever get antsy these last few days." He glanced up at her wall of photos. "So where's it to be this year? You doing your guide thing again?"

"Yeah, I'm leading a couple of backpack trips at Denali, and some kayak trips. One on the Odakonya River, and a couple on the Kongakut."

"The Odakonya? Where's that?" he asked.

"It's within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Doesn't get much river traffic except us, because it's pretty inaccessible along a good portion of it."

"Sounds like your kind of place."

She smiled. “Yeah, actually it’s the trip I’m most looking forward to. I went there by myself at the end of the season last year, to scout it out. Beautiful stretch of river. Great views. Lots of wildlife. We can do a day hike from there and have a pretty good chance at seeing the caribou herd.”

Gareth heaved a great sigh. “Every year I understand a little better why you didn’t want this job,” he said, sounding envious. “Take lots of pictures?”

“You got it. Now get out of here and let me get back to it. You know I’ll go crazy if I have to spend another night in the city.”

“The *city*, she says, like it’s New York or L.A.” He studied her quizzically. “You can drive five minutes out of Fairbanks and be in the wilderness.”

“Not wild enough for me,” she said.

Chicago, Illinois

They had lied to her. There was no cute brunette. It wasn’t even a bona fide gathering of the Broads in Broadcasting, though all those present were members of the group.

No, this was just her and the five of them. They’d lured her to the Cool Breeze for the sole purpose of getting her drunk and ganging up on her so she’d go on this wilderness thing with them. After a few too many tequila shots, they had produced another one of those damn brochures with all the pretty pictures and a sign-up form already half filled out for her, with her name and address and the other stuff that Justine knew off the top of her head.

“You’ve been promising for years that you’d go with us,” Linda Ferris, a photojournalist with WNC, said from Megan Maxwell’s left. “Fearless” Ferris, they called her, for her award-winning footage under fire from a variety of war zones.

“Last year, as I recall, you swore you’d *absolutely* go this year, no matter *what* the destination,” Justine reminded her from across the booth. Although she appeared in millions of homes every evening on the news, the WNC reporter was rarely recognized in public. Without makeup and with her flyaway auburn hair untamed by network stylists, she looked like a distant cousin of her on-air persona.

"At the time you were all talking a lot about seeing Paris next, as I recall," Megan mumbled.

"You're always bragging about how good your staff is," Pat Palmer reminded her. Pat was Linda's lover and a photographer as well, with TV station WGN. "Don't you trust them enough to leave everything in their capable hands?"

"Well, of course they're very capable, but—" Megan began.

"When's the last time you took a vacation, anyway?" Yancey Gilmore interrupted. "You're like...living in workaholicville, girlfriend. You need to chill." Though her vocabulary and blond, pinup girl appearance seemed to belie the possibility, Yancey was a highly regarded researcher with the Oprah empire.

"Oh, I don't know. Some say the Royal Ice Bitch is pretty frosty already," Justine said, which touched off a gasp of shock and then a chorus of snickering among the group clustered around the plush booth. Only Justine dared to bring up the nickname that the malcontents in the newsroom had assigned to Megan.

Megan glared at her. "You're lucky you're not in my department," she warned with a gruffness that was not at all convincing.

"You have only yourself to blame that I'm not," Justine responded warmly, leaning across the booth to place a hand on Megan's forearm. "I'd still be in the writing ranks if you hadn't given me a shot in front of the camera."

"Oh, shut up. You belong there. I had nothing to do with it." Megan's vision began to swim from the tequila. She closed her eyes and slumped against the thickly cushioned booth.

"Back to the trip," Elise Webber reminded them, pointing to the sign-up sheet that lay on the table in front of Megan. "We have to get this in by tomorrow to get the group discount." The youngest of the group, Elise was a graphic artist with the Discovery Channel. She was also Megan's biggest competition if there were any prospective bed partners about—both of them liked to prowl for new faces when they went out with the group.

"Right you are," Justine agreed. "So you're gonna come, right, Meg?"

"I have never even *seen* a kayak, much less *been* in one. Besides, camping and I don't mix." Megan cracked open an eye, but the room began to tilt, so she quickly shut it again.

"You're athletic," Pat said. "You'll pick it up in no time. And I guarantee you, it's a blast! You'll be so glad you did!"

"It'd be all bugs and snakes, and bad food, and sleeping on the ground, and no way to take a shower..." Megan grumbled on, as if she hadn't heard.

"Look at these pictures." Yancey thrust the brochure at her. "The last great frontier. Unspoiled beauty. How can you miss this?"

Megan ignored her.

"You'll come back a new woman," Linda promised. "Relaxed, refreshed, rejuvenated."

"I think she's afraid," Elise volunteered.

Afraid? That cut through the haze of the alcohol. "Am not," Megan said, rousing herself.

They were all staring at her, totally united in their task of getting her to sign that piece of paper she was having trouble bringing into focus.

"Prove it," Elise said. "I *dare* you to go."

"*Double* dare you," Yancey chimed in.

"Triple-*dog* dare you," Pat added.

"What are we, back in grade school?" Megan said. Her defenses were beginning to crumble.

"Rather make it a *bet*?" Justine asked.

Megan perked up a little. There might be a way out of this after all. "I'm game for that." She blinked several times, trying to clear her head. "How about...movie trivia. Or...current events. You ask me a question, and if I miss it, I sign on the dotted line."

"Oh, no, you don't," Linda said.

"No *way* are we going to take a sucker bet," Yancey agreed. "No trivia. It's got to be left totally up to chance. A flip of the coin?"

"That's fair," Pat said.

"A fifty-fifty chance? That's *not* fair." Megan never played those odds. She only bet on a reasonably sure thing.

Justine leaned forward again to claim her undivided attention. Her gray eyes grew serious, and she used her most convincing tone of voice...the one that audience focus groups characterized as "highly trustworthy." "You *need* this, Megan. Leave it up to fate this one time?"

Leave it up to fate. It was an alien concept to her. Despite the

fact that her workday was ever changing and unpredictable—often dependent on breaking news—she had established an orderliness and routine to her life that she was reluctant to relinquish. She never left any important decisions to fate.

You once dreamed about exploring some place like Alaska, she reminded herself. She had to admit she did find the whole idea intriguing. Exciting, even. And not much excited her any more.

“I’m not afraid,” she repeated to no one in particular, swaying as she tried to sit up straight in the booth. “Flip the damn coin.”

CHAPTER TWO

Winterwolf, Alaska

One corner of the conference room was cluttered with the remnants of the trip they'd just led. Flaccid packs and sleeping pads and unused food packages had been dumped in a heap by the clients, eager to catch the noon charter home. Elsewhere was a hint of the organization that was a hallmark of every Orion Outfitters expedition.

On two long tables lay neat groupings of supplies destined for their upcoming whitewater kayak trip. There were eight piles of food and gear in all: six for the clients and two for the guides, who were, at that moment, neglecting their preparations in favor of two steaming bowls of moose chili and two bottles of Kodiak Brown Ale. The cook at the Stony Creek Lodge had become good friends with Chaz Herrick and Sally Travis during their frequent stops in Winterwolf, and sent over a busboy with some chow whenever they had a short layover between trips.

It was obvious both women spent a lot of time in active outdoor pursuits. Their bodies were tanned and fit, and their clothes were designed for their lifestyles, made of quick-drying fabrics and with ample pockets. But the similarities between the two guides ended there. Chaz was dark and lean, while Sally was all blond curvaceousness.

Sally glanced at her watch as she took a long pull of the ale. "Jeez, where has the time gone? I've got less than an hour before I have to get ready to go."

"Don't worry about it," Chaz said from across the table. "I can finish this up. Why don't you brief me on the clients?"

"Sure." Sally reached for a file folder that contained the registration forms. "You know, I *am* sorry I can't be here for the welcome and briefing. I know you hate that part."

"I suppose I can manage this *once*," Chaz replied, rolling her hazel eyes. "You do have a relatively good excuse. It's not every day your daughter graduates from college."

"Chelsea will be glad you approve." Sally pulled the top form off her pile and perused it, refreshing her memory. "Looks like a good group. All women, and all friends from Chicago."

"All women?" Chaz repeated, leaning forward and trying to read the form upside down across the table.

"Yeah, I thought you'd like that."

"Well, it'll be a nice change after this last nightmare." Chaz glanced over to the pile of discarded backpacks. "I got tired of fending off Mister Can't-keep-his-hands-to-himself."

"Why didn't you just tell him you're gay?" Sally asked.

"Because that rarely discourages them. Remember that pilot who went kayaking with us last summer? I told *him*, finally, and he only got more determined to hit on me. Said he viewed me as a challenge. What a creep."

"Oh, yeah, that big guy with the bad comb-over. Followed you around like a dog in heat."

"Don't remind me. Okay, who have we got?" Chaz gestured toward the registration forms.

"The good news is they all can swim. The first two have good whitewater experience. Linda Ferris, forty-four, who's been kayaking for fifteen years..." Sally gave her form to Chaz. "And Pat Palmer, forty-seven, who's got about the same." She handed over a second sheet. "They have their own boats and have done a lot of class III and IV."

Chaz glanced over the two registration forms. No physical limitations for either woman. No special dietary restrictions or allergies. Both said they had extensive previous camping experience, and both listed themselves as expert kayakers. In other words, on paper, they looked like very low-maintenance clients. Her favorite kind. "Okay, next?"

"Two more with *some* previous paddling experience," Sally continued. "Yancey Gilmore, thirty-eight, who goes canoe camping with her family a couple of times a year, and Justine Bernard, twenty-nine, who went on a ten-day sea kayak trip to Glacier Bay last summer with another outfitter." She tossed two more forms to Chaz. "I've talked to Justine at length a couple of times—she's the point person for the

group and made all the arrangements. I like her a lot. Good sense of humor, lots of enthusiasm.”

Chaz scanned the papers. Like the other two, there were no red flags on these forms, warning of potential problems. “Can we be lucky enough not to get any Muffys on this trip?” It was the word they used to describe the occasional woman client who griped from the get-go about the lack of modern amenities. “Muffys” were usually talked into coming along by a boyfriend and had no idea what primitive conditions they were in for.

“Don’t celebrate too soon,” Sally cautioned, perusing the forms of the final two clients. “Elise Webber—she’s twenty-eight—*has* done some canoeing, but it was a long time ago, and the only camping she’s done has been in an RV.” She tossed the woman’s form to Chaz. “And then there’s Megan Maxwell. She’s thirty-two.”

Chaz didn’t like the tone of Sally’s voice. She reached over and plucked Megan’s form from the other guide’s hand. “How bad is it?” she asked, even as she began reading.

“No previous experience on the water,” Sally said. “And no outdoorsy experience at all either, except for two-and-a-half disastrous days at summer camp when she was seven.”

“She actually wrote that down?”

Sally shrugged. “Seemed kind of odd to me, too. But at least she claims to be a fast learner, and physically active—golf, tennis, racquetball. Might not be too bad.”

“I hope you’re right.” Chaz scanned the form, trying to picture the woman who’d filled it out. The handwriting at the top of the sheet—name, address, phone, and so forth—was clearly legible, the backward slant indicating that Megan was probably a lefty. But the questions beneath had been answered in an almost childish scrawl that canted in the opposite direction, and each answer was given in painstaking detail, almost to the point of absurdity.

What intrigued her most were the words Megan had written after the disclaimer at the bottom of the registration form. All adventure trips required them; it was standard practice among the industry, and Chaz had never had a client comment on it before.

**I acknowledge that the trip I am undertaking involves
hazardous activities in a remote area, with a risk**

of illness, injury or death. I also acknowledge that medical services and facilities may not be immediately available during the majority of the trip. In order to participate, I am willing to accept the risks and responsibility for any and all risks of illness, injury, or death due to the negligence (but not the reckless, willful, or fraudulent conduct) of Orion Outfitters and its employees.

I verify this statement by placing my initials here.

Megan had initialed it all right, with a barely legible MGM that made Chaz briefly wonder whether the woman's parents had been fans of the movie studio. And just beneath she had scribbled, *Covering your butts, I see. Sure does inspire faith in your guides.*

"Did you see what she wrote after the disclaimer?" Chaz asked. *What a bitch!*

"Yeah," Sally responded, a smile appearing at the corner of her mouth. "I asked Justine about it, actually, once we'd kind of gotten to know each other through a couple of phone calls."

"And?"

"Megan was apparently somewhat reluctant to join the trip, so her friends got her shnoekered."

"Drunk? She was drunk when she signed this?" Chaz was appalled. "Then we can't accept it!"

"Relax. I thought the same thing, but Justine says Megan really wants to go and will be great fun on the trip. To make sure, I called her myself while she was at work and totally sober. She's some vice president at WNC, by the way."

"The news network?"

"That's the one. I had to go through two secretaries to get to her. Anyway, she apologized for writing the comment, said she didn't remember doing it. And she confirmed she wants to go on the trip."

"So she sits behind a desk all day in downtown Chicago," Chaz summed up. "And she's a bigwig executive, so she's used to giving orders. In other words, she's *just* the type of client who'll want to dig a latrine and gather firewood."

"Chaz, you're not one to prejudge people," Sally gently rebuked.

Chaz hung her head and gave a shrug of chagrin. She knew that a lot of clients were nothing like what she expected from their forms. And she respected Sally and valued her thoughtful opinion of things. During the five summers they'd led trips together for Orion, Sally Travis had become the big sister Chaz had always wanted growing up.

"You're right. Of course you're right." She took a deep breath and let it out. Thought a moment. Then grinned. "What *am* I griping about? We've got an all-women trip. And we're going to one of the most drop-dead gorgeous places I've ever seen. You're gonna love it, Sal. Great water. Lots of wildlife. And *awesome* scenery."

"I can't wait. Those pictures you took are incredible." Sally looked at her watch. "I hate to say this, but I'd better get going if I'm going to catch a ride out."

Like most bush communities in the north Alaskan interior, Winterwolf was accessible only by air. There were two flights a day, at noon and five. Sally would be leaving on the same small plane that was bringing in their clients.

"No worries," Chaz said, as Sally pushed back from the table and stood. "I'll wrap this up tonight after I get everyone settled."

Sally headed for the door. "Meet you in the lobby in ten?"

"Make it out front. I'll pull the van around." Once her partner guide had departed for her room, Chaz glanced once more at the file on the table in front of her. *Will you be able to really appreciate where I'm going to take you, Megan Maxwell? I sure hope so.*



Her friends all had their faces pressed up against the thick-paned milky windows on either side of the nine-seater Beechcraft, but Megan, seated in the back by the door, had her eyes closed. She hated flying, especially in small planes, and this one had done enough bouncing around that she was feeling increasingly airsick. On top of that, she was fretting about all the things she'd forgotten to tell Grace, her administrative assistant, before she left.

She attended to a million details on a daily basis. Managed a staff of several hundred people. So even *with* her incredible memory, it stood to reason she might miss a *few* things. But that didn't make her feel any better. How could she even have thought about leaving for two weeks?

To make matters worse, she hadn't learned until just before leaving that they would be totally incommunicado for a good portion of the trip. Modern technology apparently still hadn't found a way to get a radio or cell phone signal from within a steep river canyon in northern Alaska.

It's only for a few days, Megan told herself, swallowing repeatedly to try to keep her nausea at bay. *Only the three or four days we're in the canyons. The network won't collapse in three or four days.*

"Is that the Brooks Range we're coming up on?" Justine asked from her seat behind the pilot, a scruffy-bearded forty-something man.

"Yup, we've crossed over the Arctic Circle." The pilot banked the plane slightly to give them a better view.

"I knew it would all be...well, *big*," Yancey said in wonder. "But this...this absence of any civilization whatsoever...as far as you can see. It takes your breath away."

"Miles and miles and miles of absolute, utter wilderness," Linda said.

586,412 square miles, to be exact, Megan thought to herself, trying to ignore the high-pitched whistle of air that came from her left; there was a bad seal between the door and the plane. *Alaska is the last great wilderness in the United States. Civilization has only encroached on about 160,000 acres of its 365 million acres, which is less than one-twentieth of one percent of the state.*

The whistle refused to be ignored. Megan hated planes that were so small that they had to ask you how much you weighed. *The doors on big planes never whistle like this.* Megan felt her stomach lurch when the plane hit turbulence and fell several feet before recovering. Everyone else seemed to take it in stride, but her knuckles went white where she gripped the armrest. *Alaska bush pilots have the third most dangerous job in the United States. More than 500 have died in crashes.*

"Look over there. Are those flowers?" Pat pointed toward the northeast, where a dense carpet of wildflowers had painted a long valley in brilliant hues of purple and red, yellow and orange. "It looks like an Impressionist painting."

The state flower of Alaska is the forget-me-not. The plane rode another big bump of turbulence. Megan's palms went clammy.

"It's all the sunshine that does it," the pilot informed them. "The sun doesn't set up here, this time of year. From early May to early August."

Megan groaned inwardly. *Oh, shit. That's what else I forgot. The damn eyeshade.* She'd had Grace pick one up at the mall, along with several books about Alaska: field guides to flora and fauna, history, indigenous cultures, ecology. She'd devoured them all, had even gone online to read up on Orion Outfitters and this caribou herd they were going to see.

She had gotten where she was at WNC in large part because of her extraordinary research skills and attention to detail. She was nothing if not fully prepared for any endeavor she decided to undertake, and this trip was no exception. She had packed every single item listed on Orion's suggested packing list, including all the optional ones, and she'd thrown in a few of her own impulsive purchases from the L.L. Bean catalogue. It was a good thing money was not an issue—the only things on the list she'd already owned were underwear, toiletries, and a swimsuit.

But the eyeshade was still sitting in the top drawer of her desk. It wasn't like Megan to forget things, and this was a rather important item to miss, as she had trouble sleeping even under the best conditions. *What the hell's happening to me? I'm the master of going with the flow, great under fire, calm in a calamity. So how come going on vacation has me more stressed than I've been in a year?*

Megan barely heard the others after that, oohing and ahing over the sights below. She was too busy compiling a mental list of all the people she needed to call when they landed.



Chaz leaned back against the van, watching the southern horizon. She ran her hands over the front of the Orion Outfitters T-shirt she'd pulled on, trying to smooth out some of the wrinkles. The navy shirt was so faded it was hard to read the words or make out the namesake constellation drawn above it, but she couldn't bear to part with it. The rest of her clothes were made of more durable fabrics and bore labels recognizable to any serious outdoor enthusiast.

Sally was occupied digging in her duffel bag for a paperback to read on the plane. They were parked on the edge of a single long runway cut into the tundra, a short distance from Winterwolf. There was no terminal, no control tower, only a pair of well-weathered wind socks

to help guide the pilot. The weather was fine this early June afternoon, with temperatures in the midsixties. The wind socks barely moved, and the sky was clear and blue.

Chaz was itching to be on their way to the Odakonya; this first day and a half of preparing the clients would drag on more than usual without Sally. They'd worked up a routine that played up each woman's strengths. Normally, after the welcoming dinner, Sally—the more gregarious of the two—would spirit the clients away and conduct the orientation, while Chaz—the more detail-oriented—would take care of getting their gear together and packing all the meals. The following day, the two of them together would conduct the individual paddling and rolling lessons.

With Sally going away for her daughter's graduation until tomorrow night, Chaz would have to attend to all their combined duties by herself, but she wasn't worried. She didn't think it would be too difficult since most of the clients had previous paddling experience.

A speck appeared on the horizon, and her heartbeat kicked up a notch. "Here it comes," she announced.



"Man, we *are* out in the middle of *nowhere*," Megan heard Yancey say as the plane bumped down onto the runway. She'd been so lost in thought she hadn't been aware they were about to land.

She opened her eyes and looked around. They'd touched down in a long valley surrounded on every side by snowcapped mountains, the runway a narrow strip of asphalt surrounded by wildflowers and a few scrawny, low scrub trees. The only other signs of civilization were two wind socks and the blue van they were taxiing toward and, across the tundra, in the distance, a small settlement of buildings.

Finally. She pulled a small day pack from under her seat and began digging through it for her BlackBerry.

"Are those our *guides*?" Elise asked, with obvious delight in her voice. "I think I'm in *love*."

The pilot turned to glance at Elise with raised eyebrows and a bemused grin.

"Down, girl," Justine said, but she was straining to get a good look at their welcoming committee, too.

“Hey, she’s not kidding,” Pat added, as the plane rolled to a stop some twenty-five feet from the van. “They’re both certainly easy on the eyes. Check out the legs on the brunette.”

“Hush, you,” Linda said, poking Pat good-naturedly from the neighboring seat. “You’re taken, remember?”

“Oh, I certainly remember, darlin’”. No harm in looking.” Pat leaned over to plant a quick kiss on Linda’s cheek as the pilot got out of his seat and maneuvered through the narrow aisle to the door at the back next to Megan.

After he deployed the stairs, the women began filing out of the plane.



Chaz watched the clients emerge, making no immediate move toward the plane. The first one off, a handsome and butchly older woman with a short, severe haircut, sent her gaydar pinging off the scale. Her suspicions were confirmed when the woman paused at the bottom of the steps to offer an assisting hand to a petite woman with long, curly brown hair and was given a quick peck on the lips in thanks. They waved to the guides but remained by the plane for their bags, which the pilot had begun to unload from a compartment in the wing.

The third to disembark was a striking young woman—tall and lean, with dark spiky hair, chocolate brown eyes, and the kind of androgynous appeal that could melt men and woman alike. She wore tight black jeans and a matching T-shirt, and she didn’t take her eyes off Chaz as she bounded down the steps and headed directly for the two guides.

“Well, well, *well*...” Sally said under her breath as the woman approached. “See what I mean about how the registration forms don’t tell you everything?”

“Elise Webber,” the woman introduced herself as she extended a hand toward Chaz.

“Chaz Herrick,” she responded as they shook. “Welcome to Winterwolf.”

Elise’s grip was firm and reluctant to immediately disengage. They looked at each other for a long moment, openly appraising each other with knowing smiles.

“*Very* pleased to meet you, Chaz.” Elise gave Chaz’s hand a final squeeze before finally releasing her grip and turning to acknowledge the other guide.

“Sally Travis,” Sally said with undisguised amusement as they briefly shook hands.

“Hi, Sally. Well, better get my bag.” Elise walked away with a sexy sway in her hips, and Chaz couldn’t help but appreciate the woman’s effort to get her attention.

All the clients were now busy retrieving their luggage, except for one, who stood off to the side, preoccupied with the phone in her hand, her back to the guides. *Megan Maxwell*, Chaz decided, taking in the woman’s clothes. She was dressed head to foot in brand-new gear, from her North Face jacket and L.L. Bean clothes to the tips of her shiny, right-out-of-the-box hiking boots. *Those boots could be trouble. Obviously got them mail order. A good salesman would have warned her to break them in.*

“Sure looks to be an interesting group. Here we go,” Sally said, as the two guides pushed off the van and headed toward their clients.

“You owe me *big* for this,” Chaz muttered under her breath. “You know how I hate this schmoozing part.” It wasn’t that she was antisocial by any means. But she was always a bit uncomfortable in the beginning, having to make polite small talk with strangers. It was much easier once the ice was broken, and the trip got underway.



Damn thing. We’re not even out on the river yet. Megan frowned at the no-signal display once more before she shoved the BlackBerry into her coat pocket.

“Have you gotten a good look at our guides, Meg?” Justine’s voice, subdued from behind her, alerted Megan that something was amiss.

“What? Why?” She turned and peeled off her sunglasses, glancing first at Justine, who had the oddest expression on her face—then at the two strangers who were approaching.

Both women were fit and athletic, she could see that at first glance, which was not unexpected. *The blond in the lead looks a little like Helen Hunt*, Megan thought, *and the one behind her.* Her mouth hung open in shock, and she could feel the color draining from her face. *It*

can't be. She stared, disbelieving, unable to move.

"Are you all right?" Justine asked in a low voice.

Megan couldn't answer, her mind busy cataloguing the differences, no matter how small, as if to reassure herself that this could not possibly be Rita, five years older and with a shag haircut instead of the long, straight locks she'd had throughout their relationship. No, this woman was taller, at least five foot ten, and definitely had a more tautly muscled physique, especially in the shoulders and upper arms. Slightly smaller breasts, too, though well-rounded, like Rita's. *And no bra. Rita never went out in public without a bra.* And though the hair was the right shade, a deep chestnut brown, the eyes were entirely wrong. Hazel, with yellow flecks, instead of piercing blue.

Still, there was much that was the same. The high cheekbones, the almond complexion, the expressive eyebrows and full lips surrounding a perfect white smile. It was such an uncanny resemblance that Megan could not tear her eyes from the dark-haired guide, or find her voice to respond to Justine's gentle inquiry.

"Welcome to Alaska, ladies," the blond guide said in greeting. "I'm Sally Travis and this is Chaz Herrick. We'll be leading you on this adventure."

Her friends stepped forward and began introducing themselves, but Megan hung back, fighting the overwhelming urge to flee. *I should never have come. This is a really, really bad omen.*



The look on the client's face was indecipherable. But something was definitely *wrong* with Megan Maxwell. Chaz could see it. And damned if it didn't look like it had something to do with *her*. The woman hadn't taken her eyes off her since the moment she'd turned around. Those expressive green eyes reminded Chaz of a deer caught in the headlights: bewildered, vulnerable. And then, something else—she looked...*angry*, almost. *What the hell?*

Chaz had no time to try to decipher what the woman's problem was—she was immediately occupied with greeting the other clients. The first to introduce themselves were the two who had been first off the plane. They looked to be a bit older than the others, though both seemed to be in excellent physical shape.

“Hi, Chaz, I’m Pat Palmer. Good to meet you.” The butch shook her hand firmly, then turned to put an arm around her companion. “And this is Linda Ferris.”

A compactly built woman with blue eyes and dark hair tinged with hints of gray, Pat carried herself with an athletic grace, and her muscular shoulders and forearms evidenced her many hours in a kayak. She wore a T-shirt with the words OCOEE RIVER embroidered on it, and bungeed to her duffel was a top-of-the-line, take-apart crankshaft carbon fiber paddle, expensive but extremely light and ergonomic. Chaz had one like it.

It was equally obvious that Pat’s partner was the other experienced client. She’d brought along her own high-tech paddle as well, and Linda Ferris had tucked her curly brown hair under a well-worn baseball cap that read “Kayakers do it rapidly, then roll over and do it again.”

Linda greeted Chaz with a big smile. “Sure am looking forward to this.”

Next to introduce herself and shake hands was Yancey Gilmre, the only blond among today’s clients. “Hey, there. Good to meet ya.” Yancey was built like a Barbie doll, with trim hips, a narrow waist, and surgically enhanced breasts that strained against the confines of her red-and-black-checked flannel shirt.

“Welcome, Yancey,” Chaz said, trying to keep her eyes from straying to the blond’s ample assets. All of Yancey’s gear, she noticed, from her duffel bag to her clothing—most of it Patagonia—was well-used but well-tended. This woman had also obviously spent a lot of time in the out-of-doors.

The introductions were interrupted by a shout from the pilot. “Hey, Sally! We better get going!”

“Sorry, ladies, but I have to leave you in Chaz’s expert hands for the moment.” Sally picked up her bag. “I’m off to see my daughter graduate, but I’ll be back tomorrow night.” After a nod of encouragement and a quick wink toward her partner guide, she took off toward the plane at a trot.

Ah. So that’s the story. Megan caught the wink and immediately surmised that their two guides had a thing going on between them. She still hadn’t recovered from the shock of Chaz’s uncanny resemblance to her cheating ex. *Looks the same, probably acts the same. A slut, just like Rita was. I shouldn’t be here. I should be back in Chicago.* That

reminded her of the calls she needed to make.

“Where’s the nearest phone?” she asked Chaz without preamble. “Or at least somewhere where mine can pick up a signal?”

Chaz pasted on her best professional smile. “There’s a phone at the lodge. We’ll be there in a few minutes.” She gestured toward the van, and without further ado, Megan picked up her bag and headed for the vehicle. *What the hell is your problem?* Chaz wondered, watching her go.

“Hi, Chaz, I’m Justine.” A slim, attractive woman with wild auburn hair and a ready smile approached and offered her hand. “I made our arrangements with Sally.”

“Ah, right. Good to meet you, Justine. You’re the one who’s done Glacier Bay, right?”

“That’s me. The rude one, by the way, is Megan.” She gestured toward her sullen companion, who had tossed her bag into the van and settled into a seat. “She’s not really as bad as she seems. She just hasn’t yet realized she’s on vacation. It’ll sink in.”

“Good to hear that.” Chaz smiled back at the redhead. She liked this one already. “Ladies? Shall we go?” she asked the rest.

The women piled into the van as Chaz loaded their bags into the rear storage area. Megan Maxwell’s duffel, she noted, was like her clothes—brand-new, right off a store shelf. And it was easily twice as big as any of the others. She had obviously well exceeded the what-to-pack list that Orion had sent to all the clients. It would be a challenge to get all the gear on the supply raft.

Soon they were underway, and the women began peppering her with questions.

“So what’s this river like?” Pat inquired from the front passenger seat.

“Oh, it’s a *blast* to run,” Chaz replied, her enthusiasm for their destination evident in her tone. “The first stretch will take us four or five days. It’s nice and easy, with fabulous scenery and all sorts of wildlife and birds. Give you a chance to all get comfortable with the kayaks, and those of you who haven’t done a lot of paddling can get some experience before we hit the faster water.”

“There are a couple of stretches of class IV rapids on the section we’re taking, aren’t there?” Yancey asked, from the second row of seats.

Chaz glanced in the rearview mirror, which happened to be pointed at Yancey's considerable cleavage. She readjusted it to aim at the woman's face. "Yes, near the end of the trip. And there's a long stretch of class III in the middle section of the river, where it cuts through some steep canyons. But those of you without a lot of experience don't need to worry—"

"I need to make some calls when we get to the lodge," Megan interrupted Chaz from the back row. "I hope we're going to get some time to ourselves before we have to be somewhere."

"You'll get about a half hour to check in and get settled in your rooms," Chaz explained, trying to keep in check her growing irritation with Ms. Maxwell. She could already see this client was going to test her normally placid and easygoing demeanor. "We'll meet in the dining room at six. During dinner, I'll brief you on the trip and answer any questions you have. Tomorrow, you'll be assigned your gear, and I'll conduct training sessions for everyone in the creek behind the lodge. I expect that some of you won't need much instruction from me, in which case you can use the time to get the feel of your gear."

"You probably don't need to spend a lot of time with Pat and me," Linda said. "We've been kayaking together a lot. We just got back from doing the Middle Gauley in West Virginia."

"That's some great water, I've heard." Chaz knew it wasn't the most difficult section of the famed river—the area with class V+ whitewater—but you still had to be a skilled paddler to make it through the Middle Gauley.

"It was awesome," Pat confirmed.

"So I understand you're all friends, right?" Chaz asked.

"Yup," Justine answered. "We work at different media outlets in Chicago. TV is a very small industry, really, and one where people change jobs a lot. So you get to know those who work in the same market you do. You cover the same stories, attend the same events and parties. Well, a few years ago, Megan and I started up a group called Broads in Broadcasting and invited a lot of women we'd met to join. I think we have a half-dozen media outlets represented. A bunch of us get together at a pub a couple of times a month to kick back and dish the dirt."

"And every year, a few of us take a trip together. Last year, ten of us went to London," Elise supplied. "We stayed at the Hilton."

"This will certainly be a change of pace," Chaz remarked dryly.

The women—all but Megan, who was staring out the window—chuckled at the understatement.

"About half the group are your typical I-can't-be-without-my-hairdryer-and-makeup gals, Pat said. "They tend to sit out trips like this one."

"The other half are more adventurous," Yancey added. "We want to get *away* from the city when we get some time off."

"So we've compromised," Justine said. "A posh trip one year, an outdoor adventure the next."

"How do you decide the destination?" Chaz inquired. *Quite an interesting concept*, she thought, glancing at Megan in the mirror. *Which type of woman are you?* Megan was staring out the window but seemed entirely self-absorbed, and Chaz wondered whether she was seeing any of the beauty of their surroundings. She sure looked out of her element here.

"When we started the group, every member wrote down a destination or type of trip, and we put them all in a jar," Linda explained. "We draw one every year. If we select a ritzy location on a year we're supposed to do an adventure trip, we put the slip back in the jar and keep drawing until we get it right."

"How many are in your group?" Chaz asked.

"Oh, gosh, close to thirty, I guess," Justine said. "Although most are in it only for the occasional socializing. A lot of the 'Broads' are married with kids and can't get away for long trips."

"So none of you fit into that category?" Chaz inquired. "Married with kids, I mean?" She noticed several of the clients exchange looks with each other—Pat and Linda, Elise and Justine.

"I've got a hubby at home," Yancey answered. "And two boys who love getting a week or two alone with Daddy each year. They get to eat McDonalds and Pizza Hut every day and stay up late." She laughed.

"What about you? Are you married, Chaz?" Linda asked.

"Nope. Never married. Never close."

She glanced up to find Elise staring at her in the rearview mirror with a raised eyebrow and flirtatious grin. Chaz couldn't help smiling. *So Yancey's straight, but Elise sure isn't. And Pat and Linda are definitely a couple. Justine might be a lesbian, too*, she thought, but her

gaydar was less certain on that one. And who knew what Megan's deal was—she was still staring out the window and seemed totally removed from the rest of them.

"What about Sally?" Justine asked. "Didn't she say she was attending her daughter's graduation?"

"Mmmhmm. Chelsea is graduating from Washington State. Sally and her husband Tom also have a son named Nathan, who's a sous chef at a fancy Seattle restaurant."

"Sally and I became phone pals setting up this trip," Justine said. "She has a right wicked sense of humor, doesn't she?"

"That she has," Chaz agreed. "And a practical joker, too. I advise all of you to check your sleeping bags the first night out for rubber snakes and spiders."

"Oh, great," Megan mumbled from the back. "I'm back in summer camp." It was the first acknowledgement that she'd been paying attention to the conversation.

"Lighten up, your Majesty," Justine chided, snickering.

"Your Majesty?" Chaz repeated.

"Our auspicious friend back there has quite a reputation among her underlings at work...some of whom refer to her as the Royal Ice Bitch," Linda supplied, grinning.

"Oh, come on, guys," Megan grumbled, but the explanation surprisingly brought the first smile to the woman's face and seemed to crack her cool exterior. Chaz tried not to stare at her in the rearview mirror. She felt a flutter of something unexpected in the pit of her stomach. *She's an altogether different woman when she smiles.*

"We can kid her about it, you see, because we all know what a softhearted ol' gal she really is," Yancey added.

"Will you all stop talking about me as if I'm not here?" Megan complained good-naturedly.

"Although she *can* be pretty intimidating when she has on her I'm-a-vice-president! mask," Yancey went on.

"Before I knew you, I thought you had *no* sense of humor," Linda admitted. "But boy, when you have a few tequilas..."

"That's *enough!*" Megan rebuked, but she was still smiling. Chaz noticed a slight flush to the woman's cheeks. *There's certainly more to her than meets the eye.*

They entered the bush community of Winterwolf, a block-long cluster of buildings that included a small gas station/convenience store, a one-room school, tiny post office, and a handful of homes, and at the end of the street, their destination—a quaint log and stone building whose sign out front proclaimed it the Stony Creek Lodge.

“We’re here,” Chaz announced, pulling into a parking spot in front. She shut off the engine and turned in her seat to address her clients. “Sue and Paul Bartlett own the place. They’ll meet you inside and show you to your rooms. We’ll gather in the dining room at...” She glanced at her watch. “...six? That gives you thirty-five minutes.” She said the last directly to Megan, who nodded and reached for the door handle. “There are no phones in the rooms,” she added. “But there are pay phones in the lobby.”

“Thanks,” Megan mumbled before getting out and hurrying inside. She was so intent on her call that she left her bag in the van.

Chaz retrieved it, surprised by its heft, and followed the clients inside. She spotted Megan facing away from her on a phone in the corner of the empty lobby, and headed toward her to drop off the bag. Chaz paused when she overheard part of the conversation. It was impossible not to. An obviously exasperated Megan was nearly shouting into the phone. Chaz didn’t want to interrupt.

“You’re going to have to make these calls yourself,” Megan was saying. “Use your best judgment.” She listened for a moment. “*Stop!*” she interjected, raising her voice. “Deal with it! I’m on vacation and I’m turning my BlackBerry *off!*” She hit a button on the device and took a deep breath. Then another. She turned to find Chaz staring at her from six feet away and jumped a little.

“Eavesdropping, are we?” Megan inquired without humor.

“Sorry,” Chaz stammered, embarrassed. She dropped the duffel and headed to her room. *Why did you let her get to you like that? You weren’t eavesdropping.* She couldn’t understand why the two of them seemed to be mixing like oil and water, but that had to change. They were going to be spending an awful lot of time together, and she wanted both of them to enjoy the experience.

As senior guide, Chaz would take the lead kayak, scouting the river and assisting the less-experienced clients as needed through the tough spots. Sally would bring up the rear, rowing their gear and supplies on a large raft.

Chaz had to figure out a way to improve her rapport with Megan, the sooner the better. *Maybe an opportunity will present itself.*



Megan's stomach clenched involuntarily as she watched the guide depart. *Well, that was extremely rude of me*, she admitted, instantly regretting her words. *She was only bringing me my bag, and I nearly took her head off.* She sighed. It was just that she'd only been gone one day, and already things were going to hell at work. *Okay, and maybe it's weirded me out a bit that she looks so damn much like Rita.*

For nearly five years, she had successfully avoided thinking very much about the woman she had married. She worked sixty to seventy hours a week to fill her waking hours with distractions, and when the memories refused to be ignored—when her cheating ex popped up on TV or in a magazine—Megan escaped with sex or alcohol. But now here was Rita's twin, and she had nearly two whole weeks ahead with the woman. Far too much time to remember what she'd fought so hard to forget.

CHAPTER THREE

Even though she'd technically been on vacation for more than twenty-four hours, Megan still felt every bit as stressed as she did in the newsroom. Perhaps even more so. For not only was she having to worry long distance about what might be happening back at WNC, she was more unsettled than she'd expected by the abrupt and radical change in her surroundings and routine.

She'd spent nearly every bit of her thirty-five minutes of getting-settled time on the phone with Grace, putting out brush fires and briefing her assistant on the few things she'd remembered on the plane. So she barely had time to drop her duffel bag in her room before she had to meet the others.

When she arrived at the dining room, she spotted her friends sipping cocktails around a long table, framed by an immense picture window. Beyond were the mountains of the Brooks Range, their snowcapped peaks cast in the golden alpenglow of the lowering sun. It was a beautiful sight, but Megan's eyes were drawn to the dark-haired guide, seated at the head of the table, who at the moment held the entire group's attention.

The guide said something that made everybody roar with laughter, and Megan frowned, unexpectedly disappointed she'd missed the punch line. *They smile the same, too*, she realized. *That easy, charming, suck-you-in, you-can-trust-me grin*. Every time she looked at Chaz, she was struck anew by the uncanny similarities. The same long legs. The same thick, silky hair. She remembered the feel of it between her fingers. A cauldron of emotions welled up and churned within her, throwing her off balance. Chaz definitely unnerved her.

She detoured to the bar to fortify herself with a double martini, downing half of it on the spot. But she still felt unsteady on her feet when she joined the others.

“Sorry I’m late,” she muttered as she took the empty seat they’d left her, halfway down the table next to Justine. She was grateful she had the menu and the view to distract her. She told herself it would be a lot easier if she just didn’t *look* at Chaz.

“I recommend the rainbow trout, with asparagus and roasted garlic mashed potatoes,” Chaz was saying. “That’s the specialty of the house. Paul gets the fish in fresh every day from local Inupiat fishermen.”

Of course she has to have a great voice too. Rita had started out in radio, and Chaz could have gotten a job there as well, Megan decided. They both had bedroom voices, as they called it at WNC—that low, seductive, breathy quality that draws in viewers—especially male viewers—who happen to be channel surfing. *Okay, so I do have to listen to her. But I don’t have to look at her. At least, not much.*

After they placed their orders with the waitress, Chaz outlined the next couple of days.

“After dinner, I’ll pass out garbage bags and dry bags to everyone. You’ll need to repack all your clothes and your sleeping bags, double bagging them first into the garbage bags and then into dry bags. Sally will take the big bags of gear and all the food and equipment on our supply raft. You’ll get a small dry bag to keep with you, that you can put essentials into—snacks, camera, bug head nets, sunglasses. Oh, and you can leave your luggage here at the lodge if you like, until we get back. Just check it at the front desk.”

The double martini was finally helping her to relax. But Megan kept her eyes on the scenery outside, steadfastly refusing a niggling temptation to glance in Chaz’s direction every ten seconds.

“Tomorrow morning after breakfast you’ll get the rest of your gear—PFDs—that’s Personal Flotation Devices, or life jackets, which you *must* wear at *all* times in the water...” Chaz’s mellifluous voice trailed off, as if she was seeking an acknowledgement from her audience, but Megan would not look her way. “You’ll also get paddles, helmets, neoprene gloves and boots, and dry suits...and then we’ll spend some time fitting you with boats.”

“What kind of boats do you have?” Pat asked.

“We mostly use Dagger Crazy 88s,” Chaz replied. “They’re stable, responsive, adjust easily, and clients find them to be about the most comfortable. And they’re good if you have to portage—they only weigh about twenty-eight pounds. But we do have a few others—a Riot

Nitro 58, a couple of Mambos for beginners, and a Necky Orbit Fish, if you're familiar with those."

"I've tried the Fish," Pat said. "They're nice boats."

"You'll get to try them out down there." Chaz pointed out the window to the wide, deep creek that ran behind the lodge. "I'll go over paddling fundamentals for those of you who need it, and you can spend the late morning getting a feel for your boat. Then after lunch, we'll have some individual training sessions to make sure everyone knows how to do a wet exit and an Eskimo roll, and I'll spend some time with those of you who need extra help on anything."

Individual training sessions. Megan's heartbeat picked up a notch at the thought of spending alone time with the guide. *I hope to God I pick this stuff up fast.*

"Sally will be back right before dinner tomorrow," Chaz told them. "We'll turn in early so we can get going right after breakfast. We'll be ferried to the Odakonya in two groups by Twin Otter. The trip there takes about a half hour."

"How far do we go each day?" Elise asked.

"We'll spend four to six hours a day paddling, on average." Chaz glanced down the table at Megan, who seemed to be off in her own little world, staring out the window. "We don't want anyone to get so sore they aren't enjoying themselves, and we want to give you plenty of time to do day hikes to get up where you can really see the surrounding scenery and wildlife. So we keep a flexible agenda. We also have a day built in to take it easy, or to stay off the water if the weather turns foul. That's the one constant up here—the weather can change in an instant."

"When do we get where we can see the caribou herd?" Justine asked.

"Three or four days in, we should start seeing them. It's a truly amazing spectacle. One you won't soon forget."

"The picture of them on the brochure was awesome," Yancey said.

"Why, thanks!" Chaz beamed. "I took that last summer when I was scouting out the Odakonya for this trip."

Megan looked over at Chaz. *You took that picture.* The picture that was responsible for her ending up here. *That brochure would have ended up in the trash, and I wouldn't be here admiring how nicely those*

muscles in her upper arms move when she takes a bite of food. She forced herself to look out of the window again as Chaz continued.

“We at Orion follow the Leave No Trace principle on our trips, like every other outfitter who leads groups into the refuge. The arctic ecosystem is very fragile—easily impacted by human activities. Are any of you at all familiar with Leave No Trace?”

Pat and Linda nodded their heads.

Yancey stuck a hand in the air. “I’ve heard of it, anyway. It’s packing out all your trash, right?”

“That’s a part of it,” Chaz acknowledged. “There’s a lot more to it than that, though. It’s about choosing the right campsites to minimize our impact on the environment. Taking care of how we wash up and how we dispose of human waste and leftover food. It’s about respecting wildlife. Watching where you walk when you venture away from camp. And leaving behind souvenirs—no bringing home antlers or fossils or any artifacts we might find. And there’s a distinct possibility of that, I might add. This area has been home to the Inupiat Eskimo and Gwich’in Indian people for centuries.”

Another page of the field guide she’d read popped into Megan’s head. *There are more than 300 archeological sites in the refuge.* That had really appealed to her. The idea that she might find some ancient relic. Her eyes skimmed over the wide expanse of tundra out the window. *You’ll be walking where wooly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers once lived.*

“I’ll give you handouts to read tonight that explain the Leave No Trace principles in more detail,” Chaz went on. “And Sue and Paul have a number of books on the refuge if you’d like to study up on some of the animals and birds you might see on the trip. Sally and I will be pointing things out as well, of course, as we see them.”

“What about fires?” Linda asked. “Part of Leave No Trace is not building campfires, isn’t it?”

“We don’t get a campfire?” Yancey asked with obvious disappointment. “I love sitting around a campfire.”

“The rule of thumb is to evaluate the wood resources and the potential impact to the environment,” Chaz said. “And if you do decide to build a fire, you leave no trace of that fire. We *will* be using stoves for all of our meals. But there *are* a couple of places on our route where

there is ample dead wood and where we can have a small campfire in a fire pan that we'll bring along."

"Great," Yancey said. "That'll do fine!"

"The first stretches of the river are very mild," Chaz said. "But when we get to the canyons and the water gets faster, I'll be scouting ahead on occasion to look for obstacles or check the line."

"The line?" Justine asked.

"The best route to take," Chaz elaborated. "I'll evaluate how you're all doing as we go along, and when we get to the more challenging stretches, I'll decide who paddles and who portages."

"Portages? You said that earlier. What's that?" Elise asked.

"You get out and carry your kayak. All of the tougher stretches can be portaged, which is one reason it's a good river for all ranges of experience," Chaz said. "You and Megan will definitely portage the class IV rapids and probably some of the III as well. We'll see."

Megan bristled at the declaration. *She's already decided I'm not going to be capable of doing any of the harder stuff. I'll show her.* "You say *definitely* like it's not open to discussion," she said, glaring at Chaz.

"It's a precaution for your own safety," Chaz replied in a friendly tone, meeting Megan's eyes. "You said on your form that you'd never been kayaking before. Has that changed?"

"I might pick it up faster than you expect," she challenged, her stare unwavering.

"I have no expectations at all about your abilities, Megan," Chaz said.

There was something about the way the guide said her name that made their exchange sound more *intimate* than it was. Megan was annoyed by how much she *liked* the way it sounded.

"It's just a policy of ours," Chaz continued. "We don't take unnecessary risks with our clients. The most difficult stretches of the river also happen to be the same areas where we are the most inaccessible to outside help."

"What if I think I can do it?" Megan asked.

"That doesn't matter. This has to be my call."

Megan wasn't ready to concede. She opened her mouth to argue further, but the waitress interrupted.

"Dessert, ladies?"



Over cappuccinos and raspberry cobbler still warm from the oven, Chaz touched on the chores that would have to be done at each campsite. “Sally and I will take care of the cooking. Though we won’t object if anyone feels inclined to pitch in any time.” She smiled.

“You’ll put up your own tents and take care of your boat and gear. And everyone needs to help with cleanup and with collecting wood when we have a fire.” Chaz glanced at Megan. The woman was hard to read. After their brief exchange, she had gone back to staring out the window and seemed not to be paying attention. But Chaz had thought the same thing in the van.

“We’re in bear country, which means we have to take careful precautions. We cook and eat well away from the tents. All food and trash need to be put into bear-proof containers and carried at least 200 feet away from camp each night. There must be nothing left in the tents that might attract them. No candy, flavored drinks, strong cosmetics, toothpaste, things like that. If you help with the cooking, or spill food on your clothes, change before you go to bed.”

“Have you ever had any problems with bears?” Yancey asked.

“No. We’ve seen them, of course, but if you give them a wide berth and take the proper precautions, they’re usually no problem.”

“I’d love to see a bear in the wild,” Justine said.

“Speak for yourself,” Linda chimed in. “I’d rather not get acquainted with any bears, thank you very much.”

“I’m with you,” Yancey said.

“Ordinarily, you want to travel quietly in a pristine area like this, to avoid disturbing the wildlife and to have the best chance of observing it. Bears included. And that’s what we should try to do when we’re on the river and hiking as a group to see the caribou. *But...*” she paused for emphasis. “If you’re off by yourself, especially in an area with lots of brush or uneven terrain, avoid game trails and make some noise. Not that we advocate you go wandering off by yourself without letting one of us know, but keep it in mind when you make a bathroom run and may be out of sight of the rest of us. One more thing,” Chaz said. “Please be careful to wear lots of sunscreen—don’t forget your neck and your hands—and good sunglasses, and I hope everyone brought a wide-brimmed hat?”

There were nods or raised hands all around. Justine's WNC baseball cap was hanging behind her on a peg on the wall.

"Well, ladies, if we're all done eating." Chaz surveyed their empty plates. "Let's adjourn down the hall and I'll pass out your dry bags."

They trooped over to the conference room that Orion rented between trips, still in disarray from the aborted gear and food sorting session that morning.

"You get two of these." She held up a large dry bag. "One for your clothes and one for your sleeping bag and pad." In her other hand, she held up a much smaller one, about the size of a large purse. "This is for the essential stuff you need to have with you during the day. Both of them should be lined with garbage bags. They're on the table over there, you can help yourself."

"I'm also giving each of you one of these." Chaz put down the dry bags and held up a Ziploc bag containing a roll of toilet paper and a lighter. "When you need to use the bathroom, pick a spot 200 feet away from camp *and* away from the water. That's about seventy steps. Dig a hole, six to eight inches deep, preferably in an area without vegetation. Do your business—and try to burn the paper when you're done. Any remnants go in the hole, then you cover it and try to make it look like you were never there. Oh, and any feminine hygiene products need to be packed out with the trash. I can give you extra Ziplocs if you need them. Any questions?"

There were none. But Megan gave her a look she couldn't quite decipher when she picked up her bags. *She's unhappy about something*, Chaz guessed, *probably the lack of bathroom facilities*.

Once all the clients had retired to their rooms to repack their gear, Chaz picked up where she and Sally had left off assembling their equipment and meals. She spread out the food on the long tables, allocating perishables for the first days out and freeze-dried and dehydrated meals for the later stops. She packed the ingredients for each meal into a large Ziploc, labeling it "Thursday lunch" or "Sunday breakfast" or whatever was appropriate. She also packed individual bags that contained drink powders, candy, and energy bars for each of the clients.

She was finishing up when she felt eyes on her and glanced up to find Megan Maxwell watching her in silence from the doorway.

"I need a couple more dry bags," Megan said. "I can't fit all my stuff into the three you gave me."

"We have a limit on what we can take with us on the raft," Chaz explained patiently. "We generally only allow each client the three bags—that's why we sent out detailed packing lists of what to bring. Can you leave some of your things back here at the lodge?"

Megan frowned at her for a moment before she replied. "Well, I really don't want to do that unless I absolutely have to."

Clients had asked this before, and she and Sally had always stood firm. But despite Megan's abrasiveness thus far, there was something about her that touched a chord in Chaz, and she relented. Maybe this was her opportunity to improve their rapport. "I'll give you one more bag." She reached for one of the smaller ones she had left over on the table. "But you'll have to limit yourself to that, all right?"

"Just this?" Megan complained, taking it from the guide. "Can't I at least have a bigger one if I'm only getting one more?"

"I'm sorry. That's the best I can do. Anything you don't have room for you can leave with Sue and Paul, and they'll make sure it's safe until we get back."

Megan didn't try to hide that she wasn't happy with the arrangement. Her expression said it all. She looked like a pouting child. "Whatever," she harrumphed. Pivoting on her heel, she headed back to her room.

Peachy, Chaz sighed as the woman departed. *Royal Ice Bitch indeed. Why am I trying so hard to please the Queen of Rude?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Chaz glanced at the bedside clock as she stretched awake and was startled to find it was already seven. She rarely slept that late, but she *had* found it more difficult than usual to fall asleep the night before, preoccupied with thoughts of Megan.

She'd had rude clients before. Business tycoons who were full of themselves, spoiled rich kids who never had learned an ounce of common courtesy. She had always dealt with them easily. Kept on smiling. Killed them with kindness. But this one...this one really bothered her, and she wasn't entirely sure why.

Craving coffee, she dressed and headed for the dining room. She was surprised to find Megan already up, sipping coffee and enjoying the view from one of the big comfy chairs in the lobby.

"Good morning, Megan," Chaz greeted her, determined to break her rude client's distant coolness. "You're up early."

"Force of habit," Megan replied glumly. She glanced over at Chaz as she said it, but made no further attempt to engage her in conversation.

Chaz took the hint and continued into the dining room. *Damn. What the hell is her problem?*

Megan watched Chaz depart out of the corner of her eye, mentally chastising herself all the while. She hated being rude, but at the moment she seemed unable to respond in any other way to the guide. *Every time I see her, it all comes back.* It was like tearing the scab off the most agonizing moments of her life, exposing the raw pain of betrayal all over again.

She was also feeling particularly cranky because she hadn't slept well. The room's blackout curtains had worked well enough to keep out the midnight sun, but worries about work had kept her tossing and turning until late into the night.

And then there was the dream. Part memory and part imagination. Rita's face and body, then Chaz's. She'd bolted awake at two in a tangle of sheets, sweating though the room was cool, her mind working furiously to remember, her body as tensed up and tight as the drawstring of a bow. It had taken her ages to fall back asleep, half afraid she would have the same dream again, half afraid she would not. Even then, her body was still in a different time zone, so she was up for good at five thirty and had downed half a pot of coffee by the time Chaz found her in the lobby.



At nine, after everyone had eaten breakfast, the women all trooped back to the conference room where Chaz distributed their gear for the trip. Each client was fitted for a dry suit, PFD, helmet, spray skirt, and neoprene gloves and boots. Then each got a paddle, a water bottle, a Ziploc bag of snacks and power bars, and an emergency whistle to clip to her vest. Chaz also passed each woman a rescue throw rope, coiled into a small floatation bag.

After suiting up, they followed a narrow foot trail down to the creek behind the lodge, where their boats were lined up in a neat row. Chaz paired them up with the kayaks according to size and skill level, and spent time making minor adjustments to thigh braces, hip pads, and seats until everyone was comfortable.

"I really wanted the blue one," Megan griped as Chaz knelt down and leaned into the cockpit of a bright yellow Dagger Mambo to shorten the foot pedals for Megan.

"This is a more stable boat for beginners," Chaz said amicably. When she finished what she was doing, she leaned back on her heels and looked up at Megan. "And I like to have the lesser experienced clients in the bright colors, so I can pick you out more easily when we get in the rougher waters."

"Oh." Megan's pout began to evaporate.

"Want to get in for me, see how it feels?"

"Sure." Megan stepped into the kayak and eased into the seat, bracing her arms on the sides of the cockpit so she could slip her legs into the forward space of the boat. Chaz had set the foot pedals perfectly.

“You brace your thighs here.” Chaz put her hand just inside the rim of the cockpit, and it brushed against the top of Megan’s leg.

Megan could feel the heat rise to her face as she glanced down to where they had touched. Chaz had strong hands, with long slender fingers. Short nails, no polish. No rings, either. No jewelry at all, she noticed, except a necklace of some kind—a couple of inches of a thin gold chain had escaped the collar of Chaz’s wet suit. And what a wet suit it was. *Oh, Lord, I hope she’s not going to wear that thing the whole trip.*

The rest of them were wearing dry suits, but Chaz’s red and navy wet suit hugged her body like a second skin, and at such close proximity Megan couldn’t help but notice the round swell of the guide’s breasts, the bump of nipples faint but unmistakable. She suddenly realized that Chaz was still talking to her.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I *said*, you want to sit so you feel as though you’re actually *wearing* the boat,” Chaz repeated. “The fit should be comfortable but snug, so the boat moves *with* you, like an extension of your body.” As she talked, she reached behind Megan and made a slight adjustment to her back band.

Megan leaned forward, all too vividly aware of the brush of Chaz’s fingertips against her spine. “I think I get the idea,” she said, anxious for the guide to move a bit farther away.

As if reading her mind, Chaz stood and took a step back. “Brace your hips and legs against the sides, and roll your hips a little from side to side. Get a feel for how the boat is balanced here on land.”

Megan did as instructed and was surprised to find that with the tiny adjustments Chaz had made, the boat did indeed move with her, like an extension of her lower torso. It was more comfortable than she’d imagined, with a padded seat and thigh braces, and cushy foam knee blocks. She was anxious to try it out.

“It feels fine,” she said. “I’d like to get in the water now.”

“Soon,” Chaz promised with a smile. “We need to go over a few paddling strokes first.”

“Oh, right.”

Chaz took them through an onshore lesson of the basic strokes: power strokes and sweeps, high and low braces, back paddling.

Glancing around at her friends, Megan noticed that of the six of them, only she and Elise seemed unfamiliar with all this stuff.

"Very good. How many of you know how to do a wet exit?" Chaz asked.

Four hands shot up. All but her and Elise again. *Wet exit. Power strokes. Why does every word out of her mouth seem to have a sexual connotation?*

"Great. And who can Eskimo roll?"

Only Pat, Linda, and Yancey raised their hands this time, and Yancey's affirmation was only halfhearted. "I learned how to do it a couple of years ago, but I haven't really tried it in a long time. I'm not real gung ho I could do it in a pinch."

"Kind of the same with me," Justine said. "I've done it once in a pool, that's it. I don't really remember much."

"All right, then. Well, it doesn't look as though I'll need to spend any more time with you two." Chaz gestured toward Linda and Pat. "You're welcome to spend the rest of the day as you like, getting your muscles warmed up and getting used to your boat. I'd appreciate it if you'd stay together and keep an eye on each other."

"No problem!" Pat replied, openly leering at Linda, which got all of them chuckling. The couple immediately donned their spray skirts and PFDs and headed for their kayaks, while Chaz turned her attention to Justine and Yancey.

"You two can paddle around until lunch. This afternoon, I'll spend an hour or so with each of you one-on-one, going over how to roll."

"Cool beans," Yancey said.

"I may need more than an hour," Justine said. "I had a hard time getting the hang of it, as I recall. Everything seems so ass-backwards when you're upside down."

"Whatever time you need," Chaz replied. "It's not imperative that you can do one, but it's always a good skill to have under your belt." She turned to Megan and Elise. "Now if you two would put on your spray skirts and get into your boats, I'll teach you how to do a wet exit."

"That sounds like *fun*," Elise said, cocking one eyebrow suggestively in Chaz's direction.

Chaz laughed, a low ripple of pleasure. "Not very. Not in this water."

Megan squeezed into her neoprene spray skirt without comment, trying to ignore the obvious flirtation between the two. *So maybe she's not with that other guide. Or maybe she's just with anyone and everyone.*

Once they were in their kayaks, Chaz went to sit on the back of Elise's boat, straddling it so that she was seated just behind Elise.

"Now this is cozy," Elise commented, looking back over her shoulder at Chaz before the guide had a chance to say anything.

Megan saw Chaz blush; a faint trace of rose blossomed on her cheeks. "To attach your spray skirt," the guide said, all businesslike despite the smile on her face, "first you lean back slightly..."

Elise, smiling broader now, leaned back until she rested right up against Chaz's chest.

Chaz laughed and her blush deepened. "I said *slightly*, Elise. Only enough so that the back of your skirt will hook around the edge of the cockpit."

"Spoilsport," Elise groused under her breath as she sat up.

"These fit so tight that it's easier at first if someone helps you and holds the back down," Chaz positioned the spray skirt over the curled rear rim of the cockpit, "while you lean forward and attach the front."

Elise did as instructed and stretched the front of the skirt over the leading edge of the cockpit until it snapped into place.

"Great." Chaz stood. "After a while, you'll be able to do it without help."

"I sure hope not," Elise said suggestively, eliciting another smile from the guide.

Well, Elise, just throw yourself at her right now, why don't you? Megan's irritation grew with each exchange between the two. She didn't know why she was getting pissed off. She'd certainly seen Elise in action when they'd cruised the bars together.

"Next?" Chaz said, stepping toward Megan's boat.

"I can probably do it myself," Megan said quickly, hooking the skirt around the back of her cockpit. Her tone of voice warned Chaz away, and the guide froze, watching her.

But when Megan sat forward to attach the front, the back popped out. She tried again, with the same result. And then again, and again, her frustration growing with each effort.

Before she knew what was happening, Chaz was seated behind her on the kayak.

“Like I said, it’s easier at first with some help,” the guide said gently, fastening the skirt into the rim and anchoring the back firmly in place with her hands. “Now get the front. Lean forward.”

As soon as Megan snapped it into place, Chaz stood and stepped away. Megan felt the sudden absence of the body behind her, though they hadn’t touched.

“If you happen to capsize and can’t do an Eskimo roll to right yourself, you’ll need to do a wet exit,” Chaz explained, glancing between Elise and Megan. “First, you grab the loop there on the front of your skirt and give it a tug. That releases the skirt. Then you relax, put your hands on the side of your cockpit, and slide your legs out. It’s kind of like taking off a pair of pants.”

“Now *that* I can visualize,” Elise said.

Megan could, too. *All too well, in fact.*

Chaz continued without pause, suppressing a grin. “You’ll actually do a kind of half somersault to get out of the boat, but it won’t really feel like that under water. It’s pretty easy. You just need to stay calm and focused. That cold water will be a big shock when you go over.” She looked out across the water. “This creek is very slow, so you should have an easy time of it today. I want to also practice wet exits once we’re on the river, so you won’t panic if you capsize in the rougher water. If you turn over in water over your head, get out, grab your boat—and your paddle, if possible—and try to push toward shore.”

Chaz reached into a small pack she had brought with her and pulled out two nose plugs. “I recommend these when you’re starting out.” She tossed one to each woman and they put them on. “Who’s first?”

“I’ll go!” Elise volunteered.

Megan watched as Chaz pushed Elise’s boat out into the water, wading out with it until the water came up to her chest.

“Any time you’re ready,” Chaz told Elise. “Just relax, and lean over to one side until you go over.”

Elise took a deep breath and held it, closed her eyes, and with one hand on the release loop of her spray skirt, turned over. She broke the surface an arm’s length from Chaz a few seconds later, gasping for air. “Damn! That’s *ice water*!”

Yancey and Justine, watching from their kayaks a short distance away, broke out laughing.

Chaz tried a little better to hide her amusement. “Told you it wouldn’t be much fun. Nicely done, though.” She made Elise do it twice more before she let her go inside to dry off and get warm. Then she turned in Megan’s direction. “Ready for your turn?”

“I guess,” she answered, with no conviction in her voice.

Megan would never admit it aloud, but the whole kayaking element of this trip scared the hell out of her. She hadn’t really faced up to that fact until this moment. *You don’t know anything at all about boats and currents. And the water is frickin’ cold as hell, and the only swimming you do is in the heated pool at the gym.*

Chaz waded in and towed Megan’s boat out into the creek as she had Elise’s, until the water was deep enough to do the maneuver safely. “There’s a sandy bottom here,” she said as they got into position. She looked directly into Megan’s eyes then. “No reason to be nervous. Just relax, and you’ll be back up before you know it.”

“I’m not nervous,” Megan lied. *Don’t think about it, just do it.* But she hesitated, staring at the icy water. She started to hyperventilate. Her mind was screaming instructions, but her body wasn’t listening.

Chaz’s patient expression held no challenge, only encouragement. “You can do it, Megan,” she said in a soft voice.

Damn right I can, Megan thought, her eyes glued on Chaz until the very last second. She closed them as she leaned left and sucked in a deep breath right before she went under. She popped the skirt and before she knew it, she was out of the boat and back on the surface, Chaz’s firm grip on her arm orienting her upright. She touched bottom and Chaz released her.

“See? Cold, but not so bad, eh?” Chaz was only a foot away, smiling that damn charm-your-socks-off smile again.

Much as she wanted to resist it, Megan was finding it harder by the moment. “Not so bad,” she agreed.



After lunch, it was time to learn to Eskimo roll—combining leverage from your paddle with a strong hip snap to right yourself after capsizing. Chaz went through the steps on land; then she got into one

of the kayaks and demonstrated the maneuver. Megan found the display something akin to a nautical ballet.

On the water, Chaz was all fluid muscle, the kayak a part of her, every movement graceful and efficient. The blades of her paddle sliced cleanly into the water with no splash and no sound. Once she got in position, she went over with a wink and a smile, like this was one of her secret pleasures. And when she came up again, easily, gracefully, shaking water from her dark hair, her face pink from the cold, Megan thought she looked beautifully at one with her surroundings. Wild. Primitive. Larger than life.

After a couple more rolls to break down the process into steps that they could visualize, Chaz paddled in, and they all took to their kayaks for their individual lessons.

Megan was up last, but she stayed close by so she could watch the others. She paddled around in the shallow water, getting used to the boat and practicing the strokes that Chaz had taught them that morning. For the first several minutes, she felt awkward and uncoordinated, but she gained confidence quickly and began to get the hang of it.

From a distance, learning to roll didn't seem that intimidating. Not at first. Chaz had made it look easy, and Yancey got it right away, rolling her kayak back upright on the first try with little apparent effort, a big smile on her face. But Justine struggled for a half hour to get it right, cursing loudly every time she couldn't manage to turn her kayak back over and had to rely on Chaz to do it for her. Freezing and exhausted by the time she was finally able to master the maneuver, she limped back up toward the lodge shaking her head.

Elise fared no better. Megan actually counted this time, recording each unsuccessful effort. She wanted to learn the technique faster than Elise, though she didn't bother to imagine why. It took Elise eleven tries to do it right. *Surely I can do it faster than that. I'm an athlete. I play tennis. Golf. Racquetball. Those all take good coordination.*

When Chaz hailed her over for her turn, Megan felt both fear and determination in equal measure.

Chaz was beginning to feel the cold despite her wet suit. *Please do well*, she thought to herself as the bright yellow boat came nearer. She wanted Megan to catch on quickly to rolling, and not just because that meant they would both be able to get out of the water and get warm. She knew, somehow, that Megan was afraid of all this—of tipping over,

of learning to roll, maybe even of kayaking altogether. Chaz had seen it in her eyes that morning, and she wanted to help her get past her fear so she'd enjoy the trip ahead.

Standing next to the boat, one hand on the forward carrying toggle, she went briefly back over the fundamentals: how Megan should hold the paddle, how she should distribute her weight. When she should begin the hip snap and sweep that would turn her upright again.

They were close together, concentrating intently on each other, all businesslike but breaths apart, when Chaz first felt the sparks begin to fly. It was entirely unexpected. One minute, she was assessing with cool detachment her client's readiness to try the roll for the first time. *Good grip, good hip snap, hands the right distance apart. She seems nervous, but that's normal.* The next, without warning, she was suddenly fixated on how soft and silky Megan's hair looked. And how the sun caught the blond highlights. And how could she not have noticed before that Megan's eyes were an uncommon shade of green. *That vibrant, iridescent green of early spring. And she has the most incredibly long eyelashes.*

Chaz realized she was staring. And Megan was staring back, a smirk creeping outward from the corner of her mouth. *Oh, shit. Busted. Don't ogle the clients, idiot.* She quickly averted her eyes and cleared her throat, trying not to blush.

"Ready?" she asked, letting go of the paddle and putting some distance between them, taking up position at the front of the kayak.

She glanced at Megan. The smirk was gone, replaced by a look of grim determination. Megan nodded, her eyes glued to Chaz. She put on her nose clip and gripped her paddle firmly, took a deep breath, leaned left, and flipped over.

After a few seconds, there was a big splash as one blade of Megan's paddle clumsily broke the surface at an odd angle, then disappeared again. Chaz could see her flailing away under there, and her heart began to beat faster as the seconds ticked by. She kept a firm grip on the boat, ready to turn it back over, waiting anxiously for the sign of distress she had taught them all. *Too long*, she thought, a millisecond before she felt them through her fingertips and heard them vaguely, muted by the water—the three raps on the hull of the kayak that said *I need help!*

She flipped the boat over, and Megan came up sputtering, shaking the cold water from her hair and gasping for air. "Damn it!" she cursed.

“Everything is so turned around down there, I couldn’t get oriented. It all seemed backwards.”

“That was only your first try. You’ll get it,” Chaz said in a soothing voice. She waded a step closer and looked into Megan’s eyes. “You can’t *think* about it too hard. I know that doesn’t make sense, but it is hard to orient yourself when you’re upside down. It’s better to memorize the action that you need to do and let your body—not your mind—take over.” She held out one hand, the other on the kayak so it wouldn’t drift. “Let me have your paddle.”

Megan gave it to her with a confused expression.

Chaz oriented herself so the paddle was laid on the surface of the water between them, parallel to the boat. “I want you to go over again...leaning *away* from me. When you get upside down, reach up on this side for the paddle. I’ll be holding it in the right position, and I’ll help you get yourself back up, so you can see what it should feel like.”

Megan looked like she was about to object, but she nodded reluctantly, took several deep breaths, and then went over. It was only a moment before Chaz could see her hands just beneath the surface, groping for the shaft of the paddle. Chaz clamped her hand around Megan’s forearm and led it to the paddle. As Megan began to pull herself up, Chaz helped her, twisting the paddle and pulling up on it until the kayak had righted itself.

Megan sucked in air, her face pink from the cold, hair plastered to her head. “Shit, that’s cold.”

“That wasn’t bad at all,” Chaz said, trying not to stare at the rapid rise and fall of Megan’s chest, only a couple of feet away and at eye level at the moment. “Did it feel better that time?”

“No! I don’t know.” Megan’s shoulders slumped. “Maybe a *little*.” She blew out a breath. “This is really *hard*.”

“You have pretty high expectations of yourself, don’t you?” There was no malice or rancor to Chaz’s question, that was obvious in her tone, but Megan visibly bristled anyway.

“I usually catch on to things pretty quickly,” she snapped. “And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with expecting the best from yourself.”

“I didn’t say there was. I just meant that I don’t think you can...or *should* expect to be able to do this on the first try. It’s a very tough maneuver.”

“I think that I’m the only one capable of knowing what I’m capable of... doing.” Megan looked a little flustered as she said this, as if she wasn’t entirely sure that what she’d just said made sense. “Anyway, I want to try it again.”

Stubborn one, aren’t you? Chaz felt a guilty stab of pleasure at seeing her off balance. “Great. Are you doing it with or without my help?”

“Without.”

There was no hesitation this time. As soon as Chaz backed off and got into position on the end of the kayak, Megan went over. Chaz could see immediately that she would never make it. She put her hands around the kayak and flipped it back upright.

Megan let all the air out of her lungs with a big whoosh of surprise, then her expression turned to fury. She slammed her paddle against the kayak. “What did you do that for?”

“Your paddle was in the wrong position. Remember? You need to put your hands—”

“I know what I did wrong,” Megan snapped, cutting her off. “Just get ready and let’s go.”

“Not until you take a deep breath and focus,” Chaz said slowly. “It’s important that the setup is right—and remember, you have to have the upward blade flat on the surface of the water when you begin the sweep and hip snap. If the blade dives—if it comes down perpendicular to the water—you won’t have enough resistance to pull yourself up.”

“I know,” Megan said, biting her lip.

Chaz positioned herself, hands on the bow of the boat. She normally had infinite patience at this procedure, even with difficult clients. Three tries at Eskimo rolling was nothing. But the frigid water had seeped deep into her wet suit, and something about Megan’s princess attitude was starting to get to her. She was anxious for this to be finished. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Megan closed her eyes. Several seconds passed. Then she squared her shoulders, leaned left, and disappeared under the surface. Chaz counted seconds, holding her breath. Ten. Twenty. She saw the blade of Megan’s paddle break the surface of the water, turn, orient itself. Thirty seconds. She took her hands away when she felt the boat begin to move. The kayak righted itself and Megan reappeared, gasping for air and shivering.

Her eyes found Chaz's. They were bright and sparkling, and a smile spread across her face. "Did I make it? Or did you help me?"

Chaz grinned back. "You made it all by yourself. Congratulations." *You look altogether different when you're happy.*

"Wow!" Megan whooped. She raised her paddle aloft in a moment of unabashed giddy happiness. But she reined herself in at once and became her usual serious self.

"That's plenty for today. Why don't we both go in and get warm?" Chaz suggested, giving Megan's kayak a shove toward shore.

Megan put her paddle in the water and started to go in, but paused a few feet away. "Thanks," she said, over her shoulder, just loud enough for Chaz to hear.

"Welcome." *Why are you so determined not to like me?* She frowned. *What's not to like?*

There was no ego behind Chaz's musings. She had always been well liked. She was an honest, and loyal, and steadfast friend, the first to remember a birthday, to show up in a time of crisis, the first to volunteer her time and energy to a worthy cause. Many of her Orion clients had kept in touch over the years with her, Christmas cards and letters updating their lives and fondly recalling their Alaskan experience.

She shook her head in puzzlement as she watched Megan beach the kayak and head to the lodge. She just couldn't fathom what could be behind the woman's prickly attitude, or why she seemed to be so strangely drawn to her despite it.



Chaz went back to her room and took a long hot shower before setting off for the airstrip to pick up Sally an hour before dinner.

"Everything went well, I trust?" Chaz inquired after their hellos.

"Great. I brought some pictures I'll show you later." They climbed into the van, Chaz behind the wheel, and headed to the lodge. "So how does it look?" Sally asked. "Anybody need special handling?"

"It'll be a good group, I think. Everyone did well on the water today. Pat and Linda are really top-notch kayakers—we sure don't have to worry about them. I'd say Justine and Yancey are above average, and Elise and Megan both learned the strokes pretty well and managed to do a roll."

“So if everyone did good why are you in a lousy mood?”

“I’m not in a lousy mood.” Chaz glanced over at her partner guide. Sally sat facing her in the large bucket seat, with a look on her face that said she wasn’t buying it for a minute. “Okay, I’m a little...well, annoyed, maybe, at one of the clients. That’s all. It’s nothing. And I won’t sour your judgment. You can make up your own mind.”

“Oh, no, you’re not getting off that easily. Give it up. What’s the deal?”

“Forget I said anything.”

“*Spill*, Chaz,” Sally demanded in a sterner voice.

“Well, one of them is kind of...abrupt. You know—hard to warm up to. Not a lot of social skills.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” Sally remarked, a smirk on her face.

“Who, me? I’m not like that.”

“Well, you’re *great* with the clients after you get to know them a bit. But you do tend to be a bit standoffish at first. And you don’t let many people get to know you *well*.”

“Oh, I’m not that bad.”

“No? And when was the last time you went out on a date, hmm?” Sally pressed.

“That has nothing to do with anything. And how did we suddenly start talking about me and my dating habits, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter. Now that we are, fill me in. Your love life improve any over the winter? You deftly avoided the subject during the whole last trip. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“Sally, you know I’m very happy with the status quo,” Chaz said.

“I know what that means.”

“It means I’m not necessarily lonely just because I’m alone.”

“Oh, that’s crap, pardon the expression.” Sally reached over and gave Chaz’s shoulder a shove for emphasis. “You’re scared of getting involved and you know it.”

“I am not. I’m selective. How did we ever get off on this subject? We were talking about the clients.”

“Speaking of which,” Sally said, “I saw the way Elise was coming on to you when she introduced herself.” A lot of cute women hit on Chaz, but as far as Sally was aware, her friend never took anyone up on their offers.

“Well, you know my feelings about that. It’s so unprofessional. I would never get involved with a client. Kind of like sleeping with one of my students.”

“*Maybe* during the trip, you could argue that, although personally I don’t see a problem with it. And there’s certainly nothing wrong with taking somebody’s phone number and getting to know them better afterwards,” Sally suggested.

“If I ever get hit on by somebody I have real chemistry with, I promise I’ll think about it, *okay*? What do you know, we’re here,” Chaz announced as they pulled up at the lodge.

“You’re not off the hook, you know. We’re going to talk about this some more,” Sally promised.

“Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. I know you mean well. But we have lots of other things to think about right now.” Chaz opened the door of the van, hoping it would end the discussion.

But Sally wouldn’t let it go. She put her hand on Chaz’s forearm to keep her in her seat. “You can handle two things at once, Chaz. You should always keep an open mind in matters of the heart. You never know when an opportunity might present itself.”

Chaz patted her friend’s hand. “Spoken like the true married-for-life die-hard romantic that you are, Sally. Tom is a lucky man.”

“You’re a good catch too,” Sally said. “Smart, funny, bighearted, and cute as a bug.”

“Aw, gosh, you’ll turn a girl’s head.” Chaz sighed dramatically. “It’s such a shame you’re not gay.”

“So...I counted at least three from your team among our clients. That couple who were all over each other—Pat and Linda, right?”

Chaz nodded.

“And Elise, for sure,” Sally continued. “Any chance of anything happening there? She’s cute, and sure interested in *you*, my friend.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter. I told you I don’t date clients.”

“Translation—she doesn’t make your heart go pitter-pat. What about the others? Did your gaydar give you good vibes about any of the rest?”

Megan’s face popped into Chaz’s head. The way she’d looked after the roll, all flushed with excitement. Chaz could feel the heat rise to her cheeks.

Sally’s eyes got wide. “Oh? And what’s this? Hey, wait a minute.

This client that's so...annoying. Do you mean annoying as in 'getting under your skin'?"

"Jeez, Sally. Lay off already, would ya?" Chaz got out of the van and headed toward the lodge.

"I bet I get it figured out within twenty-four hours," Sally predicted as she trotted up the steps behind her friend.

Of course Megan *would* be the only client in the lobby. She was back in the same chair she'd been in that morning, this time with her attention on a book. They had to go right by her to get to their rooms. *We can't just ignore her.* Chaz dearly hoped her blush wouldn't worsen with Sally on high alert. And even more than that, she prayed that Megan wouldn't notice her embarrassment. *Get a grip.*

Megan looked up as they approached. She glanced at Chaz only briefly before turning her full attention to Sally. She gave her a big smile. "Hi, Sally. How was the graduation?"

"My kind of ceremony." Sally paused in front of Megan's chair. "Short and sweet and all concerned straight to the nearest Irish pub after. So I heard you did an Eskimo roll today. Congratulations."

"Yes. Thanks." Megan glanced at Chaz, but when their eyes met she promptly looked away again and back at Sally. "I'm not entirely certain I could do it again, but I did manage it."

"You'll do some more," Chaz said. "I want everyone to do a few while we're in the slower water. We'll have a couple more rolling sessions in the early stretches of the river after we set up camp."

Megan glanced down at her watch. "It's nearly dinner time." As she got to her feet she shot Sally another smile. "I'm going back to my room to wash up. Looking forward to getting to know you, Sally. See you in a few minutes?"

"Yup. See you in a bit."

"Bye," Chaz added, but Megan was already heading away from them. She didn't look back, and she didn't acknowledge the farewell.

"My stuff still in the conference room?" Sally asked.

Chaz stared after Megan for several moments, bothered by the fact that she'd seemed much warmer to Sally right from the start. She was positively effervescent, compared to how she was when it was only the two of them. *What gives?*

She suddenly realized Sally was waiting for an answer. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, is my gear still in the conference room?"

"Yeah, do you have your key?"

Sally dug in her pockets. "Nope. Must be in my bag. Can I borrow yours?"

"Why am I not surprised?" Chaz fished for her key. Being organized was not Sally's strong point.

"So which one is the rude one that's got you all hot and bothered? You going to tell me?"

"Knock it off." Chaz handed her the key. "Please?"

"Fraid not, chum. This is the first time I've ever seen you even mildly interested in someone. It's especially intriguing that you seemed to be repulsed by her even as you are attracted to her."

"I wouldn't say repulsed," Chaz blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Aha! I knew it!"

"Oh, shit."

Sally was laughing now. "Okay, who is it?"

"I have things to do," Chaz lied. "And so do you. I'm going to my room." She headed off in that direction.

"You can escape for now," Sally relented. "But we're not finished!" she hollered after her.

Dinner only served to reinforce Chaz's growing perception that it wasn't that Megan was distant and rude. It was that she was distant and rude to *her*. Megan was chatty and charming and animated at dinner, down there at the other end of the table between Justine and Sally. She had arrived last and had taken the farthest seat she could from Chaz. *Was that deliberate? So she could get away with not having to say a word to me all evening?*

Over the next hour while the women lingered over drinks and dessert, Chaz sat brooding, observing Megan and amazed at the transformation. The woman who had spent the previous night staring out the window seemed interested in anything and everything tonight, engaging everyone in sparkling conversation. Everyone, that is, but her. Megan ignored her all evening, ignored her so absolutely and completely that she wondered how it was possible that not a single person at the table seemed to notice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Megan stood looking out of the thick insulated window in her room, sipping coffee and berating herself for her cowardice. *You won't be able to hide from her much longer.*

There was a knock on her door. "Come on in," she called, and Justine entered, carrying her three dry bags of gear. She dumped them inside the door.

"Got any more of that?" she asked, indicating Megan's steaming mug with a tilt of her head.

"Sorry, they only give you enough coffee for four small cups, and this is the last of it."

"That's all right. I've got to get going anyway if I'm going to have time for breakfast before we go," Justine said. "Just wanted to stop and make sure you haven't changed your mind."

"No. I know it's silly. I'm going to have to spend the next eleven days with the woman. A plane ride shouldn't matter one way or the other."

"I understand, Megan. It really is eerie how much they look alike. They say we all have a twin somewhere."

"I guess. Anyway, thanks for hustling to get ready to go in my place."

At dinner the night before, Chaz had announced the arrangements for the morning flights to the river, since they all couldn't fit in the Twin Otter. She would take the first flight out at eight, along with Linda, Pat, and Megan. Sally would take the second at nine-thirty, with Yancey, Justine, and Elise.

Megan didn't object at the time, but she'd decided, after another mostly sleepless night, that she'd take any opportunity she could to avoid having to be close to Chaz. So she'd tapped on Justine's door a half hour earlier and asked if she would switch flights.

“What do you want me to say if she asks why we’ve changed places?” Justine asked.

“Say I overslept and needed the extra time to get ready.”

“Anything else I can do?”

Megan shook her head. “Thanks, though.”

“You sorry you came along?”

Megan sipped her coffee and thought about it. “Yes and no. I have to admit that Alaska is everything you said it was. And more. Spectacularly beautiful. And I’m actually beginning to look forward to the whole kayaking thing.” Her expression went grim. “But every time I look at her, it tears my guts out all over again. Instead of relaxing, I’m reliving some of the worst nightmares of my life.”

Justine took two steps and put her arms around Megan. After a moment, Megan relaxed and hugged her back.

“She was a shit, Megan,” Justine said gently. “You need to move on.”

“Oh, I moved on a long time ago.” Megan disengaged from their embrace.

“Have you?”

“Oh, come on. I date all the time.”

“And how many women in the last five years have you dated more than once or twice?”

Megan turned away to look out the window again, and the question hung in the air. “You better get going,” she said finally, without looking at Justine.

“I didn’t mean to get you pissed off at me.”

“I’m not.” Her tone and posture made it clear that she most certainly was.

Justine sighed. “I’ll see you at the river, then.” When Megan made no move to answer, Justine picked up her gear and departed.

I am over you, Megan chanted again and again to herself, as if the words could form a talisman to keep images of Rita and their life together at bay. They’d had five wonderful, perfect years together. Life in suburbia, white picket fence, exotic getaways, and exceptional sex.

But so far, Chaz had been stirring up mostly negative memories. Memories of *the day*. March 29. The day Megan’s orderly life turned upside down, and everything she thought she knew went right out the window. The day a stranger told her that her loving, devoted wife was

screwing someone else, probably right at that moment, in the posh hotel room the network had booked for her at the Paris economic summit.

Back then, Megan was only a copy editor, so she rarely got calls in the middle of the night, even when a major story broke. The anchors ad-libbed everything, and there was always a skeleton crew of writers and editors to cover any event. So when her phone rang at 2:30 a.m., she was instantly awake and immediately worried that something had happened to Rita, who was on assignment in Paris. The voice on the phone was unfamiliar.

“Megan Maxwell?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know me, Megan. Can I call you Megan?” The caller had sounded like she was crying.

Megan’s heartbeat picked up. “What is it? Is it Rita?”

The caller laughed, a hollow laugh that became a sob.

“What is it? Has something happened?” Megan gripped the phone so tight her knuckles went white.

“Yes, it’s about Rita. And yes, something’s happened.” Megan could tell the caller was trying to compose herself. “There’s no way to tell you this except to tell you. Rita is cheating on you and she’s going to leave you.”

The words hung there. She closed her eyes and saw them in her head, pictured bloodred letters on a black background. RITA IS CHEATING ON YOU AND SHE’S GOING TO LEAVE YOU. She thought in words and pictures, a photographic memory. Usually like a newspaper. Black letters on a white background. But not this time.

“Are you there?” The stranger’s voice jarred her.

“I don’t believe you.” Rita had kissed her good-bye like she always did. Nothing at all different. They’d made love the night before she left. It had been wonderful, as always. At least for Megan it was wonderful. The first doubt crept in.

“You have no idea she’s been seeing my girlfriend for six months?” the caller asked shakily.

Six months? It was impossible. “Your girlfriend? Who are you?”

“My name is Denise. My girlfriend is...was...Iliana Theroux.”

A face sprang instantly to Megan’s mind. Clear blue eyes set against lush dark eyelashes, bronze skin. Iliana Theroux was the exotically beautiful chief foreign correspondent for the Canadian

Broadcasting Company. The CBC had a reciprocal arrangement with WNC, so Iliana's reports often aired on the shows that Megan edited.

But how? Iliana Theroux was based in Washington. And Rita had been in the capital a lot during the past year, filling in for vacationing reporters in the D.C. bureau. WNC was grooming her for big things, maybe a permanent gig as one of the White House press corps, and Rita had never been happier. *She's always been ambitious. She told me that on our first date.* Megan's stomach churned.

"They met when both were covering some State Department briefing," Denise went on, her voice calmer. "The briefing kept getting delayed, so they had a couple of hours to get to know each other. Apparently it was love at first sight, or so they say."

They say. Her stomach roiled in violent upheaval, and she felt the first tears form.

"Iliana moved out last week. I knew they were seeing each other, but I thought it was a fling. It wasn't the first time." Denise wept softly into the phone. "I knew she was never in love with me, but she always came home." There was the muffled sound of her blowing her nose. "I had no idea how serious it was until she announced she was leaving. She told me everything, then. She says they're getting married in Amsterdam next month."

Married. And legally married if they're going to the Netherlands. It had been a major story on WNC and the networks that week—it was going to be legal for same-sex couples to wed there in just a few days. Megan and Rita had made private vows on a beach at Lake Michigan, promising to love each other forever. Her head swam. It was unbelievable. Unthinkable. That Rita had been pretending to love her. *How long has she been lying to me?*

"Your girlfriend's hired a lawyer," Denise said wearily. "I overheard Iliana on the phone with her. They were talking about telling you, but it sounded like Rita wasn't going to until she hired a lawyer. Something about your house and bank account, I think."

The house was in both their names. And Megan hadn't checked the account balance at the bank in a long time. Rita paid all the bills out of their joint account, took care of all things financial.

"Iliana at least was honest with me in the end and tried to make it easy on me." Denise sounded desolate. "I saw the news tonight and realized they're both in Paris at that summit. So I knew you'd be alone,

and I thought you should know. That's all. I'm sorry."

There was a soft click and then a dial tone. Megan had listened to that dull drone for several long seconds, frozen with shock. She'd been on the phone for five minutes or less. That was all it took for her whole life to change.



Megan lay on her back on a smooth rock the size and shape of a sports car, her eyes closed, while a short distance away, her five friends and the two guides prepared to get underway.

Seven kayaks and one large raft were lined up along the shore of the Odakonya at a place where the river was wide and shallow and flat, meandering through a long valley of muskeg and low, scrubby spruce trees. The pilot had landed in the middle of the river, the fat front tires of the plane bouncing them along on a wide gravel sandbar.

The weather could not have been more perfect for the start of their adventure: seventy-four degrees with a light breeze. In every direction, the awesome spectacle of snowy peaks starkly outlined against the deep blue cloudless sky behind.

They were all in high spirits and anxious to get underway. Everyone but Megan, who had puked her coffee and toast into her airsickness bag in the Twin Otter on the way over. The turbulence in the little plane had exacerbated a stomach already in upheaval over memories of the past.

"Are you feeling any better?"

She hadn't heard anyone approach. She was glad it was Sally and not Chaz. "Yes, a bit. Are we all ready to go?"

"Pretty much, but we're not on a schedule. If you'd like to spend more time here so your stomach can settle..."

"No, I'm all right." She sat up slowly. "I don't want to hold everyone up." The raft was loaded, all the gear tied in, and everyone was putting on their spray skirts and PFDs. Chaz was looking right at her from the water's edge, forty feet away.

"Will you help me with my spray skirt?" she asked Sally as she pushed off the rock and headed toward the group.

"Sure." Sally followed her to her boat and got her situated, and soon they were on the river.

They settled into a lazy pace, rarely paddling, enjoying the view

and letting the gentle current sweep them along. Megan kept to the rear, about as far away as she could be from Chaz.

It wasn't long before they got their first glimpse of some of the wildlife they'd been promised. A bald eagle, following the course of the Odakonya, soared low over their kayaks, looking for fish, allowing them all a close-up view of his magnificent white head and tail.

Megan and most of the other clients had been talking in low voices until then, remarking on the scenery and telling stories of past vacations, but the eagle stunned them into silence. Then they could hear that the air was alive with subtle but constant bird songs—juncos and myrtle warblers, gray-cheeked thrushes and tree sparrows.

Megan spotted a couple of Arctic ground squirrels playing tag on the bank, a muskrat swimming next to the shoreline, and several hawks, flying so high she had no hope of identifying them. She drifted very near a male rock ptarmigan, starkly contrasted in its winter plumage against the brown grass alongshore. *They stay white to distract predators from the nest, she'd read. The females turn brown.* She was excited to be able to identify so many animals that she'd never seen before. It was an eminently satisfying use of her considerable research.

A bit farther on, Chaz, in the lead, slowed her kayak until all the others were grouped up and able to see her. Then she pointed her paddle blade at one of the nearest mountains—its base rose from the tundra a half mile away.

Megan couldn't decipher for the longest time what she was pointing at. She had excellent eyesight, but she didn't see them until one of the Dall rams took off on a run up the steep slope. Then she could see them all, a scattering of white sheep among the gray and tan granite rock behind. Specks at this distance. *How the hell did she see them?*

They stopped for sandwiches and chips at a spot on the river where a wide gravel bar offered a perfect parking spot for the kayaks and a chance to stretch their legs. Most sat atop their decks, but Pat and Linda sat side by side, leaning up against their boats.

"What's that?" Elise asked, pointing to a flash of movement in the clear emerald water.

Elise had, Megan noticed, managed to park her kayak right next to Chaz's, and had been flirting openly with the guide all through lunch. She asked Chaz what every single bird and plant and animal and tree

in sight was. *And damn if that woman couldn't answer every single question, too.* Their exchanges were really starting to get under her skin.

"Those are grayling," Chaz answered, with the same patience she had every one of Elise's incessant queries. "Hopefully we'll have some for dinner one night."

"I love a woman who can cook," Elise said.

I'm going to go nuts if I have to listen to this for two weeks. How is it that in all the times we've gone cruising together, I never realized that Elise is quite so painfully, dreadfully obvious.

"We do eat well," Chaz agreed. "Menus are a high priority."

So you're deflecting her flirtations, for the most part anyway. Aren't you interested? I know you're one of us. Aren't you?

"Man, I can tell I'm going to be sore tomorrow," Justine said, getting creakily to her feet. She arched her back with a groan, then rolled her shoulders to loosen them up. "I should definitely get more exercise."

"No lie. This sure reminds me about some stomach and back muscles I don't use very much," Yancey added.

And shoulders. And arms. Megan didn't want to admit aloud that she was feeling it, too. She'd thought she was in pretty good shape, but decided tennis and golf must use different muscle groups. *And you've been working so much, you really haven't played that much the last year or so.*

"I think I'm beginning to see why you invited me along," Elise said.

"Oh, yeah! I get first dibs tonight!" Pat raised her hand.

"Me second!" Linda chimed in.

"Not fair! You two do this all the time. You don't need her like we do," Yancey said.

"Let me state right up front that I'm not doing all of you every night," Elise said.

"Maybe we should draw straws or pick numbers or something," Justine suggested.

"Can someone clue me in on what's going on?" Sally asked.

"Before she became a graphic artist, our dear, sweet, charming Elise went to massage therapy school," Pat said.

"Sucking up will do you no good. I'm still only doing two or three

of you a day, max.” Elise turned to look at Chaz. “You can get in on this, you know,” she said invitingly. “You *and* Sally,” she amended.

“I’m in,” Sally said immediately.

Megan watched Chaz, waiting for a response. *Don’t do it.* Picturing Elise with her hands on Chaz was not an image she liked very much at all.

Chaz neither accepted nor declined. She merely stood and stretched—slowly, languidly, a contented smile on her face. Looking every bit, Megan thought, like a pampered cat getting up from a nap, like they hadn’t already been paddling three hours on the river. Like this was no exertion at all for her.

Chaz looked up at the sky as if judging the position of the sun and announced, “Everybody ready? There’s a great campsite about another three hours downriver.”

You’re nice to watch, Megan admitted. *Much too damn nice to watch.*

After another hour or so, the river began to split into channels, some wide, some narrow—fingers separated by swampy tussocks of earth or wide, pale gray gravel bars. The group all followed Chaz like ducklings behind their mother, with Sally bringing up the rear in the raft, and eventually all the fingers of the river seemed to join up again.

Megan was halfway up the line of kayaks by then, quite a bit closer to the front than before. Not enough to have to make conversation with Chaz, but close enough to get a first-rate view of the guide. She didn’t look much like Rita at the moment. Rita never looked this good from the back.

In the warmth of the afternoon sun, Chaz had peeled off her outer shirt and was wearing only a tank top under her PFD, allowing all those behind her a splendid view of her well-developed and wonderfully tanned shoulders and arms as she paddled her smooth, effortless strokes. *Poetry in motion. So that’s what that phrase means.*

Several of them had been jockeying for position since the shirt had come off, none of them too overtly, of course. Megan had moved up, and so had Justine. And Elise seemed determined to keep the spot behind Chaz that she’d held most of the day.

The river led them very near a low, wide mountain with a big splotch of green limestone on the side. They saw more sheep there, close enough this time that with binoculars they could pick out the big

curved horns on the rams. Chaz had encouraged them to keep their binoculars always close at hand. It was easy in this wide, gentle current to put down their paddles for a moment now and then. They began automatically reaching for theirs when she reached for hers, following her eyes, never disappointed.

The hours passed quickly, they were all so absorbed in the awesome views, in every direction, ever changing with each stroke of their paddles. Not a landscape to be rushed through. Mountains, mountains, mountains, and wide plains of tundra meadows dotted with dark pools of placid water and interlaced with a dazzling mosaic of lichens and mosses and wildflowers.

She was guessing, having only colors to go on and not the details of blossoms and shapes of leaves, but Megan thought the wide swaths of pinkish-purple flowers she was seeing must be fireweed—the guidebook said it was ubiquitous in Alaska.

It was such an immense and endless landscape of wilderness that it began to unsettle her. She was the center of the universe at WNC; the newsroom revolved around her, and she was in total control of everything. Her words moved mountains. But out here...all bets were off. *You can't control this place. Get lost out here and you're in some damn serious trouble.* It was frightening, but exhilarating too. Like she was living on the edge of danger instead of just reporting about it.

She hadn't seen any sign at all that another human being had ever been this way before. But Chaz was here, she remembered. She took the caribou picture on this river. For the first time it occurred to her. *Who was with you when you took that? Who did you share that with? Sally?*

There were more trees than she'd imagined she'd see this far north—forests of spruce and thickets of dwarf birch and alder and willow. They were coming up on one now, an area of dense conifers with an undergrowth of spongy green moss, and Chaz was pulling off, beaching her kayak.

"We're stopping here!" she called as she waved them over.

It was a delightful spot, Megan had to admit, with the soft sphagnum to cushion their sleeping bags. Through the trees, a short distance away, she could see a small lake shimmering in the sun.

Once they had shed their life jackets and spray skirts, Chaz laid out the camp: the area for the tents, where the food prep and cooking

would be done, and the designated bathroom area—over a small rise for privacy and away from the water.

“We have two-person tents,” Sally said, taking four identical navy blue tent bags out of a large compactor garbage bag and lining them up near the area where they would spend the night. “Since you’re all friends, we’re assuming you can decide how you want to divvy up the sleeping arrangements.”

“Linda and I will take one.” Pat plucked bag number one.

“Megan? How ‘bout it?” Justine asked, glancing her way as she reached for number two.

“Sure, that sounds great.”

“That leaves me with the masseuse.” Yancey ruffled the spiky dark hair on Elise’s head as she passed by her to pick up the third bag. “You all didn’t think very smart on that choice, my friends.”

Elise smiled at the compliment, but her eyes hadn’t left Chaz since they’d beached the boats. “Well, we can always change the sleeping arrangements at any time, if someone wants a little variety, can’t we?”

Here we go again. Though it was increasingly obvious that Chaz was not exactly jumping at the chance to take Elise up on her blatant, nonstop flirtations. More and more, Megan began to wonder why. She was fairly certain Chaz was gay. *I swear I caught you checking me out for a second during that rolling lesson. So, what is it, then? Are you involved with somebody, or just not interested in Elise?*



Nearly simultaneous shrieks from the tent area 200 feet away brought Chaz to her feet and instantly alert, but the familiar laughter that followed quickly reassured her that it was merely Sally’s traditional opening night prank of assorted artificial spiders, hidden in the tent folds and among the poles and stakes. She relaxed back down on the rock she’d been sitting on and resumed preparations for their dinner. Shortly thereafter, she spotted Linda and Pat approaching.

“Oh, come on, honey.” Pat’s voice rang with amusement. “You know there are no tarantulas in Alaska. Chaz even warned us this would happen.”

“So I forgot. And you better stop teasing me about it if you want

any nookie tonight.” Linda tried to sound annoyed, but Chaz could see she was pretending.

Nookie in the next tent. Not that it hadn’t happened before on trips; she and Sally sometimes had a hard time stifling their laughter over what they overheard a few feet away. Growing up in a commune, Chaz had thought she’d heard it all when it came to sounds made during sex. But apparently “doing it” in the wilds of Alaska brought out the beast in some people. They’d had clients growl, and snort, and howl, and one guy even yodeled a little. But they’d never overheard two women making love. Thinking about it sent an unexpected ripple of arousal through her.

“I think it’s hysterical that you have no qualms at all about jumping out of an airplane or going into a war zone, but a tiny spider gets you all unnerved. I didn’t think you were afraid of anything.” Pat sat down near Chaz and leaned back against a large boulder. When she reached up and took Linda’s hand, Linda allowed herself to be drawn down into the cradle of Pat’s arms.

“So what else is Sally going to pull on us, hmm?” Linda asked, as she settled comfortably between Pat’s legs and reclined back against her lover’s chest. Pat ran her hands slowly through Linda’s curly brown hair, and Linda closed her eyes and groaned in approval.

“She’d kill me if I told you all her tricks,” Chaz responded with a smile, as she made up a rub of fresh tarragon, thyme, and garlic for the night’s main course.

“Anything we can do to help with dinner?” Linda offered.

“Got it covered, thanks. So how do you like everything so far?”

“Amazing place you’ve got here,” Linda said. “Breathtaking.”

“I’ll second that. We’re already planning to come back. Do you live in Alaska?” Pat asked.

“Yes. Outside Fairbanks,” Chaz answered.

Elise joined them, taking a seat on a rock next to Chaz. “And what do you do in Fairbanks?”

“Teach,” Chaz said.

“A teacher? Ah, beautiful *and* brainy,” Elise remarked.

“You know, you really are incorrigible.” Chaz couldn’t help but be a bit flattered by the attention, even if she would never in a million years consider a liaison with Elise. The woman certainly was attractive, though.

"That's what they tell me." Elise reached over to steal a dried cranberry from a small bowl at Chaz's feet. "So, what's on the menu for tonight, mademoiselle chef?"

"Grilled pork tenderloin with an herb rub, served with a cranberry rice pilaf and Caesar salad," Chaz replied. "And for dessert, chocolate cake with bourbon chocolate sauce."

Pat whistled approvingly.

"This sure isn't roughing it." Elise stole another cranberry. "I kind of expected hot dogs or something."

"The menu is courtesy of my son, Nathan," Sally told them as she ambled up, the others not far behind. "He's a sous chef at the moment, but hoping to get his own restaurant soon."

"I'm so glad not to have to be the one cooking for a change that I'd be happy with absolutely anything," Yancey said, setting up a small portable camp chair.

"I could eat cardboard with this view," Justine agreed. "The light is so wonderful here. It seems altogether different than in Chicago."

Linda smiled. "I noticed that, too. It's got this soft glow to it. Kind of...ethereal."

"Very romantic, I think," Pat said, nuzzling Linda's neck.

"You two find everything romantic," Megan groaned. "It's the angle of the sun, that's all."

"Come on, Megan. You don't find this to be the most romantic setting on earth? Are you blind?" Linda looked disbelieving. "Surely you haven't been cooped up in that office so long that you're not appreciating all this?"

"It's great, it's great," Megan hastily agreed. "I'm only saying that when you're newly in lust, like you two, everywhere is paradise."

"*Love*, Megan," Pat corrected her with only a gentle hint of reproach. "Newly in *love*, though I'll readily admit that my whole world and everything in it got brighter when I met Linda."

Pat hugged Linda tightly to her as she spoke. At the look of such pure bliss and devotion that passed between them, Chaz felt a momentary pang of envy over the glimpse of what she might be missing. She glanced at Megan. *You sound like such a cynic about love. Why is that? And why does it seem to matter to me?*

She kept trying to tell herself that she was imagining things. But by the time they finished cleaning up the supper dishes, Chaz was

convinced that Megan had something against her personally. It was like last night's dinner back at the lodge. Around absolutely everyone else, she was fine. Relaxed. Talkative. *But the moment I get within earshot she goes all quiet. And she seems to go out of her way to avoid sitting close to me or interacting with me in any way.*

She tried to tell herself it shouldn't matter as long as Megan was enjoying herself, which she evidently was. But her pep talks to herself weren't helping. Megan's behavior was starting to really drive her crazy. *Got to find some way to get her to warm up to me.*

The clients turned in early, beat from the day's exertions. Elise gave massages to Pat and Linda in their tent after much pleading and begging, but all was quiet about the campsite by nine thirty. Feeling restless, Chaz climbed a nearby hill and sat with a cup of decaf, watching the landscape turn pink in the alpenglow effect of the midnight sun. She thought Sally had also retired for the night, but her partner guide appeared with a mug of her own and reclined comfortably beside her.

They enjoyed the view for several minutes in companionable silence before Sally spoke. "It's Megan, isn't it?" she asked gently.

"Don't go there."

"Why is she giving you the big chill?" Sally asked, refusing to be deterred.

Chaz sighed. "Beats me." There was a long silence. "She did kind of catch me...looking at her...you know, maybe a bit inappropriately...when I was teaching her how to roll." She could feel a rush of warmth rise to her cheeks. "I didn't mean to. And it was only for a few seconds. I didn't think much of it then, but maybe she was offended."

Sally put her arm over her friend's shoulder. "I doubt very much whether you offended her just by looking at her. What can I do? Extol your virtues to her? In a very subtle way, of course."

"Subtle? You?" Chaz laughed. "Please, Sally, promise me you won't say anything."

Sally withdrew her arm and playfully punched Chaz. "That's not fair. I can be subtle."

Chaz laughed harder. "If you say so. But I still want you to promise me you won't try."

"All right," Sally agreed. "But if you change your mind, say the word."

"I know your heart's in the right place," Chaz said. "You're

always trying to play matchmaker, and bless you for that. But don't meddle in this. I had a momentary lapse in judgment, that's all. Okay, so she's attractive. But even if she wasn't a client, which she *is*...she is still *not* my type. We have *nothing* in common. It just bothers me that she doesn't seem to like me much."

"If you say so." Sally got to her feet. "I'm going to turn in. You coming?"

"Soon," Chaz answered. "'Night, Sal. Sleep well."

"You too. 'Night."

We have nothing in common at all. And you apparently can't stand the sight of me. So why is it, Megan Maxwell, that I can't stop thinking about you?

CHAPTER SIX

Megan was so groggy from lack of sleep that she took no note of what time it was when she decided to get out of her sleeping bag. She just knew she had to get away from that appalling racket. She couldn't take it one minute more. Justine might be one hell of a good friend and an exceptional reporter, but she could sure snore the paint off a wall.

It was bad enough that she didn't have an eyeshade. The tent helped to mitigate the light a little, and she'd rigged a half-assed blindfold out of a bandanna she'd brought along because it was an "optional and recommended item" on Orion Outfitter's suggested packing list, God bless 'em. But she had nothing to combat the cacophony of noise vibrating through her tent.

First she'd flipped her sleeping bag around, so her head was at Justine's feet. Then she'd stuffed rolled-up tissue in her ears and, over that, her fleecy hat. Then she wrapped her pillow around her head and burrowed into her sleeping bag. All for naught. She only got uncomfortably warm and claustrophobic. Justine's particularly quirky snore—a long raspy wheeze, followed by a megadecibel snort, reverberated through her body regardless of how many layers she used to cushion her ears. It was like the tent was equipped with a surround sound system.

Finally, when she could stand the Dolby snore no longer, she got up and went in desperate search of coffee. To her amazement, though apparently no one was up and about, a large thermos sat on a rock outside their tent, next to their steel mugs. She was delighted to find it contained hot coffee. And not just any hot coffee. A smooth Jamaican Blue Mountain, if she was any judge. And she was.

She poured a cup, walked up the nearest rise to sit and admire the view, and began to feel better immediately. It was impossible not to.

Such a vast and varied expanse of terrain spread out before her, it was hard to know where to look first. *How far can I be seeing? Fifty miles, easy, in this direction. Maybe more. Nearly all of it unexplored.*

She quickly decided to institute the routine that she would use whenever they set up camp. First she took a couple of minutes to check all around her for anything *moving*. If something moved, it got a close-up look with the binoculars for identification. Then she sat down and studied the view in front of her with the naked eye. Big picture first. The whole landscape. Then in small parts, very systematically. Close in first, surveying for insects, wildflowers, birds. *Siberian phlox. Ivory anemone.* Then farther out. *Oooh, that's a peregrine falcon. Gray-blue above, kind of a cream color underneath. Definitely a peregrine. Very cool.* Next, the horizon. She'd admire the sharp delineation of blue sky against the white mountain tops. Now and then she'd go for her binoculars if something struck her fancy.

When she'd completed her meticulous inspection of everything she could see, she'd turn ninety degrees and do it all again. *Those are sure some big birds over there.* She adjusted her binoculars. *Bald eagle! Two bald eagles! Three! Three!* Many minutes later, she'd turn another ninety degrees. *Oh, wow. Look at him go. That's an arctic fox, I think. Big tail. Dark face, lots of brownish-blue fur. Yeah, that's an arctic fox, for sure.* She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten so much pleasure out of her uncanny memory.

She whiled away an hour and a half and drank three cups of coffee studying the view from their first campsite, and by the time she was done, she had decided it was a damn fine thing she'd come to Alaska, regardless of the bad memories it was dredging up. This really was a unique and unforgettable experience.

She stood up and brushed herself off and only then glanced at her watch. It was just a bit before six thirty. No wonder nobody else was up. She knew she'd had too much caffeine to try to go back to sleep. *Well, I really could do with a bath after all that paddling yesterday. I'm probably a little ripe, and my hair is not fit to be seen in.* She refused to think about whom it might be that she needed to look good for. Arching her back, she groaned loudly. Her back, arms, and shoulders were still sore. *I'm not in shape for this. I sit behind a desk too much.*

She was amazed to realize she hadn't thought of work once since

they got on the river yesterday. *Grace will never believe it when I tell her.*

She went back to the tent for a towel and a change of clothes. Justine was still sawing logs so loudly that Megan didn't worry about accidentally waking her. She scribbled a note that said she'd gone to the lake to wash up and left it on her pillow. There was one stop she had to make first. She detoured to the area where they'd left their food and some of their personal items in bear-proof cylinders and picked up her toiletries kit.

Yancey and Justine had spent an hour at the lake the night before and reported it was too cold for bathing unless you were a polar bear or masochist. But they both managed to tolerate it enough to wash their hair. At least it was unusually mild, with temperatures that felt like the upper sixties.

It was only a short walk, and she could see the lake through the trees the whole way, so her mind drifted as she trod slowly along on the soft moss. She inhaled long and deeply. *The air is so clean here. The colors so vivid. Is that the angle of the sun too?* Whatever it was, she felt more *alive* in Alaska, like all her senses had been enhanced.

Before she knew it she had stepped out of the tree line and was at the lake. The water was deep and clear, and so absolutely calm it reflected the enormous mountain behind it in a perfect mirror, taking her breath away.

"Wow." The word escaped like a reverent sigh.

"Awesome, isn't it?"

Chaz's voice, so near and so unexpected, startled her so much that she dropped the bundle of clothes and toiletries she was carrying. As she picked it all back up, she glanced around but didn't immediately see the guide.

"Up here," Chaz drawled lazily.

She was six feet in the air, lying atop a large black rock, face up to the sun, as if she was on a beach in Florida instead of the Arctic Circle. Her head turned slowly toward Megan, her eyes concealed behind sunglasses. It was the only thing about her that was hidden. She was otherwise completely and utterly nude.

Megan's jaw dropped and her brain short-circuited for a moment, as she tried to fully grasp what she was seeing. She was unable to speak. She couldn't bring herself to look away.

“Megan?” Chaz’s demeanor changed from languid torpor to concern, her brow furrowing above her dark glasses, her rosy lips pursed in worry. As she roused herself from her semislumber, she seemed to become aware that Megan, who was *not*, unfortunately, wearing sunglasses, was staring at her breasts, not at her face. She half sat up, reached for her towel, and draped it across herself.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting anyone to be up this early. Does nudity bother you?” She turned to lie on her side, facing Megan, propped up on one elbow.

Bother me? Hell, yes, it bothers me. But she certainly couldn’t say *that*. Her mind struggled to come up with a suitable reply while her eyes, of their own accord and totally without her permission, burned the image she glimpsed of the naked Chaz into her memory. Legs that went on forever, athlete’s legs—with firmly muscled thighs and calves that complemented the buff upper body she’d been staring at the prior afternoon. A flat plane of stomach, not a tan line in sight. Her breasts were not too large, but they were round and firm and inviting, the dark areolas standing out like the center ring on a target, pulling her eyes to them. The triangle of dark hair below testified that Chaz had indeed been born with that rich, vibrant chestnut brown everywhere.

Photographic memory indeed. She was doomed.

“I’m fine. Just fine,” she managed after several moments.

She forced herself to look away—at the lake, at anywhere else. It really made no difference. She was still seeing that absolutely delicious body in her mind’s eye, and she knew she would for a very long time. But at least she might hope to appear outwardly a bit more composed. No way did she want Chaz to have any idea what effect she was having on her. *What the hell is the matter? I’ve certainly seen naked women before. Lots of naked women, as a matter of fact.* She took a deep breath. Then another. *Yeah, but not like her;* some part of her whispered. *Even Rita. In the nude, they look nothing alike, really. Rita never looked this good.* She realized her hands were trembling. She gripped her bundle of clothes and towel tighter to herself to hide it.

“I can’t believe it’s this warm.” Chaz lay back down, face up to the sun. “Wind’s from the south.” She kept the towel draped across herself. “I went for a run and then I had to take a swim, I got so hot.”

Stop with the double entendres, Megan wanted to say, but she knew they were unintentional. Frankly, she didn’t think it was *that* warm,

not *let's-sunbathe-nude* warm, but maybe anything above freezing was balmy to an Alaskan.

"Did you find the thermos of coffee?" Chaz asked.

She'd forgotten all about that. *So you're my secret caffeine benefactor. Gotta give you points for that.* "Yes, I did, thank you. Excellent blend."

"Glad you approve." Chaz smiled. "Personally, my morning coffee is my most important meal of the day."

"I was a bit worried about that part," Megan found herself admitting. "I was absolutely expecting terrible burned coffee, or instant, or something."

"I use a French press out here, with beans I roast myself. The results aren't bad. I also brought an old-fashioned stove-top espresso pot, any time you're interested."

So she's a coffee connoisseur too. "Thanks. I may take you up on that."

Megan began to relax a little as silence fell between them. *This isn't so bad. I'm fine now. As long as I don't look at her.*

On the one hand, the more time she spent with Chaz, the more she saw the differences between her and Rita. She was thinking less about Rita by the day. *But now I'm thinking about Chaz, instead. And seeing her naked sure isn't gonna help that.* She had absolutely nothing in common with this woman. *Well, except for coffee, maybe.* She stole a glance up at Chaz.

Her face was relaxed and her body still, except for the slow rise and fall of her chest. Megan thought she'd fallen back asleep, but it was hard to tell with those damn sunglasses on. She felt suddenly reluctant to bathe as she'd planned. The thought of Chaz perhaps watching her from behind those shades was a bit disconcerting. *Later. I'll come back later.*

Backtracking quietly the way she'd come, Megan returned to their campsite. She could hear Justine's snoring from thirty feet away. *I bet everyone else will have heard her, too. No one will want to switch tents.* Perhaps she'd start sleeping outside the tent. They'd been warned the mosquitoes could be ferocious in Alaska in June, but she'd seen hardly any at all thus far.



The swarm from hell arrived an hour later, just as they were getting ready to eat breakfast. Sally had cooked bacon and eggs and fresh muffins, and they were all just sitting down to enjoy them when a cloud of hungry mosquitoes found them, enveloping them and biting at every inch of exposed flesh, which was abundant on this unusually warm morning. The skeeters flew into their ears, buzzing their torment as they raised welts in a hundred places at once.

Guides and clients ran to their tents and dove inside. They'd all been complacent about the mosquitoes. None of them had their head nets with them, and the few who'd bothered applying repellent had done so in much too cursory a fashion to impede the little buggers at all, so no one escaped unscathed. The sound of zippers rang through the air, along with a litany of cursing as all eight of them sought sanctuary.

"Bastards!"

"Damn it! Get *off* me!"

"Nasty bloodsuckers!"

Then there was the frenzied clapping of hands, as they all sought to eradicate the tiny beasts who'd snuck in and were trapped inside the tents with them.

"They got me *everywhere*," Yancey moaned. It was so pleasant out, she'd gone to breakfast in what she'd worn to sleep: loose-fitting shorts and tank top.

"Join the crowd," Pat hollered from the next tent. "I am *so* going to itch."

"I hope somebody else brought a lot more hydrocortisone cream than I did," Elise yelled. "I'm going to go through this tube I brought in about three hours!"

"We've got plenty," Sally called back.

"What do we do now?" Justine asked. "Our breakfast is getting cold!"

"Sorry, ladies, I'd bring your breakfast to you, but we can't have any food in the tents," Chaz's voice rang out. "Not in bear country. Cover up your arms and legs and dig out your head nets and repellent."

"Oh, shit," Megan groaned. "I left that stuff in my toiletries kit, out by the cooking area." She turned to Justine, who was digging through the contents of her small dry bag. "Do you mind getting it for me while you're out there?"

"Soon as I find my head net," Justine said. "And my gloves. I'm

not leaving any skin exposed for a *second*. I was going to spray my hands, but I put my repellent in with the bear-proof stuff.” She found the gloves immediately, but the head net was more elusive. She hadn’t unpacked it yet. It was still in its wrapper, and she didn’t immediately notice it had gotten lost between the pages of her book at the bottom of the bag.

Megan could hear someone moving around outside the tent, but it was opposite the opening so she couldn’t see who it was. “Whoever’s out there, would you mind handing me my red toiletries kit out by the food?”

Chaz appeared at the entrance to Megan and Justine’s tent a minute later. She wore a head net, draped loosely over a navy felt hat to keep the fabric away from her face. The hat looked quite dashing on her, Megan thought, netting notwithstanding. The rest of her body was entirely covered. The hand that held up her toiletries kit wore thin deerskin gloves that had been so long used they had conformed themselves to the shape of her fingers.

That melt-your-heart smile that Megan was becoming increasingly fond of made its way across Chaz’s face, and a twinkle came to her hazel eyes, now blessedly free of the shades. “This is yours, too, right?” She held up the towel and clothes Megan had carried to the lake in her other gloved hand.

Megan nodded. “Yup.”

“Pretty bad out here,” Chaz said. “Let’s coordinate this, to minimize enemy infiltration. On three—Justine unzips, I do a quick handover to Megan, Justine then zips back up. Ready, me hardies?” she added with the right touch of pirate inflection, her hands poised outside the zipper.

Despite herself, Megan had to smile. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Ready when you are, Gridley,” Justine added, getting into position.

They completed the handover with mercifully few invaders getting in. “Thanks!” Megan hollered after Chaz as she headed back to the cooking area.

“She’s not really very much like Rita when you get to know her, is she?” Justine observed in a low voice.

“No. Not very,” Megan agreed.

“Is it getting any easier to be around her?”

Megan shrugged. "A little, I guess." She dug in her bag for a long-sleeved shirt and long pants to change into, as Justine resumed searching for her head net.

"She sure knows a lot about all the birds and flowers and everything else around here," Justine said. "Both of them seem to really know their jobs."

"I wonder if she does this year round," Megan mused aloud as she changed. "Doesn't Orion take out snowshoeing and dogsled trips in the winter?"

"Not Chaz," Justine replied, pretending not to notice that Megan's question only referred to one of the guides. "She's a teacher."

"A teacher? Really?"

"That's what she told Elise."

Megan felt a tiny twinge of jealousy that Chaz was sharing details of her life with Elise, but she brushed it aside. "What age does she teach?"

"Haven't a clue. Aha! There you are!" Justine held up her head net in triumph.

"What else did she tell Elise?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask Elise."

Megan frowned. That idea wasn't very appealing. "Never mind. It's not important." She pulled on her head net and gloves and scooted to the tent entrance. "Ready to face the bloodthirsty scavengers?"

"Lead on!"

In no time, they were all back to their breakfasts, which Megan was surprised to find didn't seem to have suffered too badly from their lengthy absence. Or maybe it was only that everything seemed to taste better in the out-of-doors. Like the fresh air had blown away the urban pollution that clogged her lungs and nasal passages and taste buds.

"Okay, so who's the buzz saw who kept me awake half the night?" Pat inquired as she took a bite off a slice of bacon.

Linda snickered.

"Oh, *man*! No lie!" Yancey added. "Some set of lungs!"

"I didn't hear anything," Justine said.

Megan groaned so loud that all eyes turned first to her, and then at her tent mate.

"What's everyone looking at me for?" Justine asked, the picture of innocence.

"I thought it was your tent," Pat said to Megan. She frowned sympathetically. "Poor kid."

"I don't suppose anybody would be willing to consider trading tent mates tonight?" Megan asked, trying not to sound too desperate. When there were no takers, she added, "Twenty bucks a night 'till we get home? Thirty?"

There was laughter and smiles all around, but no one raised a hand.

"I can't be that bad," Justine protested.

"You're worse," Pat said.

"You beat out my husband, and I thought he had a corner on the market," Yancey said. "Fortunately, he only snores when he sleeps on his back, so I make him sleep with one of those antisnore-ball thingies pinned to the back of his pajamas. Works like a charm."

"Wouldn't help even if I had one. She snores on her stomach, her back, her sides, you name it," Megan told them.

"Megan! Some friend you are!" Justine reached over and punched her lightly on the arm.

Megan laughed. "Justine, you know I love you, but you're a record-class snore bucket, and I'll take drastic measures if I have to, to get in another tent tonight." She turned toward the rest of her friends. "Do I hear any takers at forty dollars a night?"

Sally hoped that Chaz would forgive her for what she was about to do. "I'll swap with you," she volunteered. "My husband snores. I'm used to it. You can stay with Chaz."

It was hard to say which of them looked more shocked at her suggestion, which told Sally all she needed to know. Megan looked aghast, her eyes as big as saucers, and Chaz looked taken aback too, for a moment—though she regained her composure much faster.

"Or *I* can stay with Chaz, and Megan can stay with Yancey," Elise offered, before either of them had a chance to say anything.

Megan turned to stare at Elise. *Like hell you will.* "No! I'll swap with Sally."

It was out before she could think about what she was saying. She just knew she didn't want Elise staying with Chaz, that's all. She looked toward Chaz for confirmation and only then really realized what she'd done.

Chaz was eyeing her with a bewildered expression, as if her

acceptance of the arrangement was the last thing she'd expected. Which of course it was, since Megan had been treating her like shit. Suddenly the mental photograph she'd taken of Chaz in the nude roared up out of nowhere and implanted itself on her eyelids. *Oh, shit. What the hell have I done?* She looked away, her brain scrambling to find a way out of this mess she'd somehow gotten herself into. *She turns my brain to mush. I can't be held responsible for my actions.*

"Whatever you like," Chaz said. "I'm fine with it."

"It's settled then," Sally said. "We'll swap beginning tonight."

"Sure I won't keep you awake, too?" Justine asked sheepishly.

"Nah, I can sleep through anything. This'll be fun," Sally said.

"I'll get a chance to hear some great inside stories about TV news."

And I'll get the chance to see how well I can hide the fact that she's really getting under my skin, Megan thought, glancing at Chaz.

The guide was watching her with an unreadable expression. "All right, then," Chaz said. "If we're all done eating, why don't we pack up and get ready for another day on the river."



Despite the breathtaking scenery and abundant wildlife they spotted, a good portion of the hours passed in a blur for Megan. Oh, she got out her binoculars when Chaz pointed out the snowy owl, his white feathers starkly contrasted against the gray-green spruce tree he was perched on. And she thrilled with the rest of them at the first caribou they spotted, a small group of eight adults far in the distance. But she got totally lost in thoughts of Chaz for great long periods of the day.

She was comfortable and confident now in the kayak, and able to daydream as they mostly drifted in the wide, slow current. Over and over again, she replayed the small loop of images she'd captured of the handsome guide. Her sculpted back, as she dug her paddle into the water. That brief look of attraction and desire that had crossed her face as she stared at Megan's breasts during the rolling lesson. *I didn't imagine that. I know I didn't.*

And of course it was impossible to keep that mental picture of the naked, relaxed Chaz at bay. Megan was tortured relentlessly by those round breasts and dark nipples, the glimpse of hair at the apex of those long legs.

There were other mental snapshots, and as she reviewed them in her mind, she saw new differences between Chaz and Rita. Chaz was a lot more nonchalant about her body, for one thing. She seemed to have not an ounce of pretension about her perfect physique and smoldering good looks. No makeup at all, and always dressed in clothes so faded and comfortable-looking that Megan suspected Chaz couldn't bear to part with them.

I haven't seen her look in a mirror once. She combs her hair by running her hands through it. Megan had to admit she found that habit kind of sexy. It was almost as if she was totally unaware of how great she looks. Though she must get hit on all the time.

Rita, on the other hand, had been obsessed about her body. She went to the gym religiously and weighed herself twice a day, morning and night. She was always on weird diets, Megan recalled. And she wouldn't be caught dead without her makeup and hair just so. For her, appearance was everything. Megan had gotten a little that way herself, since she'd become a vice president. She didn't particularly *like* getting all gussied up. But she knew how to play by the rules.

She had to admit, though, she really liked the *au natural* look on Chaz. *Perhaps a little too much.* Now that she'd begun to see Chaz as someone completely different from Rita, *the thought* crossed her mind for the first time. The possibility of maybe flirting with Chaz herself. *Why not? What's holding me back?* She'd never been shy about going after a woman who interested her. *Nothing's stopping me. She's not Rita. She's just one deliciously hot woman, and I'm on vacation, after all.*

A niggling of her conscience tried to warn Megan she should not be so cavalier about this one, but she ignored it. She really hoped she hadn't only imagined the way she'd caught Chaz looking at her. *I'll find out soon enough if we're sharing a tent, won't I?*

The thought of sleeping beside Chaz made her heart skip a beat, and a thrill of anticipation skittered up her spine. *Oh, God, I really hope I'm not wrong about what I saw in your eyes.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chaz scarcely noticed the scenery during the first couple of hours after breakfast. She was totally thrown by the prospect of sleeping next to Megan that night, and equally baffled by the sudden thaw in her client's frosty attitude toward her. It almost seemed like Megan jumped at the chance to stay with her, rather than one of her friends. What was up with that?

Chaz was even more perplexed by the way her mind and body were reacting to the turn of events. Whenever she pictured them lying side by side in the tent she felt a sharp twinge of arousal.

Okay, so you're really, really attracted to her, she admitted, paddling along on autopilot, her eyes seeing only the way Megan had smiled at her that morning from the other side of the tent screen. She'd felt something warm her from within when Megan smiled at her that way.

But nothing is going to happen, she reminded herself. *Even if she is warming up to you. She's a client, you have nothing in common, and she lives on the other side of the country. Besides, you're not even really sure she's gay. It's your hormones talking.* She kept telling herself that, but it was doing nothing to stop her overactive imagination from wondering what the pale skin of Megan's neck would taste like, what the press of Megan's body would feel like against her own. What the network vice president might be like in bed. *Do you always have to be the one in control?*

She felt both tremendous anticipation and profound dread when she thought about the nights ahead of them. Sharing a tent with Megan might test the limits of her resolve. Though she hoped that no one had noticed how distracted she was all morning, she wasn't too surprised when Sally sought her out soon after they stopped for lunch.

Chaz had taken her sandwich and gone to sit on a rock next to the river, her back to the clients.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” Sally asked as she settled beside her.

“Now why in the world would I be mad at you?” Chaz answered calmly. It took some effort, because in all honesty she *was* a tad peeved at what was blatantly a misguided effort to play matchmaker. *It’s all your fault I’m apparently going to have a frustrated libido the next week and a half*, she wanted to say. But she knew Sally’s intentions were honorable.

“Well, I can see that I really threw you for a loop when I volunteered to swap tents with Megan. I just thought you needed a nudge. I know you like her. And I think she likes you, too, despite how she’s been acting. I’ve seen her looking at you a lot, kind of like you’ve been looking at her.”

“You didn’t throw me for a loop, and I haven’t been looking at her any more than anyone else,” Chaz protested, annoyed with how well Sally could read her. She didn’t want to admit how much Megan was getting to her; it would only encourage Sally’s determination to hook them up.

“I guess there must have been some other reason you failed to point out a half-dozen things during this last stretch of river, then.” Sally grinned.

“What? What did I miss?”

“Let’s see. A golden eagle, another nice grouping of Dall sheep, and the first musk ox of the trip, among other things.”

“Oh, shit, really? Where was the musk ox?” Chaz felt awful for slacking on her responsibilities. They might not see another one, she knew, and that was an animal that always made a real impression on the clients.

“There was a pair of them a good ways back, and they *were* a long distance away—I could only really see them with binoculars. But I knew that if *you’d* blown by them, Miss Eagle Eyes, there was something major going on with you.”

“There’s nothing going on with me,” she replied, a little too defensively.

“Whatever you say,” Sally said, with an inflection that said she clearly didn’t believe a word of Chaz’s denials.

“Okay, so your tent-swapping plan distracted me a little,” she admitted. “But I already told you, I’m not getting involved in any one-night stands with a client.”

“Well, I think you’re limiting yourself,” Sally said. “Maybe it wouldn’t have to be a one-night stand. You never know.” She put her hand on Chaz’s shoulder, and her voice grew serious. “Maybe you’re throwing away a prime opportunity for happiness. I’d hate to see that happen. Think about it, would you? Please?”

Like I can think about much of anything else. “Give it up, Sally. It’s not possible. We have a job to do here, a responsibility to these women, and I’m not going to forget that.” She packed up the remnants of her lunch and stood, ending the discussion for the moment anyway.

She managed to keep her mind on her duties when they got back on the river to head to their next campsite, at least for the most part. She didn’t want the clients to miss any more prime wildlife sightings because of her daydreaming.

But it wasn’t easy. She’d caught Megan watching her as she got back into her kayak, and Sally’s words rang in her mind. *I think she likes you, too...I’ve seen her looking at you a lot, kind of like you’ve been looking at her.*

Something told her that the greatest tests of her self-control were still to come.



Most of that day the Odakonya meandered lazily through a wide, flat plain of tundra, the mountains far distant and the view unfettered by trees or brush for miles in every direction. But late in the afternoon, the river turned and entered a long valley thick with trees: a forest of cottonwoods and aspen and spruce, protected from the killing winter winds by the mountains rising steeply on either side. The lush growth around them after several hours of unbroken, treeless terrain made Megan feel a bit like she’d come upon an oasis in the desert.

There were birds everywhere, and ground squirrels chattered noisily at them from the riverbank, adding to the cacophony of twitterings and chirps and snippets of birdsong. Up ahead, she could see that Chaz had pulled off and was out of her kayak. They must have reached their second campsite.

Justine brought her kayak alongside Megan's. "What a great spot."

"Beautiful," Megan agreed.

"Are you sure you're okay with the sleeping arrangements? You actually *want* to stay with Chaz?"

"It'll be all right." *I hope it will be, anyway.* "No offense, Justine, but I haven't slept well since we left Chicago."

"Sorry. I guess I should have warned you."

"You *knew* you snored?" Megan asked.

"Well, *duh*. I *am* a grown woman. And too long unattached, I grant you, but only because I've been working a lot. I do have overnight guests, you know. Although most of them are apparently too diplomatic to tell me honestly how loud I am."

"What team are you trying out for these days, by the way?" Megan asked as they drifted near the place where they would spend the night.

"I think I've had it with men. Women are way more interesting."

And some women are much more interesting than others. "You got that right, kiddo. Got any prospects in mind?"

"Well, I might have made a play for tall, taut, and lovely over there." Justine nodded in Chaz's direction. "But I hate to stand in line. You realize that Elise is out for her too, right?"

Their kayaks crunched against the gravel bank, and they both popped their spray skirts to get out.

"I never said I was interested in her," Megan protested feebly, as she got to her feet and stripped off her PFD.

"You don't have to," Justine said, following suit. "It's pretty obvious, Meg. I just want to make sure you knew that you've got some competition, and you know as well as I do that Elise has a way with women."

"Well, I don't know that *quite* as well as you do. I've seen her in action, but I've never succumbed to her charms *personally*."

"That's not fair. It was just the once, and it only happened because I was stressed out and she was helping me to relax," Justine said.

"Yeah, right." Megan rolled her eyes. "She went to massage school to add to her arsenal of seduction tools. The sexy punk haircut, the flirtatious grin, the big pouty lips. She's butch with the femmes, and femme with the butches, and she gets them all."

"So why has she never gotten you?" Justine asked.

“Never tried.” Truth be told, Megan had always been a bit irritated by the fact that Elise had made a play for virtually every lesbian in their close circle of friends except for her. Not that she had any particular attraction to Elise; it was only that she felt slighted, like there was something wrong with her.

“Well, for all her flirting, she doesn’t seem to be making a lot of headway with Chaz,” Justine said, as they gathered up their gear and headed toward the others, who were already unloading their bags of gear from the raft. “Are we sure she’s gay?”

“I’d say that’s a no-brainer,” Megan replied. “But I intend to find out for sure tonight.”

“Tonight?” Justine stopped short and put a hand on Megan’s arm to keep her from getting any closer to the others, where they could be overheard. “You have some kind of plan in mind, hmm?”

“Not a plan, per se. But let’s just say I do intend to find out who and what her type is.”

“Well, good luck. She is one scrumptious-looking woman, that’s for sure.”

Not telling me anything I don’t know, Megan thought as they joined the others.

Sally helped her put up the tent that she and Chaz would share that night, because Chaz was preoccupied with trying to catch some fish to add to their dinner.

Megan decided it was the perfect opportunity for her to do a little research. “So how long have you two been guiding together?” she asked as they laid out the tent, poles, and stakes.

“Five summers,” Sally said. “I started doing this when my kids went away to college.”

“So what do you do the rest of the year?”

Sally laughed. “Not much. I’ve been a full-time mom so long, I’ve kind of been at loose ends with the kids out of the house. I do some volunteer work, and I’m thinking about going back to college for my Master’s degree.”

“What about Chaz?”

“Chaz is a biology professor at the University of Fairbanks.”

“Ah. A professor, eh? That explains her extensive knowledge of all the flora and fauna we’re seeing.”

"Yeah, she's much better at it than I am. I've learned most everything I know from her," Sally said.

"So...what else can you tell me about her?" Megan asked with forced nonchalance, as she fitted the tent pole into one of the narrow sleeves in the tent.

Sally stopped what she was doing and smiled a kind of Cheshire-cat smile, as if she were privy to a secret. "What do you want to know?"

"Oh, I don't know," Megan responded vaguely. *Is she gay? Is she seeing anyone? What's her type? Has she talked to you about Elise? About me?*

"Well, let's see. I would describe Chaz as...loyal and honest. Trustworthy. Sensitive and intelligent. Considerate and kind. Resourceful."

She sounds like a Boy Scout, Megan wanted to interject, but didn't. She found Sally's listing of Chaz's attributes somehow reassuring, but she didn't stop to consider why. "So she...uh...told us she wasn't married," she said, cursing her nervous stammer.

"Nope. She's had a few girlfriends, but no one recently," Sally volunteered. "I think it's hard for her to make the first move when she's interested in someone."

Bingo. Megan felt buoyed by the confirmation of Chaz's sexual preference, and very interested indeed to hear that she was the type to let others take the lead in a relationship. She was so intrigued by this bit of information, in fact, that she failed to think twice about the smug grin on Sally's face.



Chaz was successful in her efforts to catch enough grayling and arctic char to feed them all. And because they were in an area with ample downed wood, she prepared them grilled over an open campfire and served them with lemon and a side of wild rice. She was grateful she had tasks to do to keep her mind occupied. But all through dinner, she couldn't help glancing in Megan's direction. She often caught Megan looking at her, in a way that made her a little weak in the knees. Once again she wondered what had precipitated the apparent change in Megan's attitude toward her, and she worried about how she might react when they were alone in the tent together.

After they had eaten, they split up into small groups. Yancey and Justine took a turn at washing dishes, while Sally and Chaz packed the garbage and leftover food into bear-proof canisters and carried them to a spot well away from where they'd be sleeping. Pat and Linda excused themselves to take a walk together along the riverbank, while Megan and Elise tended the fire.

"You know, if you'd be more comfortable staying with Yancey, I'd be happy to bunk with Chaz tonight," Elise offered.

I bet you would. "That's not necessary," Megan answered as offhandedly as she could manage. "I'm fine with things the way they are."

"Well, actually, I'd *like* the chance to get to know Chaz better, if you get my drift. She is so flaming *hot*, I think I'm going to spontaneously combust!" Elise confided, as if her intentions hadn't been patently obvious the whole trip.

"I'm sure you'll find ample opportunities to flirt with her, Elise," Megan said, cutting off further discussion of their sleeping arrangements. *Unless I have something to say about it and beat you to it.*

Elise frowned, as though she'd expected that Megan would readily swap tent mates with her once she'd expressed her interest in Chaz. But before she had a chance to protest, Yancey and Justine returned to the campfire, followed soon after by the two guides.

"Saved you a spot," Elise said, nodding her head with a smile toward a camp chair beside her as Chaz neared.

Megan was initially irritated by Elise's invitation, and Chaz's quick acceptance, until she realized that would put Chaz directly opposite her, where it would be impossible for them not to look at each other.

The sun sank low in the sky, painting the tall mountains on either side of them with that pink light of the Arctic, and casting long shadows beneath the forest surrounding them. They all settled comfortably around the fire, sipping merlot and relaxing in their camp chairs or lying half supine on their sleeping mattresses, and chatted about the sights they'd seen that day.

Megan heard little of it. She could hardly keep her eyes off Chaz, who sat with her long legs stretched out in front of her toward the fire. She was damned sexy-looking in the golden glow of the midnight sun, with the flickering firelight reflected in the dark pools of her eyes.

Before too long, Pat and Linda reappeared, their arms around

each other and with their clothes and hair in enough disarray for the assembled gathering to clue in on what they'd been up to the last half hour or better. As they took seats, Linda curled within the circle of Pat's embrace, and Pat gave her a long, deep kiss.

"If you two don't give it a rest, you're going to get me way too hot and bothered...and just when there's apparently nothing I can do about it," Elise jested, looking pointedly at Chaz as she said it.

Chaz squirmed slightly at the comment and looked away, but she was smiling. Though she considered herself a nonviolent person, Megan felt like slugging Elise.

"So who's up for a round of probing questions?" Yancey asked.

"Probing questions! I forgot all about probing questions!" Elise said, a mischievous look in her eyes. "Oh, absolutely, I'm game."

"Probing questions?" Sally repeated.

"Our version of Truth or Dare, without the dare," Elise said. "Someone comes up with a probing question, like 'how did you lose your virginity?' and we answer in turn, going around the circle. The last one to answer poses the next question."

"Me first," Linda said. "Let's start off easy. Most embarrassing moment." She turned in the circle of Pat's arms and looked at her lover. "You first," she challenged, with mirth in her eyes.

"Most embarrassing moment? Let's see. As you know, I don't embarrass easily."

"Which is exactly why I asked that." Linda turned to the others. "She's almost gotten us into trouble a half a dozen times getting too amorous in public," she confided, which made them all smile.

"Oh! I know!" Pat said. "I did feel kind of embarrassed the morning I woke up in the hospital after my appendectomy, when they told me I hit on the surgeon while I was under anesthesia."

"That's doesn't sound so bad," Chaz said.

"Except that the surgeon was straight, married to the anesthesiologist, and I was apparently very explicit in what I wanted to do to her," Pat said sheepishly. "Your turn," she said to Sally as the others laughed.

"I actually have a picture of my moment," Sally said. "I tripped going down the aisle at my wedding."

"You tripped?" Chaz got up to toss a few branches on the fire. "You never told me that."

“Yup. Stepped on the dress and took a header into the nearest pew. Fortunately my dad caught me as I was going down. My mother swore it was God getting me back for playing practical jokes.”

“I see it didn’t deter you any,” Linda said. “By the way, I thought the rubber snakes tonight were a nice alternative to the spiders. Very realistic looking.”

“Thanks. We aim to please.” Sally beamed. She shifted to look at Megan. “Your turn.”

“Right out of college, I was a reporter for about a day and a half at a TV station in Traverse City,” Megan said. *I can’t believe I’m gonna tell this.*

“You were on the *air*?” Justine’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Oh, I want to see a tape of that.”

“There is no tape. I destroyed all copies personally,” Megan huffed.

“So what happened?” Justine asked.

“Shortly after I was hired, I had to anchor the 11 p.m. show. Right before airtime, the regular guy got food poisoning. Well, I was so nervous I took several deep breaths before we went on, and I guess I hyperventilated. I fainted, midway during the first paragraph.”

“Fainted?” Yancey gasped.

“Fell face-first into the desk and caught my chin on the corner of it.” Megan lifted her chin and pointed to a hairline scar that ran beneath it. “Took eight stitches to close. I bled all over the desk while the director decided what the hell he should do. After several seconds, he went to commercial and then to a repeat of *Cheers* while they called the ambulance. I decided to be a behind-the-scenes person after that.”

Everyone cracked up, but it was Chaz’s reaction that pleased Megan the most. She felt a warm rush of satisfaction to have provided the reason for that dazzling smile and warm, rich laugh.

“Next, please,” Pat said.

“Caught by the law in a compromising position is all I can say about mine,” Elise said, to sniggers from around the campfire circle. She smiled at the memory and turned to Chaz. “Your turn.”

“While I was still in college, I was asked to present a scientific paper I’d authored to a conference in Seattle,” Chaz said. “It was in one of the ballrooms in this huge hotel, and I was really nervous—I was not used to speaking in front of groups.” A smile lifted the corner of

her mouth. "I hid out in one of the bathrooms until right before I was to speak, then I came out on this tiny stage and launched right in to 'How Climactic Changes Impact Musk Oxen Reproduction.'" She paused a moment, chuckling. "In my own defense, the stage was brightly lit and the rest of the room was dark, so I couldn't *see* that the audience was made up entirely of rabbis."

Everyone started laughing.

"They let me talk for at least five minutes before a nice bearded gentlemen told me he thought I might want the Arctic Wildlife conference in the ballroom next door."

They howled with laughter.

"How have you ever kept that from me?" Sally asked, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Chaz shrugged. "Next!"

They continued around the circle, swapping stories and laughter. When they finished with most embarrassing moment, they covered pet peeves and biggest crushes, then it was on to hidden talents.

"Gosh, hidden talent. That's kind of hard." Yancey stretched out on her sleeping mattress and took a sip of wine from her metal mug. "I am *so* sore, by the way. I keep stiffening up if I stay in any position for too long."

"Yeah, me, too. Speaking of which, I think I'm due to take another dose of ibuprofen." Elise reached into her pocket for a small bottle. "Anybody else?"

The bottle got passed around the circle and Justine, Megan, and Yancey also took a couple of tablets.

"Okay, I've got it," Yancey said. "At least this is what my kids would say my hidden talent is. May I have quiet, please?"

The only sound that could be heard was the crackling of the fire.

Yancey put her fingers next to her mouth, took a big deep breath, and out came the uncannily realistic sound of a taxi horn.

The women all clapped.

"Wait!" Yancey waved away the applause and got to her feet. "There's more!" She leaned over and put her hands around her mouth. After a moment, the distinctive chirp of a cricket could be heard. More applause. That was followed by the slurp of a toilet plunger, then the unmistakable blare of a foghorn.

"Very cool!" Sally said. "You'll have to teach me how to do that."

My kids would love it!”

“My oldest can do lots of sound effects. We got them out of a book.” Yancey turned toward Megan. “We all know what *your* hidden talent is.”

“That’s not true,” Pat reminded her. “Sally and Chaz don’t know about Megan.”

“No, we don’t,” Chaz confirmed, looking at Megan curiously.

“Megan has a photographic memory,” Justine provided. “Virtually a walking encyclopedia.”

“What shall we have her do?” Pat asked.

“Nothing mundane, like the Declaration of Independence,” Justine said. “It should be something really spectacular.”

“I like when she does the countries of the world in alphabetical order,” Yancey suggested.

“As long as it’s anything but that awful shipwreck poem that goes on forever!” Linda pleaded.

“It’s only twenty-three stanzas. And ‘The Wreck of the Hesperus’ was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, I’ll have you know,” Megan said.

“So it’s a classic.” Linda pulled a face. “It’s still awful.”

Megan looked directly at Chaz. “Try me,” she said, with a hint of flirtation in her voice.

A corner of Chaz’s mouth tipped up as she suppressed a smile. It was a long moment before she spoke. “All right. What can you tell me about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?”

“I could talk about it for a couple of hours. What would you like me to address specifically?” Megan answered confidently.

“How about bird life?”

“Let’s see,” Megan began, as she leaned back in her chair and stretched out her legs toward the fire. “There have been 181 different species of birds spotted in the refuge, most migrating here from at least four continents, at least according to the official government Web site.”

“What draws them here?” Chaz challenged.

“When the permafrost melts in the summer, you have thousands upon thousands of little pools of water everywhere, the perfect breeding ground for an enormous insect population, which draws the birds.”

“Very good. I’m impressed,” Chaz complimented her, as though that had been her entire answer.

"Oh, she's got a lot more, I'm sure," Justine interjected. "Don't you, Meg?"

"Well, I could name all 181 species, if you like, and tell you something about each one," Megan said. "What they look like, where they can be found in the refuge, where they migrate from." She was pleased to see the look of astonishment on Chaz's face.

"Now I'm really impressed." Chaz said. "Do you remember everything you see and hear?"

"Everything important, anyway." *I won't forget any single detail of you any time soon, that's for sure.*

"I can't remember my ATM pin number half the time," Yancey complained. "At least tell me that you occasionally misplace your car keys."

"Never," Megan said, smiling.

"Bitch!" Yancey answered with a laugh. "All right, now who gets to follow that? Isn't it your turn, Justine?"

"Oh, great. This is going to be so impressive after *you*." Justine stuck out her tongue at Megan. "I used to be able to tap dance. That's my talent."

"You? Klutz Bernard? When was this?" Megan asked, not buying a word of it.

"From about age six until I was probably fifteen or so. I stopped when we moved away from the woman who had been teaching me."

"Prove it," Megan challenged. "I don't believe you have ever danced. You trip over something every time we go somewhere."

With a sigh, Justine stood up. "It's been a long time, and this isn't exactly ideal footwear," she said, holding one foot up in the air so they could all get a good look at the hiking boots she had on. "But here goes."

"Wait!" Sally hollered. "Would you like some accompaniment?"

"Uh, sure," Justine said uncertainly.

"You and Chaz can demonstrate your hidden talents together," Sally said, turning to her partner guide. "Waddya say?"

"All right," Chaz said, and got up and headed toward the tent she and Megan were sharing.

In a minute, she returned carrying a rectangular waterproof case about the size of a breadbox. It had already piqued Megan's interest. Sally had seemed to treat it with respect, placing it carefully among

Chaz's gear in the corner of the tent, after they'd set it up.

"So is there anything in particular you'd like me to play?" Chaz asked Justine as she regained her seat by the fire.

"How about a few bars of 'Me and My Shadow'?"

"I can do that." Chaz unfastened the twin latches that held the case shut and flipped open the top. Inside lay an antique concertina, protected by thick eggshell foam that had been custom cut to conform to its shape. The instrument was made of leather and rosewood, and the decoratively filigreed plates on each end that held the forty-eight button keys were sterling silver. It looked as though it had been well played but lovingly tended.

"Is that an accordion?" Linda asked, as Chaz removed the instrument and put her hands through the leather hand rests on either end.

"A near relative. It's a concertina," Chaz said. "Or squeezebox."

"I think I've only ever seen one of those in the movies, usually in an organ grinder's hands, or some guy singing on a gondola," Megan said derisively, but she was smiling as she said it.

Chaz merely smiled at the challenge. "Ready?" she asked Justine.

"As I'll ever be."

Justine surprised all her friends with a more than passable time step. Then she launched into a soft-shoe routine that had to have been memorized long ago, for some childhood recital.

They were also all pleased with Chaz's accompaniment, a four-part rendition of the popular tune played flawlessly. When the number was over, they all applauded and whistled.

"I will never call you a klutz again," Megan promised as Justine took a bow and settled back beside her in her camp chair.

"And very nice playing, Chaz," Pat said.

"Yeah, not half bad," Megan conceded with a smile.

"Why don't you give them an idea of what you can really do with that thing?" Sally said. "You know—like that around-the-world medley you did that time."

"Yeah! Play some more," Elise urged.

"If you insist," Chaz said, her eyes on Megan as she launched into a rousing Irish jig, her hands flying over the buttons at an astonishing speed.

After a minute or so of that tune, she transitioned skillfully into a French café song that sounded vaguely familiar, then, from there, into “La donna e mobile,” the familiar Verdi piece Megan had been thinking of when she’d made the gondola crack. After Italy, Chaz segued into a German biergarten song, another lively piece with impressive fingering, then into a Polish polka, and, finally, to a Cajun Zydeco strain that took them all to New Orleans.

Megan would never have guessed that the unusual instrument had such versatility. And it was obvious Chaz had spent a lot of hours with the concertina, for she didn’t miss a note in the impromptu concert.

There was a rousing chorus of applause and whistles when Chaz finished with a flourish.

“Bravo!” Yancey called out as the clapping died down. “That was marvelous!”

“Great going!” Justine agreed.

“Yes, very nice, indeed,” Megan said. “How long have you played that thing?”

“Since I was ten. My father gave it to me when we moved to Alaska—something to keep me occupied during the long winters.”

“Where did you move here from?” Elise asked.

“Oregon. I grew up on a commune. We moved to Alaska when it kind of disbanded.”

I guess that explains why she’s so nonchalant about nudity, Megan thought. The word commune to her evoked images of Woodstock and the hippie generation of the 1960s and early ‘70s—men and women parading around naked or half-naked as they grew their own vegetables and lived off the land. She imagined them as promiscuous and uninhibited about sex. *Wasn’t ‘free love’ one of the big slogans of that era?* She found the knowledge that Chaz had grown up in that environment most encouraging.

“I don’t think anyone should have to follow Chaz’s playing,” Linda complained good-naturedly. “That was definitely real talent.”

“No getting out of it,” Pat said. “Besides, I’m very curious to see what you’re going to claim as your hidden talent, since the one I know about can’t be demonstrated in public.”

Linda blushed bright red as everyone laughed. “I can’t believe you said that,” she grumbled.

“It’s a compliment!” Pat said.

"I'll get you for that," Linda promised. "We'll see how long before you get to experience *that* talent again."

That prompted another round of laughter.

"Okay, this isn't really a talent, but it's unusual, anyway," Linda said. She stood and bent over as if to touch her toes, but instead she pushed her foot into an unnatural angle, until it looked as though her shoes were facing in opposite directions.

"Eewww!" Pat said. "I'm never sleeping with you again!"

"Oh, my God, how are you doing that?" Elise asked.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Yancey added, craning her head for a better look.

"Nope. Double-jointed in that ankle." Linda swiveled the ankle back to normal and sat back down, giving Pat a playful punch as she did. "Okay, so what are you going to do for us, Miss Smart Aleck?"

"We'll see who laughs," Pat promised. She got to her feet and walked around the circle of friends, collecting a small assortment of items—a metal mug, a water bottle, a large tube of sunscreen, and a flashlight. She returned to stand beside Linda before she set them in motion, juggling with practiced skill, dazzling them with constant switch ups in height and direction and speed.

"The lady is good with her hands, what can I say?" Linda conceded admiringly, as the others laughed.

"What about you, Sally?" Megan asked. "Any predilection for something other than practical jokes?"

"I can't compete with the rest of you," Sally said. "My only hidden talent is this." She stuck out her tongue and touched the end of her nose with it.

"Your husband must love that!" Pat said, which touched off another round of laughter. "Who have we missed? Elise?"

"I was going to say I didn't think I had a hidden talent," Elise answered. "But Sally's reminded me that I've won a bar bet or two with the ability to tie cherry stems into a knot with my tongue."

"I bet that comes in handy," Yancey said, to a chorus of laughter.

"Speaking of which," Pat said, pausing to whisper something into Linda's ear, "I think we'll say good night at this point. We're suddenly very...uh, sleepy. Aren't we, honey?"

More laughs.

Pat got to her feet first and offered a hand up to Linda. They strolled arm in arm toward their tent, talking in low whispers.

"Where the heck do they get their stamina?" Yancey complained. "I can hardly move after all this paddling."

"I know they do this kayaking stuff a lot," Justine agreed. "But they are the oldest among us, too. It's not fair. I'm ready to drop." She stretched and yawned. "I think I'll turn in, too, I guess. Any chance I can coerce a friendly masseuse to give me a nice back rub?"

"Well, I'm sore, too, you know," Elise admitted. "How about we work out a trade. Ten minutes for ten minutes?"

"Deal," Justine said.

They got up and took a step or two toward Justine's tent.

"Hey, wait. Can I get in on some of that action?" Yancey called after them.

"Sure," Elise said. "Anybody else?" she added, looking directly at Chaz in a way that made Megan want to punch her again.

Chaz and Megan shook their heads, while Sally responded with a wave and a "No, thanks."

"Maybe tomorrow, then," Elise said.

Or maybe not, Megan thought. *The only person I want massaging Chaz is me.*

"Night, everybody," Justine called back as the three of them headed toward the tents.

Megan glanced at Chaz, her heartbeat accelerating at the knowledge that they would soon be alone together. "Well, I guess I'll head that way, too."

She felt the same exhaustion as the rest of them, but was pretty sure that when Chaz lay down beside her, she'd get her second wind in a hurry.

Chaz met her eyes but made no move to get up. "Okay. I'll be in there in a while. I'll try not to wake you."

The woman cannot get a clue that I'm trying to flirt with her, Megan thought dejectedly as she made her way to their tent. *Of course it might have helped if I hadn't treated her like a pariah the first couple of days of the trip.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Well, she certainly seems to be warming up to you now,” Sally remarked as soon as Megan was out of earshot.

“I guess. I haven’t a clue why, though,” Chaz said. “And don’t go getting any more ideas in your head.”

“Ideas? Moi? I don’t know what you mean.” Sally got to her feet. “Are you coming, or are you going to stay out here and avoid her until she goes to sleep?”

“I’m going to stay here awhile and enjoy the fire,” Chaz replied.

“You know we can’t build a fire every night. What are you going to use as an excuse then?”

“Go to bed, Sally,” Chaz grumbled.

“Oh, all right.” Sally laid a hand on Chaz’s shoulder as she passed by. “Sleep well, hon.”

“You too.”

As soon as Sally was gone, Chaz fed a few sticks to the fire and settled back in her chair, sipping her wine and recounting the day. Images of Megan filled her mind—especially the way she’d looked tonight, relaxed and at ease by the fire, a smile coming easily to her now. The rough edges she’d arrived in Alaska with had softened a lot. *And she kept looking at me all the time. She’s not just warming up to me; it almost seemed like she was flirting with me a little.*

That thought sent a teasing whisper of arousal through her and took her mind back to daydreaming of what Megan might be like in bed. She closed her eyes and imagined slowly stripping off all those brand-new clothes, layer by layer, until she reached Megan’s soft ivory skin. She could almost feel it now, beneath her fingertips. In her mind’s eye, she could see Megan’s breasts as she touched them and roused the nipples to attention with teasing passes. *I wonder what she brought to wear to bed.*

From there, despite her better judgment, she allowed her mind to consider what it might be like to kiss Megan, to feel those soft lips surrendering to her. *Surrendering, hell. She's not the type to surrender,* her rational mind tried to intercede, but by now her body was calling the shots, luxuriating in the imagined pleasures that her conscience was unwilling to allow. A shudder passed through her. It was all she could do not to touch herself.

Time passed; she couldn't have said how much. She had almost dozed, staring into the fire with heavy-lidded eyes, lost in the depths of Megan's kiss.

A scream pierced the silence.

A millisecond later, a loud grunting noise.

Then a roar.

Bear. Chaz scrambled to her feet and grabbed a sturdy burning branch out of the fire. She hurried toward the sounds, fumbling at her belt as another scream rang out. *Megan!*

She had the pepper spray in her palm when she rounded the corner of one of the tents and spotted the grizzly, twelve feet away.

He was a massive brute. Seven or eight hundred pounds, she reckoned. And at the moment, he had his head inside the tent she was sharing with Megan.

Her blood ran cold. *Oh, my God.*

She waved the torch at him and shouted, "Go, bear! Go! Out! Get away!"

The grizzly backed out of the tent and turned to glare at her with small black eyes—pig eyes—set six inches apart. His head was wider than her shoulders, and his mouth seemed disproportionately large at the moment—all sharp teeth. He was drooling a white paste of some kind, and a big glob was stuck to the fur around his mouth.

Chaz shouted some more at the top of her lungs. "Go, bear! Go away!" The fire was nearly gone from the branch she was waving around. Her heart was beating a mile a minute.

He stomped down hard with his massive front paws, stiff legged, and she swore she could feel the earth move beneath her feet. The claws on those feet had to be nine inches long, and she knew they were razor sharp.

She shouted at him once more as the flame gave out on her branch. "Get! Go away!" She dropped the stick and began waving her left arm,

as her right arm extended towards him, pointing the pepper spray at his eyes.

He rocked from one huge paw to the other and let out a *woof* that sounded like the bark of a dog. Then he stood on his hind legs, sniffing the air noisily. Frozen in place, she had just enough time to guess his height at roughly nine feet tall, before he dropped to all fours and charged her.

Time slowed.

Chaz stood her ground as she depressed the trigger, determined not to miss. He roared as it hit him, the sound reverberating in her ears, but he kept on coming.

And the wind was not on her side.

The spray came back at her in the blink of an eye, and she sucked in great lungfuls of the stuff as it blinded her. The pain was everywhere at once. She took a great gasping breath for air and began coughing.

She rolled to the ground and curled into a fetal position, head down and hands clasped together behind her neck, trying desperately to suck in fresh air. She felt the enormous bulk of the bear pass her by inches, close enough that she could smell the warm stench of his breath as he went past, bellowing in pain and anger.

Her lungs burned and her eyes were agony. She could hear nothing but her own coughing. Every gasping breath took in more of the noxious fallout. She coughed and coughed until she felt her lungs would come apart. There was no relief from the burning pain. Her eyes streamed tears.

It had all happened in seconds.

Before she knew it, a shaken Sally was at her side, and the rest of the group was not far behind.

“My God, Chaz, what the hell happened?” Sally asked, coughing herself from the remnants of the spray that lingered about the camp. Some of the other women were coughing, too.

“Are you all right?” Pat asked.

“What was that?” Justine asked. “Was that a bear?”

Chaz gasped for air. *Megan*, she wanted to say. *Is Megan all right?* But she couldn’t speak; her throat was raw.

“Someone get some water, will you?” Sally asked as she led Chaz back to her chair by the fire. Justine handed her a water bottle. “Lean your head back, Chaz, and let me rinse out your eyes.”

Sally poured fresh water carefully into both of Chaz's eyes.

"A bear came into our t...tent," Megan stuttered. In all the excitement, no one had noticed her, standing off to one side, trembling and ashen. "God, he was huge."

As soon as she heard Megan's voice, relief poured through Chaz like a soothing balm.

"A grizzly bear?" Linda asked. Her eyes got wide, and she glanced around as if expecting the beast to return at any moment.

"Are you all right, Megan?" Sally asked.

"Yeah, but he sure scared the shit out of me," Megan said. "I guess I fell asleep. Next thing I know I'm hearing this crunching noise, and I wake up to find this big-ass bear head right next to me."

"Holy shit," Yancey said.

Sally motioned her over. "You look like you need to sit down. Come over here by the fire."

On shaky legs, Megan stumbled to the fire and collapsed next to Chaz.

"Eyes still burning real bad?" Sally asked, after they'd used up the first bottle of water.

When Chaz nodded, Sally made her recline her head again, and she poured another bottle carefully over her eyes.

"How you doing, Chaz?" Linda asked, as Chaz sat up, eyes still streaming tears.

She tried to speak, but her throat felt like she'd swallowed acid. She fumbled for the water bottle that Sally had been using and took a few sips. It eased the burning only slightly. "Man, that stuff is awful," she rasped. Her eyes felt a bit better, but she could hardly stand to open them, even to squint. "Someone have a Kleenex?"

Pat handed her one and Chaz dabbed gently at her eyes.

"My fault," Megan croaked out. She was still shaking.

"What?" Chaz turned to face Megan. Her eyes were tiny slits. Tears ran down her cheeks. "What did you say?"

"My fault," Megan repeated. "I left my kit in my bag. He went right for it."

"What was in it?" Sally asked.

"Toothpaste, deodorant." Megan shook her head. "Hand cream. Lip balm. All sorts of stuff. I'm so sorry. I completely forgot about it."

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Chaz said. “It happens. Everyone’s okay. That’s all that matters.”

Megan looked at Chaz and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I’m really sorry.”

Chaz nearly jumped at the touch. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll be fine,” she said as she dabbed some more at her eyes.

“I doubt very much he’ll be back, but we should get your stuff and put it in a bear-proof canister to be safe,” Sally said to Megan.

Megan nodded and headed to the tent. She came back carrying the remains of her toiletries, a messy collection of chewed tubes and plastic jars. The nylon ditty bag that had contained them was in pieces. Her minty toothpaste and oatmeal face scrub had been crushed by the bear’s powerful jaws and sharp teeth, along with everything else that had been in the kit.

“And he got this stuff, too. It was all together,” she said. Her head net, makeshift blindfold, and baseball cap were all in shreds.

Megan’s friends gathered around her, staring in horrified fascination at the bear’s leavings.

“Oh, man,” Linda whispered.

“No lie,” Justine seconded.

“There are a couple of huge tears in the side of the tent,” Megan told Sally.

“I’ll get the repair kit,” Sally said, getting to her feet. “While I’m fixing that, will someone get Megan a big Ziploc to put all that stuff into, and make sure it gets put in a canister with the rest of the bear-proof stuff?”

“Sure,” Pat volunteered. “I’ll take care of that.”

“I’m coming with you,” Linda said.

The two of them took Megan’s mangled items and departed to carry out the task, while Justine accompanied Sally to see if she could help repair the tent.

“Do you want me to pour some more water in your eyes?” Elise asked, sitting down next to Chaz.

“No, I’ll be all right. Thanks.” Chaz kept sipping at the water; it was helping her throat. She still couldn’t open her eyes more than a fraction, though.

“Can we get you anything at all?” Yancey asked.

"Thanks, no. You all can stop fussing, I'll be fine," Chaz insisted. "And you really shouldn't worry. I think I got him pretty good. He won't be back."

"I can't believe I was so stupid," Megan said, dropping into the camp chair opposite Chaz.

"Megan, it could have happened to any of us," Yancey said. She walked over to Megan and stooped to give her a reassuring hug.

"It's late," Chaz said after Pat and Linda returned. "Why don't you all try to get some rest."

"Sure there's nothing anybody can do for you?" Elise asked.

Well, maybe not just anybody... The thought flashed through Chaz's mind that she really didn't want Megan to leave, but she pushed the feeling away. "No, I'm just going to stay here a while. You all go on."

Elise leaned toward Chaz. "Let me know if you need anything." She said it with deliberate flirtation, in a voice only Chaz could hear.

You are persistent. "Good night, Elise," Chaz replied, with a trace of a smile.

Elise snapped her fingers in disappointment and got up to leave. "Coming?" she asked Megan.

"In a minute," Megan answered.

Sally walked up as the other women drifted away after exchanging good nights. "I patched up the tent for the night with some duct tape. I'll do a more permanent fix tomorrow. How are your eyes?" she asked Chaz.

"I'm fine, quit worrying."

"Can't help it. How about you, Megan? You okay?" Sally asked.

Megan nodded. She had stopped trembling, and her color was back to normal. She stood a few feet away from Chaz, staring off at the horizon.

"Well, I'm going to turn in, then." Sally yawned. "I'd advise you both to do the same."

Low murmurs of conversations could be heard from the tent area, but an uncomfortable silence descended on the pair at the fire.

Finally Megan sat down beside Chaz, about the time Chaz's eyes recovered enough for her to see without squinting. Megan was chewing on her lower lip, and this close to her, in the soft golden light of the midnight sun, Chaz forgot about the bear and even her own discomfort. She was struck by Megan's soft, full lips and silky hair, her

delicate pale eyelashes, and the blush of color in her cheeks from all the excitement.

As if she could feel Chaz's eyes on her, Megan turned to meet them with her own. They looked at each other a long moment. Something passed between them, but Chaz couldn't put words to what it was. Something powerful, though. An unspoken understanding of some sort. Maybe it's only the shared near-death experience, she considered, the reaction of two bodies pulsing with adrenalin.

Whatever it was, it was there and suddenly gone, broken when Megan looked away.

A long moment passed in silence before Megan spoke. "I've been kind of a jerk since I got here," she admitted sheepishly. "And I'm sorry for that. As well as being sorry for the stupid mistake that could have gotten us both killed." She looked at Chaz, then, with such vulnerability that it made Chaz's heart clench in her chest, and said, "I hope you're okay."

"I'll be fine." Chaz found she was unable to tear her eyes from Megan's face. "Truly. Don't think any more about it."

Megan moistened her lips. "Thanks, Chaz," she said in a low voice. "I really mean that. I don't know what he would have done if you hadn't reacted so fast to stop him. You risked your life for me."

Chaz could think of nothing then, but how much she wanted to kiss Megan. *What's happening to me?*

"No problem. I'm glad you're okay." She knew her voice sounded husky. She forced her attention back to the fire. "You should turn in. Lots of paddling tomorrow. I'll be along shortly." *If I go back to the tent with her now, I'm not sure I'd able to stop myself from kissing her.*

Megan nodded and got up from her seat. "Whatever you say. Good night." She briefly laid a hand on Chaz's shoulder before retiring to their tent.

The touch lingered long after Megan had gone. *You got it bad, girl,* Chaz admitted to herself. She built up the fire again, too keyed up to sleep and in no hurry to subject herself to the experience of lying beside Megan, unable to touch her. *How will I get through the next week?*



Megan's nerves were on edge, and she felt as though she might jump out of her skin at any moment. The whole episode with the bear

had completely unnerved her. It still seemed unreal, like a 3-D movie. She started at every small noise from outside the tent.

But what had left her even more unsettled was the look—the feeling—that had seemed to pass between her and Chaz. There had been a totally unguarded moment between them that had spoken volumes, though she doubted either of them could really explain what it was and what it meant.

It was as though she had briefly glimpsed a sixth sense she never knew she had. *Did Chaz feel it too?* She wondered. *She didn't act like she did, sending me off to bed.*

Whatever it was, it fascinated her—she had never felt more *alive*.

It scared the hell out of her, too. *What was I thinking?* She berated herself as she stared at the ceiling of the tent, waiting anxiously for the sound of Chaz's approaching footsteps.

Pick about the most remote spot on earth for your vacation, where you have absolutely no control over anything. Oh, and make sure you pick somewhere where you can get eaten alive while you sleep. And while you're at it, develop a serious lust for some gorgeous guide who will hardly give you the time of day. Smart. Real smart.



Megan dreamt of the bear.

She was, frankly, surprised that she'd fallen asleep at all, but when the adrenalin rush had worn off, she had crashed big-time, her body finally succumbing to the sleepless nights and the exertions and excitement of the day.

Sometime around three in the morning, she'd awakened in a cold sweat, thrashing furiously in her sleeping bag, desperate to escape the dream bear's clutches. She was instantly enfolded in the comforting arms of a sleepy Chaz, who held her and murmured reassurances until they both fell back asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, she was alone.

CHAPTER NINE

Chaz was grateful the clients all wanted to talk about the bear. Between their requests to hear her retelling of last night's encounter and her duties preparing breakfast, she was too distracted to think much about waking up with Megan in her arms.

But the memory did surface every time she got a moment to herself, and she couldn't help glancing in the direction of the tents. Everyone was up and eating except for Megan, who had been out cold when Chaz had gotten up an hour and a half earlier. They were all loath to disturb her, after the fright she'd had, and there was no need to rush to get on the river, anyway. Their next campsite was not far downstream.

How the hell do I react when I see her? What do I say?

Chaz had awakened slowly that morning and had briefly felt as though she must still be dreaming, so unaccustomed was she to waking up next to someone. Especially quite like this. She had found herself wrapped protectively around Megan, hugging her from behind, one arm loosely draped around her neck, the other around her waist and... *Oh, my.* Her right hand was inside Megan's T-shirt, pressed against the warm, soft flesh of her stomach, which moved slightly with each slow, deep breath.

She was spooning Megan as though they did this every night.

Initially, she was shocked to find herself thus, but then she vaguely remembered that Megan had had a nightmare. She'd had them herself—nightmares of being chased—the summer that a grizzly followed her for miles during a solo backpacking trip near Denali. She'd wanted Megan to feel safe. She remembered that much, but not much else. *I certainly didn't intend to sleep like that all night.*

Once the initial shock had worn off, and she realized that Megan seemed to be deeply asleep, Chaz had pushed her nagging conscience aside and allowed herself a few totally self-indulgent minutes just to...

relish where she was. A moment to memorize the feel of Megan's skin against her palm. Her hand ached to go exploring, but she refused to allow it. It took every ounce of her willpower to remain still.

She closed her eyes and inhaled the delicate herbal scent of Megan's shampoo, delighting in the press of their bodies against each other. Their legs and lower torsos were separated by their sleeping bags, but during the night, they had somehow managed to unzip the tops of the bags so they could snuggle closer together.

Her breasts were pressed up against Megan's back, and she was all too suddenly aware that her nipples were aching hard. *Uh, oh. She better not wake up when I'm like this.*

With excruciating slowness, she had extricated herself from their embrace, trying desperately not to wake Megan. Only once did Megan show any sign of rousing. When Chaz's body separated from hers, she let out a soft sigh, a moan of disappointment that made Chaz's heart skip a beat.

She kept hearing that sigh.

Don't go there, she tried to tell herself. *She's a client. Just a client. Just a client.* She kept saying it over and over, trying to imprint it on every fiber of her being, but her body was having none of it. It had had a taste of Megan, and it wanted more.



Megan joined them just before nine, looking relaxed and rested. Chaz caught sight of her as soon as she left their tent, and Megan sought out her eyes, too, and held them, as she approached the eating and cooking area.

Before she had a chance to say anything, Pat and Justine corralled her with questions.

"How are you?" Pat inquired. "Still shaken up a bit?"

"Did you get some sleep?" Justine asked.

"Actually, I slept pretty well," Megan replied with a half smile. She looked in Chaz's direction and her smile got bigger. "All things considered."

Chaz could have sworn she saw a twinkle in her eyes. *Oh, shit. Well, that answers that. She apparently remembers me holding her. So the question now is, does she also know how much I enjoyed it?*

Chaz was blushing, Megan realized. Her spirits were buoyed by the sight. She'd felt a jarringly unexpected sense of loss when she'd awakened alone, and the sight of the huge rip in the tent did nothing to cheer her. But Chaz was a balm to her frayed nerves this morning, just as she'd been last night.

"Get yourself some breakfast," Sally said, coming up behind Megan and putting a hand on her back. "We saved you some. We've got fruit and granola, and Chaz made some blueberry muffins."

"They're awesome," Yancey threw in. "If you don't want yours, we've decided to draw straws for them."

"Not a chance," Megan declared, stealing another glance at Chaz, who was drying some of the breakfast dishes. "I haven't held us all up, have I?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Sally replied. "We only have a short ways to go today. We aren't going to leave until after lunch."

"I'd like everybody to practice wet exits and Eskimo rolls this morning," Chaz said. "We're going to start hitting some of the rougher water soon. Are you up to it?"

"Sure," Megan said.

As soon as she'd eaten both of her muffins, which were every bit as good as promised, everyone donned their dry suits and took to the water in their kayaks.

Chaz first spent an hour or so conducting a seminar on river currents, describing the way the speed of the water changed as it flowed around curves and through narrows, and she briefed them on the different types of eddies they would encounter—pockets of calmer water that form in the downstream sides of rocks and boulders—and how to deal with them.

After that, they took turns tossing the rescue throw ropes that she'd issued them, until all were fairly good at it, at least in the calmer water.

As they practiced, the weather began to deteriorate. The temperature dropped twenty degrees as a low ceiling of clouds swept over the land, obliterating the sun and dumping a steady drizzle of rain that showed no sign of stopping.

"All right. I'd like to see everyone do at least a couple of wet exits and two or three rolls," Chaz said. "Sally is going to watch Pat, Linda, and Yancey, and I'm going to work with Elise, Megan, and Justine."

They divided into two small groups and took turns practicing wet exits first, with no problems. When it came time to do the rolls, Chaz beached her kayak and waded out into the current, to help them as needed as she had back at the lodge.

“Let’s be perfect at this, so we can all go in and get warm, what do you say?” Chaz encouraged them as they lined their kayaks up in front of her, paddling to remain in place against the current. She went briefly over the fundamentals again, then they took turns: Justine first, Elise second, Megan last.

Justine managed to do three rolls in fairly quick succession with little help. Elise needed assistance on the first couple of tries, but then got it on her own. Then it was Megan’s turn.

Everyone else had gone in. She and Chaz were alone. And Chaz was looking as sexy as hell, with her face pink and eyes shining from the cold. Megan was having a very hard time focusing on all the details that she needed to remember to do the roll right.

Chaz moved into position at the front of Megan’s kayak, all businesslike. “Ready?” she asked.

Nothing at all in her demeanor suggested that she had any recollection of the hours they’d spent wrapped in each other’s arms. It was time to remind her.

“Thank you for last night,” Megan said, with exaggerated provocation. She said it as though they had spent the night having mind-blowing sex.

She was thrilled to see the look that passed over Chaz’s face at her words. Chaz went crimson in embarrassment and looked shyly away, as a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah, well, uh...” Chaz stuttered, tapping her fingers nervously on the end of Megan’s kayak. “No problem. I’ve had nightmares before, too.”

Oh, this is good. Very good. Last night was something to her, too.

“Chaz?” She said her name, very deliberately, because she really wanted Chaz to look at her right then.

Finally, after a very long moment, Chaz did, and Megan fell into the depths of those hazel eyes, a mere five feet away, that were gazing at her with such...*heat*. That was the word for it. *She wants me. I can see she wants me as much as I want her.*

“Last night...” she began, searching her mind for the right words, suddenly wishing she’d thought about what she was going to say. Normally she had no problem seducing women, but she felt tongue-tied half the time with Chaz, and she really didn’t want to screw this up.

She didn’t bother analyzing why this felt different to her than any relationship she could remember. Too much time passed, and Chaz looked away—she could see that Chaz was struggling to regain the professional demeanor that was her trademark.

“Chaz, I can’t tell you how much what you did last night meant to me.” The words poured out of her in a rush. “Risking your life with the bear, and then...then...” *Making me feel safe*, she wanted to say, but she couldn’t admit feeling vulnerable, even to Chaz.

“Helping with your nightmare,” Chaz finished for her. “Like I said, no problem. Are you ready to try a roll?”

The heat was totally gone now. The woman who had held her in her arms had changed back into the professional guide. Megan wanted to say something that would put that look back in Chaz’s eyes, but perhaps now was not the time. She was freezing, and so was Chaz. There would be time enough later, at their next campsite.

“I guess I’m ready,” she said, forcing her mind back to the details of the difficult maneuver. She wanted Chaz to be proud of her.

She got it on the first try. It looked a bit ungainly, to be sure, but she did it all by herself. And three more times, before they went in.

“That was really great, Megan,” Chaz complimented her as they walked back to join the others. “You should be really pleased with how well you’ve taken to this.”

She *was* pretty proud of herself, at that.



After a hot lunch, they packed up their tents and headed downriver to their next campsite. It was only a three-hour paddle, and the current carried them along at an ever-quickening pace as the river narrowed and deepened. They had to be more alert to obstructions—rocks and boulders of various sizes were scattered everywhere, and here and there, a branch or log had stuck on something.

They were still in a forest of spruce and alder and cottonwoods, alive with birdsong and the scattered sounds of other small animals, but

the mountains on either side were closing in, the river leading them into a narrow valley.

The stopping point that Chaz selected looked very much like the place they had camped the night before. There was a nice flat spot for the tents, surrounded by a spruce forest where there would again be ample wood for a fire. And a fire would be most welcome; though the drizzle had stopped, it was decidedly colder than it had been thus far in the trip, with temperatures falling into the forties.

"We have vegetable lasagna on the menu tonight," Chaz announced to the group as they unloaded the raft. "Would anyone like me to supplement that with some fish again, provided they're biting, of course?"

Several hands shot up, and Linda enthused, "That was fabulous last night."

"Yeah, prepared so simply—and so fresh. It was probably the best fish I've had in a long while," Yancey said.

Megan smiled. "I think you better catch enough for all of us, again."

"I'll do my best," Chaz said, reaching for her fishing gear. "Oh, by the way," she said to Megan, "Don't bother to put up the tent. Sally's going to take a look at it after dinner and try to do a better repair job."

"Okay. Well, if I don't have that to do, is there anything I can do to help you?"

Chaz shook her head. "No, thanks. I've got this. You can gather up some wood for a fire, if you like."

"Sure."

As Megan walked away, Chaz followed her with her eyes. She thought back to the presumptions she'd made about Megan from her registration form. *She's certainly no Muffy*. She hadn't complained about the food or the primitive conditions. She offered to help out and pitched in eagerly. And Chaz had the impression she really did appreciate the pristine surroundings and adventure she was on.

You were wrong about her, she admitted. *What else are you wrong about?*



Chaz's fishing acumen landed them each another fine grayling filet for dinner, in addition to the lasagna and garlic bread they had planned. They divvied up the chores, and so by seven p.m., they were all stuffed, the dishes were done, the garbage and leftovers safely stowed away from bears, and a nice campfire was blazing.

One by one, as they finished their tasks and changed into warmer clothes, the women regrouped around the fire bowl as they had done the night before.

Sally spread the torn tent out next to her and began to sew it up. "I hope we don't get a bad storm. Even with seam seal, this probably won't be watertight any more, and the rain fly has a big tear in it, too."

"More probing questions, anyone?" Elise asked as she pulled up a camp chair and joined the rest. Only Chaz was absent.

"I'm game. That was fun," Pat said.

"But we should wait for Chaz," Megan put in. *Her answers are the ones I'm most interested in.* She started thinking about what question she would ask, when it was her turn. *I could do "What turns you on?" That's not bad.*

"Here she comes now," Sally said, and, sure enough, Chaz was just cresting the low rise that had hidden her from view.

"Are you up for some more probing questions?" Elise called out as Chaz got within earshot.

"If you like," Chaz answered agreeably. "Although I have an alternative that some of you might like to try."

"Do tell, we're all ears," Elise prompted, in a flirtatious way that Megan found really annoying.

"When I was here last year, I stumbled on a very nice feature of this particular place," Chaz said. "About a three-minute walk downstream..." she pointed in the direction she'd just come from, "there is a really nice hot spring, big enough for two, right next to the river."

"A hot spring?" Elise repeated with interest.

"Dibs first!" Linda jumped to her feet and reached down to pull Pat up with her.

"Hey, not so fast! We're all going to want to go," Justine protested.

"Yeah, I sure want some of that," Elise added. "Hey, Chaz, want to pair up with me?"

Oh, no, you don't, Megan thought, jumping in before Chaz could reply. "We should draw straws or something to see who goes when. That would be the fair thing to do."

"My thinking exactly," Chaz said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a bunch of small pieces of paper. "There are eight slips here," she said, cupping them in her hand. "Each has a number from one through eight. One and two get the first shift, three and four the second, and so on. Trading is allowed. Does that work for everyone?"

They all nodded agreement, so Chaz went around the circle and let them each choose a slip of paper.

"Is this ever going to feel good on my aching back and shoulders," Yancey said, as she selected her number.

"My replacement is going to have to pry me out of there," Justine agreed. "We should set a time limit. Half an hour or something?"

"That sounds good," Megan said, reaching up for her slip when it was her turn to choose. *Please please please let me be paired with Chaz.*

"Okay, who's got what?" Chaz said when the slips had all been distributed.

"I'm number one!" Justine said.

"I'm with you, then," Yancey said, holding up her slip. "Number two."

"I've got three," Linda said.

"Damn. I'm five," Pat said. "Who's got four?"

"That would be me," Elise said. "And yes, I'll trade so you can be with your honey. Never let it be said that I stand in the way of hot tub luuuve."

They all laughed.

"I have six," Chaz said.

Shit. Just my luck. Though Megan couldn't help but notice that Chaz didn't seem entirely happy about being paired with Elise. Or was that wishful thinking?

"Then that leaves Megan and me last," Sally said. "Which means you all better not exceed your time limits!"

"Come pry us out of there when our half hour is up," Yancey called out, as she and Justine headed to their tents to get their towels and swimsuits.

The six who remained by the fire made small talk about the things

they had seen that day and what was ahead of them, while Sally worked on repairing the tent, and Chaz kept the fire stoked. After a while, Linda and Pat departed for their turn at the hot spring.

"That was unbelievably wonderful," Justine reported when she returned to the campfire a short time later, her skin pink and glowing. "It's not only great on the sore muscles, but what a setting for a soak!"

"Yeah, the river is kind of dreamlike in this light," Yancey agreed, reclaiming her seat. "It's all salmon-colored, with soft edges."

"I can't wait for our turn," Elise said to Chaz.

I bet you can't. Megan suddenly had a flashback of Chaz sunbathing nude on the rock after her swim. *Maybe she never wears a swimsuit if she's only got women clients. She's so cavalier about it.* Her irritation grew. *She better not get naked with Elise, or Elise will be all over her. She probably will be, regardless.*

She began to regret that she didn't make a try sooner for Chaz. *Sally said she doesn't like to make the first move. If you wait for her, you'll wait forever...or Elise will beat you to the punch.*

"Well, this is done, as best as I can fix it," Sally said, holding up the tent and rain fly, both of which bore neat rows of stitches along the rips the bear had made. Over the stitches, she had liberally applied seam sealant. "I think it's dry enough to put up."

"I'll take care of that," Chaz said, getting to her feet and gathering up the tent. "Then it'll be about time for our turn," she told Elise. "I'll meet you there in a few minutes?"

Oh, I'll be there," Elise said, with such delight in her voice that Megan cringed.

Count to ten, Megan, just count to ten.



Chaz set up the tent in a couple of minutes and went inside to put on her swimsuit, a navy one-piece. When she exited for the hot spring, she could hear Elise in the next tent getting changed, but she didn't wait for her. Elise wasn't taking the hint that she wasn't interested in her flirtations. Perhaps, she thought, it was time to be a tad more direct.

At least she wasn't paired up with Megan. That might have been awkward. The hot springs setting *was* pretty romantic, she had to admit, and she didn't know what seeing so much of Megan's body might do

to her self-control. She had never before felt an attraction like this for a client.

She heard laughter through the trees as she approached the hot spring, then voices. She stopped in her tracks when she heard her name and then Megan's. Curious, she edged forward until she could make out what Linda and Pat were saying.

"No way. It's Megan or neither one of them. She hasn't looked twice at Elise." Linda's voice.

"Yeah, but Elise can be persistent," Pat argued. "You know she'll try to seduce Chaz when they get in here together. And not many can resist Elise when she's determined."

"Well, it's obvious Megan has the hots for her, too. She can't keep her eyes off her."

She can't, eh? Chaz knew she shouldn't be eavesdropping, but this conversation was one she didn't want to interrupt.

"I can't understand why Megan hasn't made a play for her yet. She's certainly no wallflower," Pat said.

Linda laughed. "Yeah, I wondered the same thing. She usually moves right in for the kill when she spots a good target. Doesn't take her ten minutes to find someone at the club and leave with them."

"I don't know that I've ever seen Elise and Megan go after the same woman before," Pat mused. "They're both so competitive. I wonder if they have a bet going as to which one of them will get her?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Megan sure isn't used to hearing no," Linda said.

"Elise, either. I hope this doesn't cause a problem between the two of them after this trip," Pat said.

"Nah, that'll never happen. They'll both have moved on to someone else within a week, anyway."

Pat laughed again. "Too true."

Chaz felt a bit sick to her stomach. *That's what you get for eavesdropping.* But perhaps it was all for the best. It was yet another reason she couldn't, and wouldn't, get involved with Megan.

She took a moment to compose herself, then stepped out of the trees. "Hi, ladies. I think your time is about up."

"Hey, Chaz," Pat greeted her. "This has been glorious. I don't suppose we have time for another soak in the morning before we leave?"

“Not unless you get one in before breakfast,” she said. “Tomorrow’s destination is a pretty good distance downstream, and I want to get an early start. It’s the stop where we’ll have the best chance of getting a good view of the caribou herd.”

“I can’t wait for that,” Linda enthused. She and Pat got out and dried themselves off.

“Can’t wait for what?” Elise appeared out of the trees.

“We’ll see the caribou tomorrow,” Pat said.

“We hope.” Chaz stepped gingerly into the hot water. “You can’t really predict where they’ll be, but I was watching them before we left. They’ve radio-collared a bunch of them, and you can track where they are on the Internet.”

“Okay, guys, shoo! Our turn,” Elise said, dropping her towel to reveal a skimpy black bikini that left very little to the imagination.

“We can take a hint,” Pat said, chuckling, as she and Linda headed back to the others.

As she watched Elise slip into the water beside her, Chaz had to admit that the woman was way above average in the looks department. Her body would certainly make anyone look twice, but it wasn’t the body Chaz wanted.

“So, finally, I have you alone,” Elise purred, leering at Chaz like she wanted to eat her alive.

“Down, girl,” Chaz rebuked gently with a smile. She leaned her head back against the smooth rock side of the hot spring and closed her eyes. The water was roughly chest deep, so she relaxed with her knees slightly bent to keep only her head above water.

“Aw, don’t be a wet blanket. You don’t mean that, now, do you?” Elise pouted slightly.

Chaz cracked open an eye. “Believe me, I’m flattered, but it’s not going to happen.” She closed her eyes again in an effort to end the pursuit.

“Can I ask why not?”

“A lot of reasons. First and foremost, you’re a client, and I don’t go there,” Chaz drawled lazily. The hot water really did feel amazing on such a cold and dreary day. She’d stayed at this stop a couple of days the year before, primarily because of this special feature.

“Why don’t you go there?” Elise persisted. “What’s wrong with two consenting adults having some fun?”

"I don't think it's ethical for a guide to sleep with a client. This is a dangerous place, and I have a responsibility to all of you," Chaz said seriously. "I can't have my judgment compromised by personal feelings. And I can't favor one client over another. There are a lot of other reasons why not."

Chaz thought she'd finally gotten through to Elise, for a long quiet fell between them. In fact, she nearly dozed, lulled by the heat and the steady cascade of water from the river beside them. Her mind wandered back to that morning and the thrill of waking up holding Megan.

The next thing she knew, she felt a touch—so light it was almost a whisper—run slowly up her leg from calf to thigh. She reached down and gently intercepted Elise's hand before it got any higher.

"Somehow I think I'm not getting through to you," she said, opening her eyes to find Elise poised to pounce, her lips inches away from her own. "Elise, I—"

But Elise was not going to let her make any further objections. She closed in for the kill. Her right hand shot out and wrapped around Chaz's neck, and she pulled their faces together for a searing kiss.

For a brief moment, Chaz was too startled to respond at all. Then her mind registered that *Oh, man, her lips are so soft*, and it had been a long while since she'd been kissed like that, and she really *liked* kissing, and Elise sure did know *how* to kiss, oh, yes, indeed she did, and she couldn't kiss the woman she really *wanted* to kiss, so...

"No!" she said, breathless, as she pushed away from Elise and held her at arm's length. It was only then that she realized that Elise had taken off her bikini.

Elise frowned. In a sexy half whisper, she said, "Now, I know you were enjoying that as much as I was." She inched closer as though she was going to take another shot as soon as she saw an opening.

It was a very small pool, and there wasn't anywhere for Chaz to go. "Look, Elise, I'm not going to deny you're a great kisser. But it's still not going to happen."

"I bet I can change your mind," Elise predicted.

"No, Elise." Chaz injected a note of finality into her voice that was unmistakable. "I'm sorry, but no means no. If you're going to persist, I'm going to get out right now."

Elise's expression changed and she backed away. "There's no need to do that," she said dejectedly.

Sensing Elise's feelings were bruised, Chaz said, "I'm sorry. I don't want this to be awkward, and I don't want to hurt your feelings. You're a beautiful woman, and like I said, I'm very flattered. But I'm not into one-night stands, even if you weren't a client."

Elise let out a big sigh. "Oh, well. Can't blame a girl for trying."

Just then, Sally's voice rang out, "Time's up! Everyone out of the pool!"

Chaz turned to see Sally and Megan approaching through the trees. Megan had the oddest expression on her face. She looked as though she'd just lost her best friend.

CHAPTER TEN

After Chaz and Elise left for the hot spring, time had seemed to slow to a crawl for Megan. She kept glancing at her watch and wondering what the two of them were up to. She was certain Elise would try to take advantage of the situation, and the pictures that formed in her mind were not at all welcome ones.

After fifteen minutes had elapsed, she excused herself and went to change into her swimsuit, telling Sally she wanted to make a pit stop before their turn and would meet her there. In reality, she wanted to satisfy her curiosity about what was happening, so she intended to get to the hot spring a little early, alone.

She'd approached through the trees as silently as possible, grateful for the soft cushion of spongy moss beneath her feet. She strained to hear voices, but the only sounds she heard were the soft ripples of white noise from the river, and the chorus of bird songs that seemed to accompany them everywhere.

Her first glimpse of the two of them through the trees had confirmed her worst fears. Chaz had her head leaned back against the side of the pool, eyes closed with a hint of a smile on her face, the picture of contentment, while Elise loomed close, watching Chaz with a dreamy expression. Beside them, tossed haphazardly on a rock, was Elise's bikini. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Megan couldn't tear her eyes away, and neither could she move or announce her presence. She had to see what happened next.

Her heart sank when she saw Elise move in even closer to Chaz, so close that she was certain their bodies had to be touching beneath the turbulent surface of the water. Then Chaz opened her eyes and said something—but it was too far for her to make out the words. Whatever it was, it made Elise smile and reach for her.

A moment later, they were kissing.

She couldn't watch any more. *That's what you get for being so damned curious.* The image of the two of them locked in each other's arms was burned into her brain.

Megan retreated soundlessly a few dozen yards back into the trees where she could no longer see them. A turmoil of emotions welled up in her—anger, disappointment, longing, lust, envy, jealousy. She was furious that she was upset at all, that being with Chaz seemed to matter so much to her.

She didn't know what to do. Sally would be along any moment. How would she explain the fact that she was just standing here, all by herself, shaking in rage and frustration?

She took several deep breaths and told herself it didn't matter. So she'd been beaten to the punch. Big deal. She'd go home in a week, find a new bed partner, and forget all about this in no time at all.

No time at all. It sounded good, but she had a hard time believing it.

When she glimpsed Sally approaching through the trees, she'd willed herself to be calm and composed. She could put on a mask better than anyone. Royal Ice Bitch. She'd had lots of practice.

"Hey, Megan," Sally hailed her when she got nearer. "Couldn't you find the hot spring?"

"I got waylaid here watching some birds," Megan lied. "Then I heard you coming and thought I'd wait for you."

"Well, let's go. They've had their thirty minutes." Sally had led the way. "Time's up! Everyone out of the pool!" she hollered as they neared the hot spring.

Megan wanted to look anywhere but at Chaz, afraid she might not be able to disguise her tumultuous feelings over what she had seen. She didn't want Chaz to know what effect she was having on her. Chaz made her feel vulnerable, and at the moment, she didn't like that one bit.

She glanced at Elise as Elise got out of the pool and reached for her towel. She did have a great body, Megan had to admit. All lean and tanned, and Elise was apparently just as comfortable with nudity as Chaz was. *No wonder Chaz couldn't resist her.* Fury poured through her, though she knew she was being unfair. Elise was her friend, and she had no right to be ticked off just because she'd been first to take advantage of a great opportunity. *I had my chances.*

Tears sprang unexpectedly to her eyes, and she looked away, out at the river. She was aware that Chaz was getting out of the water—she could see movement out of the corner of her eye—but she didn’t dare turn around.

“That half hour passed much too quickly,” Elise sighed, from behind her. “Have fun, girls.” Her voice trailed away as she headed back toward the fire.

“Well, if anyone wants another round, they can come replace us,” Sally called out as she got into the water.

Megan blinked back the tears as she unwrapped the towel she had around her and turned to join Sally. She thought Chaz had departed with Elise, so she jumped when she discovered Chaz standing behind her, watching her with interest.

“Are you all right?” Chaz asked.

She felt a sharp jolt of joy bounce through her when she saw Chaz’s eyes travel south to check out her swimsuit. She involuntarily sucked in a breath, her chest expanding to emphasize how well the skimpy fabric of the bikini top barely held in her ample breasts. She could have sworn she saw Chaz’s eyes dilate.

But then Chaz looked away.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, with as much nonchalance as she could muster. Having Chaz’s eyes on her breasts, however briefly, had stirred her blood and made her feel warm despite the chill in the air.

She stepped around Chaz and got into the pool, her mind replaying the kiss she’d witnessed, her body wishing that she’d been the one who had put that contented half smile on Chaz’s face. Heat enveloped her as she sank into the water up to her chin, and she floated, swiveling slowly around to find that Chaz had gone.

“I don’t mean to pry. Or belabor the point,” Sally said. “But are you sure everything is okay? You seem a lot more...I don’t know, subdued...than you were by the fire.”

“Just...preoccupied, I guess.” Megan tried to relax. “Nothing to worry about. But thanks.”

Nothing to worry about. She breathed slowly in and out, trying to dispel the whole business from her mind. She sought out the familiar, so, for the first time in days, she thought about work and wondered how the newsroom was faring. *You’re needed there*, she told herself, and it brought a small measure of comfort to her state of unsettled frustration.

But it was short-lived. *What does that say about you, that the only thing that needs you is your job?*

She had accomplished a lot and had money, respect, prestige, connections. But she had always dreamed of achieving something truly meaningful, and she wasn't at all certain she'd managed to do that. And in getting to where she was now, she'd given up a tremendous amount, too, she realized.

Suddenly her life felt like it didn't fit quite right, like a pair of shoes she'd outgrown. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as it was when she'd arrived in Alaska. And she wondered whether it was the vastness of the landscape itself that was responsible for her discontent, or a certain dark-haired guide.

The hot spring managed to act as one dandy natural sleeping pill, with all the clients retiring early to their tents. When the last pair had finished their turn and returned to the campsite, only Chaz remained by the fire.

"I'm going to turn in, too," Megan told Sally, detouring toward her tent as soon as she spotted Chaz. "Good night."

"Good night," Sally replied. "Sleep well."

Megan kept trying to dispel the mental image of Chaz and Elise kissing as she readied for bed and snuggled into her sleeping bag. It wasn't easy with Chaz's things in the tent beside her.

Giving in to an impulse, she reached for Chaz's small camping pillow and pressed it against her face, inhaling the faint smell of wood smoke from the fire and a subtle trace of something else—shampoo, probably, since Chaz didn't seem the perfume type. It was earthy, like the woman herself, and it took her back to the night before, when Chaz had held her in her arms.

It does no good to think about things that cannot be, she reminded herself, setting the pillow reluctantly back at the head of Chaz's sleeping bag. But as soon as she relaxed and closed her eyes, she remembered the way it felt to be enfolded against the long length of Chaz's body, and despite her better judgment, she wished for it to happen again.



Chaz noted with disappointment that Megan went directly to their tent from the hot spring. She had rather hoped to get another opportunity

to talk to her, to ask her why she'd looked so troubled and sad. But Megan was apparently either too tired, or determined to act as though nothing was wrong.

"What a wonderful find that hot spring was." Sally sank into a camp chair beside Chaz. She had changed into warm clothes and hung her towel and swimsuit on a line they'd strung between two trees. "Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Because if I had, I'm sure the clients and I would have found all sorts of hidden surprises in there, knowing you. Fake water moccasins or something."

Sally had to chuckle. "Oh, it's all in fun. You're such a wet blanket, sometimes, Chaz. You need to lighten up."

"Someone has to be the adult."

"Speaking of lightening up... What's wrong with Megan? She was acting kind of funny, wasn't she? Not that she hasn't been kind of hot and cold since we got here."

"I noticed that, too," Chaz said. "She seemed to be okay here at the fire. Did something happen after I left? Somebody say something to her?"

"No. She was kind of quiet after you and Elise left, but she seemed fine. You know what was kind of odd? We didn't walk to the hot spring together—she left before I did and was just kind of hanging out in the trees between here and there when I found her. She said she was bird-watching, but come to think of it, that's really when she first seemed kind of... I don't know, distracted, I guess. Maybe upset, too, though she was hiding it well. I asked her about it while we were soaking, but she said she was just preoccupied."

The wheels began to spin in Chaz's mind. "Where exactly was she when you found her?"

"Oh, not far at all from the hot spring. A couple dozen yards into the trees, probably. I was kind of surprised to find her there."

"Oh, shit." She hadn't meant to say it out loud. *She saw us kissing, didn't she? And she was upset about it. Why would she be upset?*

"What?" Sally asked. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing."

"C'mon, you can't do that. Spill. Do you know why she was acting funny?"

Chaz sighed. *I just can't catch a break. Why did she have to see that?* "Maybe she saw Elise and me kissing."

"*What?* You want to repeat that? I've got to be hearing things."

"You heard me. Maybe she saw Elise and me kissing. And no, I didn't kiss *her*, she kissed *me*. It only lasted a second. Well, maybe a few seconds. I was kind of in shock when she did it. But I set her straight, and it won't happen again."

"I thought Megan was the one you were interested in."

"She is," Chaz said, before she realized what she was admitting. "I mean, she *is* the one I'm attracted to, not Elise, but nothing is going to happen with either of them."

"So Megan was ticked off that you were kissing Elise," Sally recapped. "That's an interesting development. Sure proof that she's interested in you, or she wouldn't be jealous."

"What makes you think she's jealous?" *Could she be? Or is that just wishful thinking? There are certainly other possibilities.* "Maybe she was embarrassed that she nearly walked in on something she thought was a private moment."

"Yeah, right," Sally guffawed. "You keep telling yourself that. I think this is proof she's as hot for you as you are for her, not that I didn't suspect that already."

"Would you stop with this matchmaking stuff?" Chaz replied, exasperated. "It's giving me a headache."

"No, your headache is from your conscience telling you that maybe you shouldn't be turning away from an opportunity like this," Sally said. "C'mon, Chaz. You like Megan and she likes you. I think you'll regret it if you don't see where this might lead."

"Enough."

"Oh, all right." Sally relented. "For now." She got to her feet. "Coming to bed?"

"Later," Chaz said. "Good night."

"Don't sit up too late. You really don't have to—I think she'll be asleep soon, anyway."

Just to be sure, Chaz stayed up another hour, watching the light change as the midnight sun rolled along the horizon. Was Megan really jealous? Or was she ticked off? Pat's words rang again in her ears. Maybe Megan and Elise *did* have a bet going. Maybe they had wagered on who would kiss her first, and Megan had lost. Either way, it was

doing her no good to worry and obsess about it, so she extinguished the fire and returned to the tent.

Despite the dim light, she could see that Megan was fast asleep. She looked so adorable, lying on her side in a half-fetal position, that Chaz couldn't help but take advantage of the chance to spend a few moments watching her. Her shoulder-length brown hair was tousled, and a strand near her face moved with each gentle exhalation. It was all Chaz could do not to reach down and smooth it away, caress the cheek it rested against. She couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted to touch someone quite so much.

Quietly, she got into her own bag and ignored an overwhelming urge to cuddle closer, to spoon their bodies together as they had the night before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning Megan awoke alone again, with no memory of Chaz having been in the tent at all. But obviously she had been, because her sleeping bag was unzipped, and her things had been moved around.

She reached for Chaz's pillow almost without realizing she was doing so, and this time when she brought it to her face, that same scent was stronger, like Chaz had been lying on it only moments before. An ache passed through her as she set it back down. *Why does it matter so much?* she asked herself, but she didn't allow herself to think about it too closely or too long. *Get over it. Get up and get dressed and enjoy the rest of your time in Alaska.*

She slithered out of her mummy sleeping bag like a snake shedding its skin and reached for a new set of clothes.

"Knock, knock," Sally's voice hailed her from outside the tent. "Megan, you awake?"

"Yes," she responded. "Getting dressed. I'll be out in a minute."

"Do you mind if I have a word with you? It's kind of personal."

Megan went to the door flap, unzipped it, and stuck her head outside. "Sure. What's up?"

Sally came over and stooped until they were roughly at eye level. "Well, I, uh...I talked to Chaz last night." Megan's ears perked up. "Look, this is really none of my business, I know." Sally looked at the ground. "And if I'm out of line, I apologize in advance."

"What it is, Sally?" Megan was intrigued.

"Well, I only wanted to say that if you *were* upset about something last night..." Sally looked at Megan then. "And that something involved Chaz..."

Her heartbeat sped up. *Oh, shit. Is it that obvious?*

"Then I thought you should know that maybe you didn't see what you thought you saw."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. "Excuse me?"

"If you got to the hot spring early and saw something that upset you, I think maybe you misunderstood what you were seeing."

Megan's mind raced. She wanted to deny that she knew what Sally was talking about, but if what she was saying was true... "Let's say you're right," she said. "How do you know I misunderstood?"

Sally bit her lip like she didn't really want to answer. "Because Chaz told me that Elise kissed her last night...and she thought you might have seen them." Her eyes found Megan's. "She also told me that it took her by surprise, and she told Elise not to do it again."

"Really?" Megan's funk lifted instantly.

"Really," Sally confirmed with a smile. "She's not attracted to Elise. She's more interested in someone else." She winked at Megan and left.

Well. Well. Well. This is certainly an interesting development, now, isn't it?



Chaz first suspected something was up when she spotted Sally approaching from the direction of the tents with an impish grin. When their eyes met, Sally began whistling tunelessly as though the picture of innocence.

"What are you up to?" Chaz asked.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Sally replied, as she set to work getting out utensils and plates for breakfast.

Chaz was busy cooking omelets and hash browns over a pair of stoves and didn't have time to put Sally under the third degree, but she suspected some kind of plot was being hatched.

The clincher was the happy smile on Megan's face and the glimmer in her eyes when she appeared a minute or two later.

Something's going on.

"That smells wonderful," Megan said, choosing the chair beside her. "And I could eat a horse! Can I help?"

"No, thanks," Chaz said, relieved that Megan's dark cloud had disappeared, but in a quandary about why. *Sally better not have said anything to her.*

She had decided, after lying awake next to Megan for nearly two hours last night, listening to her breathe, that it probably was just as well Megan had cooled toward her again, regardless of the reasons why. It would make it a lot easier to get through the next week.

But now things had flip-flopped again. Megan certainly was looking friendly at the moment. Entirely *too* friendly. Every time Chaz glanced in Megan's direction, she found Megan watching her. Watching her like a cat watches a bird in a cage, with heavy-lidded eyes and this bemused half smile on her face...*like she has definite plans for you, later on.*

Feeling Megan's eyes on her was getting her way too distracted and way too excited. The hand holding the spatula began to shake.

"Chaz?" Megan said softly.

She loved hearing her name said like that. She turned her head to look at Megan and found that Megan was grinning from ear to ear and looking incredibly sexy, her shoulder-length hair tousled from sleep. "Yes?" she managed, her voice sounding a lot lower than usual.

"I think those are done." Megan gestured toward the pan that held the hash browns. The way she said it gave Chaz a sneaking suspicion that Megan was suppressing snorts of laughter.

Sally, standing a few feet away, started chuckling.

The pan was smoking. The hash browns were burnt to a crisp.

"Shit!" Chaz dumped that batch onto a plate. "Those are mine," she grumbled.

Sally and Megan both erupted into mirth.

"Wise guys. You two..." Chaz pointed to Sally with the spatula and then Megan. But before she could say anything more, the other clients began to amble up, and she let it drop and started more hash browns cooking.

"Coffeeeeeeee. I need coffeeeeee," Pat groaned, bleary-eyed.

"Sit," Linda said. "I'll get you some, honey."

"Hash browns!" Yancey peered into one of the fry pans. "And omelets, too! I can't believe how well we're eating on this trip."

"I'll second that," Justine said. "I'm glad we're getting so much exercise or I'd really be gaining weight."

"So today is caribou day, right?" Elise asked.

"No guarantees," Chaz said. "But yes, our best chance of seeing a good group of them is at our next campsite."

"I can't *wait*," Megan said, and the tone of her voice made Chaz wonder if she was taking about the caribou or something else.



They had a long paddle to get there, through more gloriously breathtaking scenery. There were fewer and fewer trees as they went along, and finally the river curved out of the valley they'd been in and cut through a pass between the mountains, then emerged onto a wide sweeping landscape characterized by low rolling hills of emerald green tundra, surrounded by distant, snowcapped peaks.

The water was getting swifter all the time as the river dropped in elevation, cascading over rocks and split in channels by boulders bigger than cars. Three times, in the more turbulent water, Chaz pulled them over briefly so that she could scout ahead. So far, there had been no stretch so bad that she made anyone portage, but she reminded them to closely follow her line of travel through those areas and not to bunch up too much.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at their next campsite, a flat stretch of gravel surrounded by hilly terrain that partially obscured their view of the distant mountains. "Where are the caribou?" Justine asked Chaz with disappointment as they beached their kayaks.

"We have to hike to higher ground to see them," Chaz said. "I thought we'd grab a quick dinner first, unless you all would rather wait and eat late?"

"I'm starving," Pat said.

"You're always starving," Linda replied.

"Yeah, well," Pat embraced her lover tightly and raised both eyebrows suggestively, "I've been burning up a lot of calories."

"Where do you two get your energy?" Yancey grumped. "If my husband was here and wanted to do the deed, he'd be sorely disappointed. I'm whipped from paddling."

"Oh, I suppose I could find some hidden reserves if there was a good reason to," Elise remarked, looking hopefully at Chaz.

Megan was delighted that Chaz seemed to ignore the comment. All day long, she'd been thinking about the night to come, about lying beside Chaz. About kissing her, *finally*, and more. Her thoughts had kept

her in a mild state of arousal, energized and expectant. She certainly wouldn't be too tired when the moment arrived.



Setting up the campsite had become a familiar routine, and they were all anxious to see the caribou, so they split into groups and had the tents up and dinner prepared in about an hour and a half. They wolfed down big plates of pasta primavera, washed down with merlot, and assembled with their cameras and binoculars about the time the setting sun began to paint the world around them with tinges of gold, and pink, and amber.

Chaz led the way over spongy, boggy tundra and around grassy tussocks, some a foot high. It was difficult walking, and in no time Megan's calves began to protest.

"My legs are killing me," Yancey complained in a low voice from behind her.

"Join the crowd," Justine agreed. "This is tough going. We're going to sure sleep good tonight."

"It'll be worth it if the caribou are there," Pat said. "But I'm going to be really bummed if we're doing this for nothing."

They went up and down several small rises, scaring up a lot of small birds, whose nests were concealed amid the tussocks—and an arctic fox, who was digging after some small prey when they interrupted him. Cameras clicked as he froze, watching them, then ambled away to try for dinner somewhere else.

After an hour of solid walking, they faced an enormous hill, etched by ancient game trails.

Chaz paused at the base to address them. "Okay, we're here. On the other side of this is one of the main routes the caribou use. Cross your fingers."

They scaled the hill, tired legs protesting the steep elevation. But at the top, all weariness evaporated in the most awesome spectacle any of them had ever witnessed. Every woman stood motionless, mesmerized.

In the long, flat valley below them tens of thousands of caribou moved like a wide, living brown river. Megan was speechless. The picture on the brochure didn't begin to do the scene justice. She had no

idea something like this still existed in the modern world. It reminded her of what the Great Plains must have been like, before the buffalo herds were decimated by hunters.

"There are more than a hundred and fifty thousand animals in the herd," Sally said. "I'd say that's a good bit of them down there, maybe two-thirds."

The wind changed slightly and carried the sounds of the herd up to them. Grunts, and bellows, and snorts, and a persistent clicking noise.

"What's that weird sound?" Yancey asked.

"Their leg tendons do that when they walk," Megan answered automatically.

"That's very good. You really did your homework."

Chaz's voice, so near, startled her. She had been so intent on the caribou she hadn't realized Chaz was standing just behind her left shoulder.

"What do you think? Was it worth the trip?" Chaz looked into her eyes.

Her expression was so serious that Megan somehow knew her answer meant a great deal. "Absolutely," she answered honestly. "I'll remember every detail of this day for the rest of my life."

She had turned slightly to face Chaz, and they stood looking at each other, while the others began to spread out over the hillside, some taking pictures, others finding a comfortable place to sit and watch the herd through binoculars. Chaz's lips were so close that Megan couldn't take her eyes off them. They were wonderful lips, full and rosy red with the cold.

"I won't forget you, either," she whispered without really thinking.

Chaz lifted a hand and gently touched Megan's chin, tilting her face up until their eyes met. The touch shot through her like a charge of electricity. Chaz's eyes were dark and endless and drew her in, and for a moment—just a moment—Megan was certain Chaz was going to kiss her right then and there.

Instead, Chaz took a deep breath and let it out, as though she was struggling for control. "And I won't forget you," she said, dropping her hand. She turned to look back at the herd.

Megan's body shook with disappointment, but when her eyes followed Chaz's to the valley below, she decided she couldn't really

complain. Seeing the caribou was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and she didn't want to miss a minute of it. There would be plenty of time for kissing later.

Yup. Seducing her is going to be a walk in the park. She might even beat me to the punch.



Chaz gazed out over the herd, trying to still the butterflies in her stomach. Dear God, she had almost kissed Megan. What the hell had she been thinking? She was just so caught up in the moment and the look of sheer bliss in Megan's eyes. Something was happening between them, that was for sure. She had never felt so out of control in her life.

The tent was going to be torture tonight.

Unless...the clients wanted to stay here until very late. After that long, tough trudge through the tussocks and back again, everyone would be absolutely exhausted. Even Megan.

She could only hope.

They watched the caribou for two hours, the gangly calves, thousands of them born within days of each other, trotting along beside their mothers, who were finally shedding their bleached winter fur. The bulls already had their dark coats and velvet-covered antlers, the enormous racks swaying slightly as they grazed. In front of the herd, the land was alive with summer greenery and wildflowers, but behind it was only a vast brown plain, like it had been freshly tilled. The caribou stripped the tundra of every blossom, lichen, cotton grass shoot, and other hint of vegetation.

By the time the women trekked back to their campsite, it was truly the hour of the midnight sun, when the landscape fairly glowed—the diffuse light making colors unbelievably vivid.

They walked in silence, except for the occasional alert to something moving on the tundra and worthy of particular notice. As they arrived back at the tents, a snowy owl with a five-foot wingspan soared over them and then downriver. It was as dark as it would get, with shadows from the surrounding hills shading the tents in a suggestion of dusk.

"Good night, everyone," Sally said, "We can all sleep in tomorrow."

"Great news," Yancey said, stifling a yawn. "I'm beat."

There was a chorus of “good nights” all around, followed by the sounds of tent zippers and low voices.

Megan felt like she had voltage in her veins. The current of restless anticipation had been building all day, until every nerve ending in her body sang, until all she could think about was kissing Chaz and touching that magnificent body. She had put up their tent alone while Chaz cooked, and she had deliberately picked a spot as far from the others as possible to afford them at least a little privacy.

Turning as she stooped to unzip the tent, Megan was disappointed that Chaz was not behind her—she had apparently diverted off somewhere, probably to make a pit stop.

No excuses tonight, she thought. She’d begun to suspect that Chaz’s habit of staying up late might have something to do with the growing attraction between them. But there was no campfire to keep Chaz outside, and it was already very late. She had to come in soon.

Sally’s words came back to her. *I think it’s hard for her to make the first move when she’s interested in someone. And...She’s not attracted to Elise. She’s more interested in someone else.* Sally couldn’t have drawn her a clearer map, and her goal was within reach.



Chaz surveyed the area around where they cooked one more time to make sure they had taken care of all traces of food and garbage before they turned in. She had checked it thoroughly before they’d gone to see the herd, but she needed some reason not to retire right away, and it was the best one she could think of off the top of her head. *Can’t stall much longer.*

Though it was nearly midnight, she was not in the least bit tired. Quite the opposite. Megan had walked directly in front of her as they followed their path back to the campsite single file. She hadn’t planned it that way—Megan had taken a couple of quick steps as they all set off, to position herself there.

So she had a full hour to watch Megan’s way-too-cute ass sway back and forth as she strode along. After the first ten minutes or so, Chaz was convinced she was deliberately exaggerating the movement of her hips to maximize the impact. *She knows damn well what she’s doing to me. Talk about hitting below the belt.*

So by the time they got back, her whole body was thrumming with desire in a way that shocked her.

Can't avoid this forever. Might as well get it over with. Just go in there, get into your bag, and try to go to sleep. Don't look at her and don't talk to her, except to say good night. She knew she was on the verge of losing control, and it was a very unfamiliar place to be. It had always been clear to her, where to draw the line. But then, she'd never been tempted like this before.

She took a deep breath and headed for the tent.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chaz bent to untie her laces beside the entrance to the tent, so she could slip her boots off before she went inside. Peering through the insect netting, she found Megan wide-awake, lying half within her sleeping bag but propped up on one elbow, watching her intently. The V-necked man's T-shirt she was wearing exposed a hint of cleavage. As their eyes locked, Megan licked her lips in a deliciously enticing way.

Chaz's heartbeat sped up, and her hands shook slightly as she removed her boots and unzipped the tent to slip inside. She didn't dare look at Megan as she piled her gear into a corner by the door and shed clothes—her coat first, then fleece pullover, insulated pants, and socks. She got halfway into her own sleeping bag, wearing navy cotton boxers and a loose-fitting, long-sleeved navy T-shirt. The attraction between them had flared into a hot and undeniable living, breathing entity, and she had no idea how to deal with it except to try to ignore it.

She lay down on her side, facing away from Megan, stuffed her pillow under her head and closed her eyes, struggling to keep her body and voice under control. "Good night," she whispered, praying those words would be enough to stop anything from happening.

For a very long minute or two, Megan said nothing. Chaz, waiting on pins and needles, felt relief and disappointment in equal measure.

When Megan did speak, her voice was soft and intimate, the voice of a lover after a long night of passion. "You almost kissed me, up there on the hill. You wanted to." Not a question. A statement.

"Did I?" Chaz didn't move. *Oh, God, here it comes.* She held her breath. Her skin tingled in anticipation.

"Yes. And I wanted you to. But then, you know that, don't you?" Megan said.

Chaz shook her head. "Megan, I can't—"

“Yes, you can.” Megan cut her off. “And you will. You know we have to.”

The words sent a sharp current of arousal through her, dulling her conscience, making every single argument against it seem small and insignificant. *You can't! You can't!* But she had lost the battle almost before Megan reached for her.

She felt a hand around her waist, turning her, insistent, and she had only a moment to look into those green eyes, pupils large and dark and full of need, before Megan was kissing her, as she had never been kissed before, and God help her, there was not a thing she could do but kiss her back.

When Megan's tongue thrust into her mouth, Chaz answered with a passion she feared would consume her, her tongue exploring the welcoming warmth with an unquenchable thirst. And when Megan's hand entwined itself into her hair and roughly caressed her scalp, it sent her jangled senses into overdrive. Megan stirred something wild and primitive in her, and touching her was an elemental *need*, like the clean air of the wilderness.

The pressure in her chest made it hard to breathe. The pressure building between her legs made it impossible to think. Kissing wasn't nearly enough. Desire took control and obliterated the last vestiges of reason. She wrapped her arms around Megan and pulled their bodies together, breaking the kiss to roll until Megan was on top of her.

As Megan's smaller frame settled against the length of her body, and their curves and valleys melded together like puzzle pieces, she was rewarded with a long, sensual groan of approval. The sound reverberated through her skin and fueled the fire raging within. Megan's mouth reclaimed hers for another long, deep, scorching kiss, and just as her brain hazily registered that the sleeping bags had to go, she felt the shock of cool fingertips against the warm flesh of her abdomen and realized Megan's hand had found its way under her shirt.

Her stomach muscles contracted, and her heart began hammering even harder in her chest, in anticipation of where that hand was headed.

She didn't have long to wait.

Megan's cool palm slid over the flat plane of her belly; then the back of her fingers traced the bottom curve of her breasts, teasingly close, maddeningly distant. As Megan's fingertips neared their

destination, Chaz's hands sought their own reward of soft skin. She caressed Megan's back, grazing her fingernails lightly down the length of her body and into the confines of her sleeping bag until she felt the warm expanse of flesh between cotton shirt and silk panties.

She slipped a hand beneath the silk and cupped Megan's ass roughly. The ass that had taunted her, teased her, driven her mad.

Megan gasped and retaliated with a firm squeeze of Chaz's right nipple between her fingertips. It was instantly hard. She raised her head to look at Chaz. "What do you like?" she whispered, her breathing fast and unsteady, as her hand found Chaz's other nipple and gave it equal treatment. "Tell me what you want."

It was as though someone had thrown cold water on her. The question, the look in Megan's eyes, the momentary pause in the fevered kisses that had overpowered all sense of reason—she wasn't sure what it was. But it made her remember Pat's words and realize that she would only be a notch on Megan's belt—one in a long list and forgotten tomorrow. The thought was enough for her to regain some small sense of control over her runaway libido.

"I...I'm sorry," she stammered, disengaging herself from their embrace. Abruptly, she shifted her weight so that Megan's body was off of hers and deposited unceremoniously on its own side of the tent.

The rejection happened so quickly that it took Megan a moment to register what had happened and raise a protest. She sat up. "What's wrong?" she asked, reaching for Chaz as though she'd lost her mind.

"I'm sorry," Chaz gently intercepted Megan's hand as it headed for her breast, "I can't do this."

"Sure you can," Megan persisted. She leaned toward Chaz to kiss her again, but Chaz stiffened and turned her head away.

"No, Megan."

Megan withdrew her hand as though she'd been burned. "What are you, a tease?"

Chaz shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I shouldn't have let it go that far."

"You want me as much as I want you," Megan argued. "You can't deny that."

The words sent another rush of arousal through her. "No. I can't deny that." She couldn't look at Megan, or she knew she might lose her

resolve again. Flipping onto her back, she stared up at the ceiling of the tent. "But nothing can happen between us."

"Care to tell me why the hell not?" Megan's tone was confused.

"You're a client. I don't think it's ethical."

"Screw that. I don't care about that. We're both adults."

"It's not that simple."

"Sure it is." Frustration seeped into Megan's voice. "It's very simple. You want me, and I want you. What's wrong with having some fun?"

"What's *wrong* is that's all it *is* to you," Chaz retorted, then wished she could take the words back. She sounded like a high school kid upset to find she wasn't the first to kiss her girl. Feeling exposed, she tried for a more reasonable tone. "I'm not like that. I don't do one-night stands."

"You're kidding me, right?" Megan was getting angrier by the second. "If we hadn't had clothes on and these damn sleeping bags between us, we'd be fucking right now."

Chaz tried to ignore the picture that appeared in her mind at Megan's words, but she could not. She was still hopelessly turned on, and she had to admit that Megan was probably right about what they'd be doing. *Damn it all to hell.* "I'm sorry I let it go so far. It was unfair to you."

"No shit, Sherlock." Megan spat out the words and then turned on her side, facing away.

She lay there fuming in silence for two or three minutes, jaw clenching and unclenching, her body stubbornly refusing to relinquish the buzz of arousal that Chaz had lit. *Hell, no. No way. I'm not going to let her do this.* Her heart continued to pound as though their bodies were still pressed together. *God, I can't believe how she makes me feel. And she wants me, too. She admitted it. No way can she kiss me like that and not be just as hot for me as I am for her. I bet I can make her change her mind. Not that I have anything to lose by trying.*

She unzipped her sleeping bag and peeled it back, then turned over to face Chaz.

Chaz was still on her back. She had her eyes closed, but opened them at the movement beside her and looked over at Megan just as Megan began to unzip her sleeping bag. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if my powers of persuasion are as good as I think they are," Megan said seductively as she opened Chaz's sleeping bag and

scooted over next to her until their bodies were just touching. “I’m not buying your bullshit excuses. I could feel in your kiss how much you want this. Need this. Just as much as I do.”

Chaz didn’t move. *You can’t tell her she’s wrong.* Her body was still so overheated from arousal that the cool air on her exposed legs was welcome. “Megan, please...” Her voice was honey thick. She meant it to sound like a protest, but it came out like a plea.

Megan looked her in the eyes and smiled knowingly, as though recognizing the desire she could not hide. *Why was it again we shouldn’t do this?* Chaz wondered.

Before her mind could regain enough sense to answer, Megan’s face was descending toward hers. It paused just before their lips met. “Let me touch you, Chaz. I want to make you come,” she whispered, then kissed her hard.

As her tongue pushed into Chaz’s mouth, Megan’s hand cupped her sex, and Chaz’s body involuntarily rose to meet the contact. *Oh, Jesus, God.* She could feel how wet she was, and she knew Megan could feel it too; it quickly saturated the thin material of her boxers.

Megan’s own excitement doubled when her fingers told her how aroused Chaz was, and she pressed her body tighter against Chaz’s with a moan.

You can’t do this. Chaz had no idea how her conscience had resurfaced at this moment. Or was it pride? Her professional ethics were losing their grip. And she hardly cared whether it was just for one night, any more. She wanted Megan so much. *But what if this is all part of a bet?* She didn’t want to believe that was true. *God damn it.*

She pulled Megan’s hand away as she forced their lips apart. “Please stop.” Her voice broke with emotion.

Megan was breathing hard. She backed away slowly, just enough to separate their bodies. She could tell Chaz was upset, and that was what finally penetrated her determined efforts and haze of arousal.

“I want to,” Chaz admitted, staring up at the ceiling. She couldn’t look at Megan. She’d give in for sure, if she looked into those eyes. “God, I want to. I’m so sorry. But not like this. Please, Megan.”

Megan shifted back onto her own sleeping bag and turned away without a word, fighting the urge to say something impulsive she knew she might later regret. Her anger was mitigated slightly by the sincere regret she heard in Chaz’s voice.

Not like this. The words echoed in Megan's mind. *She wants you. Just not like this. If she has reservations you really don't want to push this right now, do you? She might regret it if you do. And you don't want her to.*

Chaz wished to hell she could think of something to say. Or that Megan would say something. Anything. *Nothing like silence after a rejection to make you feel like a complete ass.* She hated hurting Megan, or embarrassing her. She knew she shouldn't have let them go so far.

After a time, Megan's anger subsided enough for her to realize that it was up to her to ease the tension between them. It had been she, after all, who had started all this in the first place. But it was a difficult apology. She still felt humiliated, and she couldn't face Chaz when she spoke the words. "I'm sorry. I should have heard no the first time you said it."

"I'm sorry, too, Megan," Chaz said. "I don't want this to...make things uncomfortable or anything. I mean, can't we just put tonight behind us and enjoy the rest of the trip?"

"Sure. No problem."

It was an awkward, uneasy truce.

Chaz's mind and body were so keyed up that it was a very long time before she fell asleep, and she knew from Megan's frequent, restless shifts in positions that she wasn't faring any better. But no more words were spoken between them.



Megan was relieved to wake up alone the next morning. She hoped that a few minutes alone in the stark light of a new day might help her make some sense of what had happened. And why what had happened had hurt so much.

She wanted to say it didn't matter. It was only that she wasn't often turned down. And certainly not right in the middle of things like that. *Your ego is bruised, that's all. You'll get over it.*

But it *did* matter. Chaz's rejection stung. And part of the reason it hurt so much was that she had to admit that she herself *couldn't* have stopped what was happening. She had totally lost control. She had been more turned on than she could ever remember, more lost in the sensations pouring through her body than she'd imagined she could be.

It was somehow...*more* with Chaz. More passionate, more sensual, more arousing. More even than with Rita. *But apparently it's not more for Chaz. She doesn't want you enough to let it happen.*

The sense of loss she felt was overpowering. Tears came to her eyes, but she brushed them roughly away. *Damn you, Chaz.*

She was certainly not going to let Chaz see how humiliated she felt. She needed some distance. The first thing she had to do was get a new tent mate.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Chaz wasn't really surprised that it was the Royal Ice Bitch who came to breakfast. She knew she had hurt and humiliated Megan, and she regretted it with every fiber of her being. But she could think of no way to make things right. She just hoped the awkward truce they'd agreed upon in the end would make it possible to continue the trip without inflicting tension on everyone else.

They were off to a great start.

Megan avoided looking at her, talking to her, or interacting with her at all. She sat off by herself with a cup of coffee, staring at the river, while the rest of them had wild blueberry pancakes. Justine went over to talk to her, and the two moved into a huddle, speaking in hushed tones. Chaz tried not to imagine what Megan must be saying about her "performance."

"What happened between you two?" Sally asked Chaz when they stepped away from the others to wash the morning dishes.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, not meeting Sally's eyes.

"Megan made a pass at you, didn't she?" Sally guessed. "And you turned her down and hurt her feelings."

Worse. I got her all turned on, and then I said stop. "Something like that."

"That was dumb. Really dumb." Sally shook her head. "Then I'm sorry that I encouraged her."

"What did you do?"

"Let her know you were interested in her, but not likely to make the first move."

Shit. I bet she's incredibly embarrassed, then, in addition to everything else. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Silly me, I thought I was doing you a favor. I don't think I've ever seen you this way with anyone. And she seems to be nuts about

you, too. I don't see the problem here."

"She only wants one more in a long list of conquests," Chaz said. "And you know I'm not like that."

Sally was silent for a moment. "Sorry, then." She put one arm around Chaz's shoulders and gave her a brief hug. "I guess I shouldn't have interfered."

Chaz sighed. "You mean well."

A short distance away, Justine poured another cup of coffee and studied Chaz as she took a sip. Slumped shoulders. Dejected expression. *Just like someone else I know.*

She returned to sit beside Megan, determined to get her to open up about what was going on.

It had grieved Justine to watch Megan put up walls around herself after Rita left, to see her never let anyone too close, harden herself against hurt, and work herself to death in the process. But something had changed in her here in Alaska. There was a vulnerability about Megan now, a softness to her. "Still not hungry?" she asked her brooding friend.

"Not much of an appetite this morning," Megan said evasively.

Justine could see that Megan hadn't slept well. She had dark circles under her eyes, and she seemed edgy and restless. "Want to talk about it?"

"I hate the way you can read me like a book," Megan griped, not unkindly.

"Chaz, right?"

Megan blew out an exasperated breath. "Well, I sure made a fool of myself last night. I really thought she was interested. So I...you know...let her know *I* was. I kissed her."

"And? She wasn't receptive?" Justine's voice registered her surprise.

"Well, she sure as hell kissed me back," Megan said, a bit of her embarrassed anger resurfacing at the memory of Chaz's rejection. "But then she backed off and said it wasn't going to happen."

"Did she say why?"

Megan didn't answer immediately. "She said she wasn't into one-night stands," she finally admitted.

"Ah." Justine nodded her head. "So it's not that she wasn't interested in *you*...just what you could offer her."

Megan looked up at her angrily. “What’s that supposed to mean? We’re only here for another few days. Couldn’t be anything more, anyway.”

“Would you like it to be?”

Megan opened her mouth to answer, but the quick retort she had planned died on her lips. The answer to that question should certainly have been *no*. It had been no for so long...no strings, no commitments, no promises, no entanglements...that the sudden realization that she might indeed want more with Chaz caught her so off guard that she felt a little shell-shocked.

“I thought so.” Justine laid a hand on Megan’s shoulder. “Girlfriend, I think you need to think seriously about this one. Maybe it *isn’t* possible, but...I’ve seen a change in you these last few days. You seem a lot happier and more relaxed out here than I’ve seen you in...gosh, *years*, I guess.”

“Justine,” Megan said wearily. “We live hundreds of miles apart.”

“Funny but I thought it was you who once told me...never say never.” With that, Justine walked back to the group, leaving Megan to consider her words.

It’s just not possible, she repeated to herself, over and over. *You have a nice comfortable life. Better stick with the plan and switch tents and just try to forget about her and get through the next few days.*

There was no way, however, she was going to take the obvious route. Although she was anxious to put some distance between them, she didn’t want to give Elise any prime opportunities with Chaz. So if she wanted to switch tents and still get a good night’s sleep, there was only one alternative.

She got her opportunity after breakfast when the group dispersed to pack up their gear to leave. Yancey was beside their kayaks, braiding her long blond hair into a pigtail, when Megan joined her. It was a routine she followed every time they set off, so she could keep her hair out of her eyes when they were paddling.

“Hey, there,” she greeted Megan. “You were awful quiet this morning. Everything copasetic?”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Megan said. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“Would you mind bunking in with Chaz the rest of the trip?”

Yancey stopped what she was doing and studied Megan’s face.
“Sure. Fine with me.”

“Great.”

“You know that Elise volunteered to stay with Chaz?” Yancey reminded her.

“I’d rather that you did.”

Yancey’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Mind telling me why?”

Megan sighed heavily and looked away, out at the distant mountains. “Because Elise has the hots for her. And so do I. And she’s made it clear she’s not interested in either one of us.”

Yancey frowned in sympathy. “That’s rough. Well, if you’re certain that’s what you want, I don’t mind switching.”

“I appreciate it.” Megan forced a smile. “I’ll talk to Elise about it later. Would you mind telling Chaz?”

“Sure,” Yancey said. “I can do that.”



They had finished loading their gear into the raft and were putting on their PFDs, spray skirts, and helmets, when a thick cloud of mosquitoes descended on them from out of nowhere. They had no tents to escape into this time, so there was a mad scramble into their kits for head nets and repellent.

“Damn it!” Pat cursed, swatting at her neck as a half dozen of the tiny tormenters bit her simultaneously. “Get off of me!”

“Where did they come from?” Linda complained. “How can they all appear at once like this?”

“The wind died down,” Chaz explained, as she sprayed herself. “It tends to keep them at bay. That’s why we’ve been so lucky this whole trip—there’s been a nice breeze with us most all the time.”

“Can I borrow someone’s repellent?” Megan asked no one in particular, furiously swatting at her neck, hands, and face. “The bear ate mine.” She gagged as she inhaled several of the bugs. “Yuck!”

“Here, I have a spare net,” Chaz offered, stepping toward Megan with a head net in her outstretched hand.

Megan hesitated for a moment. Taking anything from Chaz was the last thing she wanted to do. But the high-pitched buzzing in her ears

was about to drive her insane. “Thanks,” she mumbled, grabbing the head net and putting it on.

Chaz held out her can of repellent, and she took that, too, and sprayed her hands.

When she handed it back, she met Chaz’s eyes and saw a look of remorse there. Her anger about their encounter melted just a little. If she was really being honest, she had to admit that she herself was mostly to blame. She had pushed herself on Chaz and continued to after Chaz had said stop. *That was sure some class act, all right*, she berated herself. *What must she think of me now? Probably that I don’t care about anyone but myself.*

Soon they were underway, and the river’s growing challenges were enough to keep her distracted. The Odakonya sped up as they paddled along, demanding more and more of their attention by the mile. The river kept dropping in elevation, and there were numerous rocks and boulders scattered about that they had to be careful to avoid. Once or twice, Megan was so busy watching something—an eagle soaring past, or a small animal trotting along in the distance—that she nearly crashed into some obstacle in the river that seemed to loom up at her without warning.

Shortly before they were to stop for lunch, the river took them into a narrow canyon, with steep cliff walls rising sharply on either side. On the right bank, there was nowhere to walk at all—and on the left, only a six-foot-wide strip of rocky terrain guaranteed to twist an ankle if you weren’t paying attention.

Chaz motioned the clients to beach their kayaks. “As I recall, our first potentially tough stretch is up around the next bend,” she announced as she got out of her boat. “I’m going to scout ahead, and I’d like everyone to come with me.”

They all got out of their kayaks and picked their way downstream single file, until they came to a vantage point where they could see the most difficult section of the rapids ahead. Chaz pointed out the route they would take, explaining the tricky parts and how the current would act around the boulders and eddies.

“These don’t look too bad, and I don’t think any of you will have any problems if you follow my line,” Chaz said. “Everybody feeling good about that?”

The clients all nodded.

“Okay, then. We’ll go through one at a time, and be sure to space yourselves out. I want to alternate the more experienced people with the lesser. So Megan will go behind me, then Pat, then Elise, Linda, Justine, Yancey, and Sally last. Let’s go!”

They returned to their kayaks and got back underway.

Megan gripped her paddle tighter. She was feeling pretty confident about her abilities and really looking forward to the challenges ahead. Every bit of whitewater they hit energized her with a burst of adrenalin. Her body was buzzing with it.

All the women made it through that stretch without difficulty, Sally bringing up the rear in the raft.

After a quick stop for sandwiches, they came to three more places where Chaz pulled them over to scout ahead. Each time, she pointed out the route and told the women that it looked very doable for all of them, but she gave them a chance to choose to portage around it. None of them took it.

At one point Megan seemed hesitant, and Chaz wanted to suggest she take the easier option, but she felt certain her suggestion would be rejected, and she was reluctant to single Megan out in front of the others. She knew she was on thin ice, and Yancey’s quick word about the new tent-sharing arrangements had driven that point home.

It’s probably all for the best, she told herself yet again. She could do without the temptation of Megan lying beside her. And Megan obviously wanted nothing more to do with her after their stressful night. *She’ll go home and find another conquest and forget all about me*. That realization depressed her much more than she thought it would, and she had to force herself to focus on their fifth stop.

“That area could be tricky.” Chaz pointed to a section beyond the curve that was crowded with boulders.

The only way through was a narrow channel of swift water that dropped at least three feet. “It’s a straight shot through if you line up carefully. And from seeing how all of you are doing today, I think everyone’s certainly capable of this. But if you have any reservations whatsoever—and I mean *any*—you might want to portage here.” She cast a pointed look at Elise and Megan.

“I’m good to go,” Elise said immediately.

“So am I,” Megan agreed. This next stretch did look rather intimidating, but she was not going to be the only one to walk it. Though

she tried not to let her nerves get to her, she allowed them to distract her more than she realized. When she returned to her kayak and put her helmet back on, she meant to fasten the chin strap securely but, in her haste to take her place, forgot.

They proceeded forward in the same order as before, with Megan directly behind Chaz. In no time, they came to the narrow channel they'd viewed from the bank. "Here we go. Careful here," Chaz hollered back as she lined up and floated through.

Megan was next.

Her approach was nearly perfect, but the current swept her kayak sideways right as she neared the gap. *Oh, shit. Oh, shit.* A burst of adrenaline surged through her bloodstream, and her heart felt like it was going to explode in her chest.

"Reverse sweep on your left side!" She heard Chaz's voice above the roar of the water but couldn't manage to get her paddle in position quickly enough.

She entered the gap all wrong, and she knew she was done for. It looked as though both the front and back of her kayak were going to hit the boulders on either side. She tried to brace herself at the last second for the impact, but she was so intent on doing that, she paid no attention to the position of her paddle.

The paddle blade hit the left boulder and threw her off balance. A millisecond later, the kayak slammed into the other boulder with a loud *thwack* and finished the job.

She went over.

Everything from there happened in slow motion. She managed to suck in a great big breath, but her heart was beating so loud and so fast she wasn't sure she could hold it very long.

When the cold hit her it was like a sharp slap in the face, a shock that made her want to cry out and lose that precious, precious air. She found herself spinning in a maelstrom of churning water. In a flash, her helmet and her paddle were carried away by the current. She couldn't keep her eyes open, couldn't see a damn thing, and she didn't know which end was up. All was a chaos of whitewater, and she had no way and no hope of righting herself.

Oh, fuck. This is bad.

Her lungs were ready to burst. She tried not to panic as she grappled for the release tab on her spray skirt.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Chaz watched in horror as Megan's kayak slammed against the boulders and overturned. The current was so strong she had to paddle furiously in order to stay in place. She was trying to position herself to intercept Megan's kayak as it was swept downstream, when the worried chorus of the others reached her ears.

"Megan's gone over!"

"Watch out!"

"Don't bunch up!"

"Back paddle!"

"Oh, shit! Does anybody see her?"

Chaz's breathing accelerated with every second that passed without Megan reappearing. She kept her attention on the overturned kayak as she stroked powerfully toward it, but risked glances around her, hoping to spot Megan in the water.

She saw Megan's red helmet float past her, out of reach, and felt a stab of fear.

Somehow Pat suddenly appeared beside Chaz, skillfully maneuvering her own boat into a position to help. They reached the bright yellow kayak at the same time from two sides and managed to get it turned partially over—enough to see that Megan was out of the cockpit.

"She's out!" Chaz yelled to the others as she desperately scanned the water around her.

"There she is!" Yancey cried, pointing toward a car-sized rock in the middle of the river farther downstream.

Megan was hanging on precariously with one hand, her head barely above water. Her face was contorted in pain. She had her PFD on, but there was a deep black hole of churning water downstream of the rock, and its sucking whirlpool was pulling her down.

“Hang on, Megan!” Chaz screamed. Her heart thudded in her chest as she dug in her paddle and raced toward the rock.

Megan looked right at her then, with such terror in her eyes that Chaz’s own fear rose, the taste of it sour in her mouth. She was only four feet away when Megan’s hand slipped from the rock, and her head disappeared beneath the surface as she was sucked into the hole. Chaz lunged after her, almost overturning, but her groping hand found nothing but water.

Megan bobbed to the surface several yards downstream, coughing violently.

“There!” Several voices yelled at once.

Chaz sped toward Megan as first Pat, and then Linda, tried to toss Megan their rescue lines. Pat’s fell short, and Linda’s landed several yards to the left, and the current took it downstream and away.

Megan glanced off another large rock. There was a sickening *crack* as her head impacted the hard surface. She lost consciousness and bobbed downstream with the current, as limp as a rag doll.

“Oh, my God!” Justine cried out.

Chaz’s blood ran cold as she closed the distance to Megan with power strokes and absolute focus of purpose. *I can’t...won’t miss her this time.* Six feet away. Four. Two.

Gotcha! She clamped onto the collar of Megan’s PFD with one hand.

“Sally!” she bellowed, desperately trying to keep Megan’s face above water as the current propelled them toward a sharp overhang of rock thirty feet downriver.

Sally was right behind her, already maneuvering into position. She scooted the raft next to Chaz’s kayak, and Chaz tossed her paddle in, then grabbed hold of the sturdy rope that ringed the inflatable. As Sally towed them away from the outcropping with long pulls at the oars, it was all Chaz could do to maintain hold of both the raft and Megan, while keeping Megan’s dead weight from overturning her kayak. Megan wasn’t moving, and Chaz couldn’t immediately tell if she was breathing.

“Come on, Megan. Stay with me,” she urged, holding so tight to the vest that her knuckles were white. “Stay with me.” *Dear God, please be all right.*

Sally got them to shore and laid Megan gently on the gravel bank

at the river's edge. She had a gash in her forehead that was bleeding profusely, but she was breathing on her own.

"Grab the first-aid kit," Chaz cried hoarsely as Sally rushed to help her, and the other women converged on the scene.

A few seconds after Sally dropped the first-aid kit at Chaz's feet, Megan came to and immediately began coughing and vomiting up water. Chaz held a compress of gauze against her head to stop the bleeding. When the worst had passed, Megan stared up at Chaz and Sally, who were kneeling on either side of her.

"Where do you hurt?" Chaz asked.

"Left shoulder." Megan grimaced and coughed up some more water. "And head, where you're pressing."

"Do you have any pain at all in your neck? Or anywhere else?" Chaz asked.

"No. Just shoulder and head. My helmet came off somehow."

"We need to get your PFD off," Chaz said.

Megan's eyes got wide. "Can't," she croaked. She coughed again.

"We have to," Chaz said. "You may have dislocated your shoulder."

"Can we wait a while? I mean, I don't want to be a baby about this. But I just want to lie still for a minute. It's only just stopped absolutely killing me."

"We have to do this soon," Chaz said. "If you've dislocated it, the sooner we get it back in place the better. We want to do it before you start having muscle spasms." She couldn't stand the look in Megan's eyes. So scared. "Look, I'll dress your head wound first. We can wait on the other until I do that."

Megan took a deep breath. Let it out. "Thanks," she said, just above a whisper.

"Sally, I think I can handle this at the moment," Chaz said. "Will you take a look and see if you can spot Megan's kayak?"

"We can do that," Pat offered. "Linda and I will take the kayaks down and portage back." Glancing at Elise, she suggested, "Maybe you could walk alongside with a rescue line and look for the kayak."

"Sure," Elise agreed, but her eyes were on Megan. She looked stricken. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Yes," Chaz said grimly.

Elise looked like she wanted to linger, but Pat tapped her on the shoulder and she hurried away.

“Don’t go so far you’ll kill yourself walking back, okay?” Sally called after them. “And be careful, please.”

Chaz finally got the bleeding stopped and gently bandaged Megan’s head wound, which was turning into a good-sized purplish goose egg. The lump concerned her, although Megan seemed perfectly lucid. When that was done, it was time to check her shoulder.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can,” Chaz said. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be, I guess.”

Chaz leaned over Megan and looked her in the eyes as she unhooked the vest. She could see how much Megan was already hurting, and how terrified she was of what they were about to do. She hated causing her even more pain. But she knew she would probably have to.

“Okay,” Chaz said. “Try to relax.”

“Easier said than done.” Megan’s eyes remained locked with Chaz’s, as if for reassurance. Something to hold on to.

“See if you can pull your other arm out of the vest,” Chaz said. “Then I’ll slip it off you.”

Megan accomplished that part with another loud groan, and the vest was quickly off.

Chaz unzipped Megan’s dry suit top and pulled it back. Megan was wearing a black, two-piece swimsuit beneath. The top created a mesmerizing display of cleavage that Chaz couldn’t, for a moment, bear to tear her eyes from. In the middle of this crisis, all she could think about was touching Megan’s breasts. *I should be ashamed of myself.*

She forced her eyes away, to Megan’s shoulder, and steered her mind firmly back to the task. She gently palpated the joint, trying not to think about how soft Megan’s skin was under her fingers.

“The good news is, I don’t think it’s dislocated.” She looked into Megan’s eyes. “Tell me where it’s tender.” She continued to gently probe, and Megan indicated with a grimace when she hit a sore spot.

“There. Ow.”

“Can you wiggle your fingers?”

Megan did so, without moving her arm. “Hurts in the muscles in my upper arm when I do that.”

“Any loss of feeling?”

“Nope.”

“Does it hurt when I try to move it?” Chaz asked. With one hand supporting Megan’s shoulder, and the other her arm, she slowly and gently moved the arm outwards and up.

Megan grimaced. “Ow, yeah.”

“Okay, that’s enough, I think.” Chaz felt a surge of relief. Megan seemed more alert than she was a few minutes earlier, so her head injury was probably not serious. But Chaz couldn’t take the chance that there were factors invisible to her. “I’m not a doctor, but I’ve had first-aid training, and I don’t think you’ve broken any bones. A bad sprain or strain, I think, in your shoulder. Your head is another matter.”

“What’s it look like?” Megan asked.

“I put a couple of butterfly bandages on it and got the bleeding stopped. But you’ll need medical attention. That cut will probably require stitches, and you took a pretty good knock on the head. I think a doctor will want to run some tests and make sure you don’t have a concussion. Head injuries can be serious.”

“Shit.” Megan blinked. “You mean the trip is over for me? I might be all right in a day or two.”

“I’m sorry, Megan.” Chaz zipped up Megan’s dry suit so she’d stay warm. *And so you can stop staring at her breasts. Get hold of yourself, already.*

“We can’t take any more risks with you. We’re going to need to airlift you out.”

“Damn.”

“Oh, what a tough break,” Justine said, coming around to stand where Megan could see her. “What can I do for you? Anything?”

“Can’t think of anything that would help,” Megan told Justine, then looked at Chaz. “The trip goes on, right? I haven’t screwed this up for anyone else, have I?”

“Stop that,” Justine said.

“Yeah,” Yancey said. “You’re what’s important right now.”

“I don’t want the rest of you to miss out because of me,” Megan repeated.

“It shouldn’t be a problem to continue the trip.” Chaz took a long look at Megan, in part checking for signs of shock, but also...just looking. Megan’s skin was pale and clammy from her long immersion in the frigid water, her hair was wet, and she was shivering slightly. “Cold?”

“Yeah. A little.”

“Justine, can you get her bag and pull out a hat and gloves for her?” Chaz asked. She reached into the raft, grabbed a sleeping pad, and laid it beside Megan. “See if we can scoot you over onto this and keep you off the cold ground.”

Megan accomplished that with a little help and a muted groan.

Justine got her gloves and a hat on, and Chaz located a thin survival blanket from her bag and tucked it around Megan.

She leaned down until her face was close to Megan’s. “Better?”

“Yes. Thanks.” It was all Megan could do to answer. She felt exhausted, barely able to stay awake. The adrenalin rush from capsizing was gone, and her arms and legs seemed to be made of stone, like she had fought a few rounds with a much larger opponent.

Chaz stood. Addressing Yancey and Justine, she said, “I need to talk with Sally while we wait for the others to get back. You two mind keeping an eye on her a minute?”

“You got it,” Justine answered for them, and she and Yancey crouched down next to Megan and started making awkward conversation.

Chaz could tell they were nervous. No one was going to feel confident until they got Megan to a doctor. She walked a short distance downstream with Sally.

“Couldn’t have happened in a worse place,” Sally said under her breath as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Yeah, no chance of a plane getting in here.” Chaz studied the steep canyon walls on either side of them. The terrain was too steep and narrow for a helicopter rescue, but they couldn’t stay here. Any kind of rain or big melt in the mountains and they’d be in trouble in a heartbeat. “We can’t get a signal out here, with these rock walls, and we can’t wait for a rescue by river. Much as I’d like not to move her, we gotta keep going.”

“So, what are we looking at?” Sally asked. “How much farther before we can call for help?”

“The river leaves this canyon soon and crosses some tundra before it heads into another one. We could set up camp there. It’s got a nice flat spot for the tents, and I’m sure we can get a clear communications link out.”

“How long to get there, do you think?”

"Maybe another half hour. We'll have to take her in the raft." Chaz glanced back toward Megan. She knew the jarring ride downriver was going to be painful on her shoulder, and she really hated moving her with that head injury. "We'll have to lash her kayak and mine to the raft. I'll ride with you."

"What's the river like between here and there? Do you remember?"

"It's not too bad," Chaz said. "We'll lead in the raft, take it slow, and have Pat take up the rear. She's certainly capable."

They spotted Elise, Pat, and Linda returning from downriver, each carrying a kayak. All three looked weary and anxious to be rid of their burdens.

"Hey! You found it!" Sally waved. "Great!"

"How's Megan doing?" Linda asked as she set down her kayak and stretched to relieve the soreness in her back.

"The trip is over for her," Chaz said. "Although I don't think her injuries are too serious, she needs to see a doctor."

"I was afraid of that." Linda plopped down onto the nearest big rock and frowned as she surveyed the steep rock walls all around them. "How you going to get her out of here?"

"We're going to take her downriver in the raft a ways, then radio for help," Sally said. "We can't get a signal out, here in the canyon."

"Is she all right to travel?" Pat asked.

"No choice," Chaz said. "We can't stay here. It's too dangerous. If we get bad weather the river could rise and flood us out in no time. Don't worry, we'll take it real easy with her."

While the others tied the two kayaks behind the raft and prepared to get underway, Chaz efficiently fashioned a sling and secured Megan's arm against her body with an Ace bandage. "It's not going to be a comfortable ride, with that shoulder," she warned.

"Peachy." Megan watched Chaz work on her, admiring the musculature in Chaz's arms and her long, strong fingers. It helped distract her from the pain in her head and shoulder.

"The sling will immobilize it as far as possible. That should help. And I'm going to ride with you."

"All right." Megan stared down at the sling and felt thankful to be alive.

Sally redistributed the gear in the raft to make an area for Chaz and Megan that was as comfortable as possible.

“Okay, I think we’re ready for you,” Chaz said, stooping down and leaning over Megan again. “Can you walk there, or would you like me to carry you?”

“I can make it with some help,” Megan said. So Chaz and Sally got on either side and gently helped her to her feet.

Chaz took off her helmet and gently set it on Megan’s head.

“No, Chaz,” Megan protested.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice,” she said, fastening it securely.

Chaz settled her long frame into the space they cleared in the bottom of the raft, with her back against one of the inflated sides, then stuck out a hand to assist Megan. “I want you to sit here, in between my legs, with your back against my chest, so I can try to cushion you.”

Megan hesitated, scoping out how she was going to get into the raft without falling right on top of Chaz. She felt clumsy and unbalanced with her arm in the sling. “You don’t need to do that,” she protested.

“Please?” Chaz asked. *Still pissed at me. And now, even needing help, doesn’t want to be anywhere near me. Not that I blame her, I guess.* She continued to extend her hand, waiting patiently, and finally Megan succumbed and allowed herself to be led carefully into the welcoming circle of Chaz’s embrace.

As soon as she sat down, Chaz enfolded her in her arms, careful to avoid the sore shoulder. Megan’s body was rigid and tense. “Try to relax against me,” she whispered in Megan’s ear as they got underway. “It’ll make the ride a lot easier on you.”

Megan could feel the warmth of Chaz’s breath against her neck as they headed downriver, and it helped immeasurably to distract her from the pain that every bump and jolt of the whitewater sent through her body.

The sudden change in circumstances was only still sinking in. *I’m leaving.* The thought depressed her. She had seen all she was going to see, at least for now, of this magical wilderness that had captivated her and made her forget entirely about work, and home, and everything familiar. She missed it already.

You miss her already, Megan thought, unconsciously relaxing into Chaz’s arms.

Thankful to feel Megan relax at last, Chaz cradled her protectively and absorbed the bumps as best as she could as they floated downriver. All the while, she had to make a conscious effort not to let their positions and proximity do what it was doing to her body.

God help her, it apparently didn't matter that Megan was injured and in pain. Or that she'd had her chance and passed it up. Megan just plain flat turned her on, in a way that completely mystified her. She was helpless to prevent it. With every bump, every roll of the rapids, their bodies came together, and the contact was beginning to manifest itself in a warm, moist pulse of arousal between her legs. She was damn glad the PFD she was wearing hid the fact that her nipples were as stand-up-at-attention sensitive as she'd ever felt them to be.

She said nothing for the first ten minutes, not trusting her voice, allowing herself to relish the closeness of their bodies, despite her best intentions. But when they hit a particularly bad bit of rough water and Megan groaned, the sound shot through her and allowed her to regain her sense of professional responsibility.

"How are you doing?" she whispered into Megan's ear.

"I feel like crap," Megan said drolly. "Thanks for caring."

Chaz couldn't help the laugh that escaped her lips, and that got Megan laughing, too.

"I haven't said thank you," Megan said, in a voice low enough that only Chaz could hear. "First the bear. Now this. That's twice you've saved me."

"No problem," Chaz said.

"Have you started thinking of me as the trip Jonah yet?"

Chaz laughed again. "No, but Calamity Jane did occur to me."

"Funny."

"Well, let's just say, I know we billed this as an adventure trip, but I'd like a bit less adventure from now on, if you please."

"I'll do my best." Megan's voice grew serious. "When will they come to get me?"

Soon. Far too soon, Chaz wanted to say. Barely realizing she was doing it, she tightened her hold around Megan's waist. "Today, probably," she said, glancing up at the thickening clouds overhead. "Unless we get some bad weather."

She found herself hoping for a nice low ceiling of clouds, or one of the sudden fog banks that frequently materialized this time of year.

Today. Megan slowly processed the idea. She could be picked up and taken away today, and that would be the last time she would clap eyes on Chaz. Her stomach churned, and it wasn't about the rolling motion of the raft. This might well be her last opportunity to talk to Chaz without the rest of them overhearing.

"Chaz?" Her voice was just above a whisper. Intimate.

Chaz cradled her head beside Megan's, her chin on Megan's shoulder, so she could hear her over the roar of the water. "Mmmhmm?"

"I really am sorry about the way I acted last night. I mean, I'm not sorry I kissed you," she amended. "But I lost my temper. And I should have respected your asking me to stop."

"You don't need to apologize. I shouldn't have kissed you back and let it go so far."

There was a hesitation. "I'm glad you did."

Another brief pause. "I couldn't help myself."

Chaz held Megan a little more tightly and sensed that they were on the same page. It was as though they had both suddenly become aware that their time together was nearly over, but they each had things that needed to be said.

"I think we're almost there," Sally said.

Chaz looked back over her shoulder. They were nearing the end of the canyon. She could see a patch of hilly tundra beyond. She settled against Megan once more and resumed their whispered tête-à-tête. In light of their admissions, and with time so short, there seemed little need for further restraint.

"I'm sorry you're leaving," she said.

"I can't imagine why," Megan murmured. "I've pretty much been nothing but trouble since day one."

"That's not how I'll remember you."

"No?"

"Nope."

"So how will you remember me?" Megan asked.

"I'll remember you with great fondness," Chaz said honestly. "And...as a very tempting opportunity missed."

"Thank you for saying that." Megan felt a pang of regret run through her over what might have been. "I won't forget you, Chaz. I can't tell you what this trip has meant to me."

The raft scraped up against the gravel bank. “Okay, ladies,” Sally said. “We’ve arrived.”

Chaz gave in to the impulse to hug Megan good-bye while she could, but before she pulled away, she planted a brief kiss on Megan’s cheek. “It’s been nice knowin’ ya, Megan,” she whispered.

It could have been a flippant remark, but the shaky timbre to Chaz’s voice revealed the sincere emotion behind the sentiment, and Megan was slightly shocked by it. *She really has feelings for me. And I find this out now?* She felt a rush of panic, like this was a critical moment and she should say something else, but what?

“Need some help getting out?” Sally said, stepping onto the shore. Justine was there too, and the others were pulling up their kayaks.

Megan craned slightly to see Chaz’s face. Her expression was impassive. Their moment of intimacy had passed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chaz radioed for help while Sally and Justine set up a tent for Megan so she'd be more comfortable, especially if the bugs picked up. Right now a pretty stiff breeze from the north was keeping the winged piranha at bay, but it was bringing with it cooler temperatures and an ominous darkening of the low clouds above them. Chaz figured the rescue would be at least a couple of hours away, so they planned to have an early dinner here. Once Megan was picked up, they could proceed downriver to their campsite only a bit behind schedule.

Chaz had described Megan's symptoms to a doctor they'd patched her through to and had given the Alaska State Troopers their GPS position. Now she was on hold, awaiting an ETA for the rescue team. The steep mountains surrounding them and the hilly terrain made it a dicey place for a plane to try to land. It would have to be an extraction by helicopter.

"Hello, Chaz, are you there?" the female dispatcher said into her ear.

"Yes, I'm here."

"We've just gotten a weather advisory that's grounding all planes and helicopters where you are. A nasty front is building north of you and is headed your way."

What else can go wrong?

"The choppers north of you are already grounded, and the ones to the south are too far away to reach you before things really go bad," the dispatcher continued. "It will start as rain, but turn to sleet and maybe snow."

"Any idea when all this will hit?"

"On radar it looks like two or three hours. This may last awhile. Doesn't look like we'll be able to get to you until sometime tomorrow at the earliest."

“Understood. Thanks for the advisory. I’ll be in touch.”

“What do you want to do?” Sally asked, drawing her own conclusions from the content of the conversation and the expression on Chaz’s face.

“Well, I’d rather get the group through the next stretch while the weather holds and the light is still good. The river goes into another long, steep canyon, and it will be awful dark in there once the sun gets low. There’s a much better campsite beyond it with room for all the tents, and a cooking area and everything.”

“You want us all to go?” Sally asked dubiously.

“No. We can’t move Megan anymore. The raft is just too rough on her. I think you and the others should go on ahead. You lead, Pat takes the rear again. The river isn’t too bad between here and the campsite—it’s the next clear patch of tundra, you can’t miss it. Two hours, tops.”

“Okay. And you?” Sally asked.

“I’ll stay with Megan until the chopper gets here. Then I’ll catch up with you.” She glanced over at the tent. The rest of the women had made Megan comfortable inside, in her sleeping bag, and were gathered around talking to her. “Shall we make sure this plan is okay with everybody?”

“You got it,” Sally said.

Once Chaz had explained the plan and everyone had agreed, there was a frenzy of activity as the women, minus Chaz and Megan, prepared to get underway again to beat the weather.

The rest of the Broads in Broadcasting all took turns poking their heads in the tent to say good-bye. Last one up was Justine.

She gave Megan a conciliatory frown. “Sorry you gotta go home, Meg.” She glanced around and her eyes fell on Chaz’s gear—sleeping bag, personal items, the case that held her concertina. “But this might not be all bad. Am I wrong, or did it seem like you two seemed a lot chummier in the raft?”

Megan smiled. “Well, I got her to admit she *is* interested in me. And we’re here overnight, so I may work on her again.”

“Work on her? I know what *that* means. You’re joking, right?” Justine stared at her incredulously. “Look at you! You can’t seduce her! You’re hurt! You’re being airlifted out of here!”

“Well, I may have somewhat limited mobility, but I’ll manage, wait and see.”

“So did you decide that maybe you *did* want something *more* with this one? What about that no-one-night-stands thing?”

Megan shrugged. *Yeah. What about that?* It was a question she’d avoided thinking about. But if she wanted Chaz, perhaps she had to think about it, and fast. She didn’t really have to think very long, before she realized she very much wanted Chaz for more than one night.

Their earlier admissions, when they thought their separation was imminent, were impossible to take back. It was out there, now—the fact that they both felt this tremendous attraction. And now they were going to be trapped together for at least several hours.

“I should get going,” Justine said before Megan could work up a reply. “Good luck. I hope the weather doesn’t get too rough.”

Megan thanked her and, as soon as she was alone again, shifted around to make herself more comfortable, which was at best a relative concept. Her friends had cushioned her head, neck, and sore shoulder with some extra clothes, and Chaz had gotten the okay from the doctor to give her ibuprofen from the first-aid kit. It was beginning to kick in. She was warm, and dry, and as long as she didn’t try to move around too much, it wasn’t half bad.

On her back, her sleeping bag tucked up to her neck, she began thinking about what she would say. By the time Chaz crawled into the tent, she was ready.

Chaz lay down on her side, facing Megan, propped up on one elbow. She was still fully clothed except for her boots and her jacket, which she’d tossed into a corner.

“I’ll make us some dinner in a while,” she said. “Before the weather hits. How are you feeling?”

“Fit as a fiddle and ready for love. Isn’t that the expression?”

That got a smile out of Chaz.

“So did you mean it when you said you view last night as a missed opportunity?” Megan asked.

“When I said that, I thought you’d be leaving in a couple of hours, and I wouldn’t get the chance to talk to you again.”

“Does that make a difference?”

Chaz hesitated. “Not really. No.”

“You have an opportunity now.”

“Megan, you’re injured.”

“We can work around that.”

Chaz laughed. "With the way this trip has been going? No. No way. You'd end up paralyzed for sure."

"Funny girl," Megan huffed. "At least kiss me. You have to kiss me."

"You're a shameless hussy," Chaz said.

Megan laughed. "And from your smile, I'd say you like that in a woman."

"Apparently, I do indeed."

"I've had the hots for you for days," Megan said. "And from the way you kissed me back, it was kind of clear the feeling was mutual. You're a great kisser, by the way."

Chaz blushed. "I didn't...and *won't*...deny I am really attracted to you. I've been...unprofessionally preoccupied with thoughts of you since day one." She ran one hand absently through her hair, brushing it back out of her eyes. "And that kiss certainly didn't help matters."

"In that case..." Megan closed her eyes and pursed her lips for a kiss.

"Megan," Chaz groaned. But she leaned toward her, all the same. "You're injured. I mean it. It's not happening."

"So you mean if we could, you would?" Megan said.

"Probably. Yes. You're very hard to resist."

"You've resisted so far," Megan reminded her, her face in a pout. "And left me in a pretty...frustrated state, to say the least."

"Welcome to my world." Chaz smiled. "You have only yourself to blame for last night. You were deliberately flaunting your ass at me as we walked back from seeing the herd."

"Was I?"

"You're going to make this a very difficult evening, aren't you?"

"Not if you kiss me," Megan said. "Then I'll go easy on you."

That got another laugh. "You're incorrigible. I think I should go and fix us some dinner before you get me into trouble." Chaz grabbed her boots and jacket and headed for the door of the tent.

"You're only delaying the inevitable, you know," Megan called after her. *At least I sure hope that's the case.*



Not long after, Chaz returned to the tent and crawled inside. “Much as I hate to move you, we can’t risk having any food in here,” she said, kneeling over Megan. “I’ll help you outside, and we can eat and take care of anything you need to, before we turn in. All right?”

“Okay.” Megan started to try to raise herself up, but immediately a burst of pain exploded in her shoulder, taking her breath away. “Damn,” she complained, sinking back against her pillow.

“Wait. Let me help you.” Chaz leaned down and wrapped one arm beneath Megan’s shoulders. As she helped Megan sit up, she put Megan’s good arm around her neck.

Megan’s cool hand anchored itself right at the pulse point where Chaz’s neck met her shoulder. Chaz’s heart started beating faster, stronger, pounding away in her chest. Surely Megan could feel it through her fingertips.

Their faces were only inches apart, and there was a moment, the two of them frozen in suspended animation, gazing into each other’s eyes, that seemed to go on forever. Chaz was lost. *Kiss her, you fool*, every fiber of her being screamed. But she feared that once she started, she’d never stop. It no longer mattered whether they had an hour, a night, or a lifetime. Were it not for Megan’s injuries, they would most certainly make love tonight.

With a shaky breath, she looked away and broke the spell. Without a word, she unzipped Megan’s sleeping bag and put her boots on for her, then helped her out of the tent and to her feet. Once they were both standing, Chaz released her grip and stepped away one foot, then two.

“You almost kissed me again,” Megan said.

“You have to stop flirting with me,” Chaz protested. But it was evident from the tone in her voice she was enjoying the exchange.

“Flirt? Me? I never flirt,” Megan said with complete seriousness.

Chaz laughed.

Megan took two steps until they were standing nose to nose. “I *seduce*, yes. But I never flirt.”

She leaned up to give Chaz a long, teasing kiss on the sensitive skin of her neck, just at the very place where it hit her the hardest, and she felt it to her toes. She clenched and unclenched her fists, struggling for control, trying desperately to keep her arms from wrapping around Megan like they so ached to do.

“God, Megan,” she stuttered, trying to catch her breath. “What are you doing to me?”

“If you don’t know then I must not be doing it right,” Megan said, leaning up for another one, this one longer, sexier, wetter, her tongue a brief caress. Their bodies were only an inch or two apart.

Chaz felt her knees begin to give out from under her. “Jesus, God, please stop,” she said, in a voice she didn’t recognize. “I have a responsibility to take care of you, and you’re making it completely impossible for me to do that.”

“I think you’re taking excellent care of me.” Megan made no move to either increase the distance between them or close those maddening final inches. “I have no complaints whatsoever, except for that whole you-won’t-kiss-me-again-yet thing.”

“Dinner,” Chaz muttered weakly, retreating another step, unable to bear the sweet torture of Megan’s warm exhalations against her neck any longer.

Megan rolled her eyes. “Yeah, keep telling yourself it’s not going to happen, Chaz. Maybe you can get someone to believe it.” A low rumble of thunder could be heard far off in the distance. “I guess I can hold off until after dinner,” she said playfully, and headed toward where Chaz had set up their cook stove.

They sat beside each other in their camp chairs and ate pasta with sun-dried tomatoes and artichoke hearts in a light parmesan sauce, both of them warily watching the northern sky and an ominous wall of dark gray clouds that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Chaz was beautiful under any circumstances, Megan decided. But sitting there, with the snowcapped mountain peaks starkly outlined against the stormy sky behind her, she was breathtaking. *You’d think that after a week out here roughing it, the woman might look disheveled or something.* Without makeup, hair dryer, and all the other usual beauty accoutrements she was used to, Megan certainly didn’t have her usual confidence about her own presentability.

But she doubted Chaz could look any more stunning than she did at this moment, her chestnut hair slightly tousled, hazel eyes moist from the stinging wind, cheeks flushed, and that melt-your-heart smile. She was beautiful in the way that the Alaskan landscape was, rugged and independent. Unadorned and untamed.

"You look like you belong here," Megan said aloud without meaning to, wistful wonder in her voice.

"I do belong here." Chaz's eyes swept the landscape. "I don't feel whole...fully *alive*, in the city. It seems like such an artificial existence to me, in many ways."

"Where do you live?" Megan asked. "Don't you work in Fairbanks?"

"Yes, I teach biology at the university. But I live forty miles outside the city. I'm pretty isolated. My nearest neighbor is six miles away."

"I live in a condo overlooking Lake Michigan. There are probably four or five hundred people in my building."

There was silence as the differences in their worlds sank in.

"Do you miss it?" Chaz asked, in a way that suggested there was significance to the answer.

Megan pursed her lips and thought about that for several moments. "Yes and no." One side of her mouth twitched upwards in a half smile. "I'm surprised at how much I actually enjoy this camping stuff. But I will admit that the first day or two out here, I did really miss that long, hot shower in the morning. And my nice feather bed. And I would have said my triple-shot cappuccinos, but you've made this trip entirely tolerable on the coffee front, I must say."

"Speaking of, would you like an after-dinner espresso?" Chaz said.

"I'd like that very much, thank you."

"How about your job? Do you miss that? I expect it's pretty exciting to work at a television network." Chaz measured coffee and water and put the espresso pot on the stove.

"I like it, most of the time," Megan said. "It's different every day—you never know what's going to happen. A quiet day can explode in activity at any moment. That's a big plus for me. I get bored easily. And...the money's good, and I get to travel. Meet interesting people."

"You're a vice president, aren't you? Quite a bit of responsibility and stress goes along with that, I expect."

"Stressful is the right word for it. I don't miss that part, for sure. Most of the time, I probably work...let's see, fifty-five to sixty hours a week." Megan could feel her whole body tense up at the thought of returning to her old routine. "Seventy or more, when there's something major happening on a weekend. I'm on call 24-7."

“Ugh. That’s awful.” Chaz shook her head. “I can’t imagine being cooped up in *any* office ten or twelve hours a day, seven days a week, no matter *what* the job. I’d go nuts.”

“It can get old,” Megan admitted. The long hours wore her down sometimes, to be sure. More often, in recent months, if she dared admit it to herself.

“When do you have any time for yourself? I mean, working sixty or seventy hours doesn’t give you much time for anything but sleeping and eating.”

Megan pondered the question. It was the same thing Justine had been trying to tell her for months. Maybe it was time to start listening. “I guess I hadn’t thought about how hard I’ve been working in a long time. This trip is the first vacation I’ve taken in...hmm, I guess it’s been more than five years.”

“Five years?” Chaz was wide-eyed in disbelief. “Seriously?”

Megan was a trifle annoyed at Chaz’s reaction. Like hard work and getting ahead was a terrible thing. “I have a very important position these days,” she said defensively. “It’s difficult for me to get away.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” Chaz hastened to add. “I just...feel bad for you, that’s all. Even if you enjoy your work...which you obviously do...it’s got to be tough not to have time for yourself, and the ability to get away now and then to really relax and recharge yourself. Get away to a place like this.” She poured their espressos and handed one to Megan. “Mind if I make a personal observation?”

“No. Go ahead.”

“If I might say so, you seem—despite your injury—a lot more relaxed and happy now than when you started this trip.”

Megan sipped the espresso. “Mmm, this is delightful,” she complimented Chaz. “And I guess you could say that’s a fair assessment.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“It seemed as though you didn’t like me very much when you first got here. Or am I wrong?”

Megan sighed. “Yeah, well. That was rather childish of me, and I owe you an apology.”

“I really wasn’t fishing for one,” Chaz said. “And if you don’t

want to talk about it, that's fine. I was just wondering...what changed. To make you...you know, kiss me."

Megan squirmed a little under Chaz's blunt questions and couldn't meet her eyes. "You remind me...*reminded* me of someone. At first."

There was a long silence. "I take it you don't like this person very much?" Chaz asked gently.

"I liked her very much," Megan said, her jaw clenching as the memories flooded into her mind. "Once upon a time. But not at the end." She looked right at Chaz then. "You're nothing at all like her, Chaz. And I'm really sorry I treated you so rudely."

"I told you, I wasn't looking for an apology. I just hoped it wasn't something I did or said."

Megan smiled. "It wasn't. And thank you for being so understanding. So...you teach biology at the university, you said. Do you like *your* job?"

"Very much." Chaz didn't flinch at the sudden change in subject. "I have wonderful students, for the most part. Bright, inquisitive, motivated. I get to spend my days talking about the things that I'm the most interested in—Alaska's wildlife and ecology, and its future. I have a view of Denali from my office. And my teaching job gives me the opportunity to lead groups like this during the summer."

"And you really *like* this, don't you? Isn't it still *work*, having to take care of everything and everyone?"

"To a certain extent, sure," Chaz said. "But I get to spend three months a year in some of the most beautiful places in the world, and get paid for it, with not a whole lot of real hard work involved on my part." She chuckled to herself. "Of course, some trips are more fun than others."

"You've had to go above and beyond on this trip, that's for sure, because of me," Megan said apologetically.

"Don't worry about it. Except for the bear and the near drowning, I've really enjoyed it."

Megan laughed. Chaz's exuberance for her work was evident in her radiant smile. In addition to the obvious sparks between them, she would miss Chaz's company a lot, she realized. She was easy to be with—bright and funny and with an irresistible charm.

"Honestly, though," Chaz said, "I'm just sorry you have to leave early."

“Me, too. I wasted a lot of time that I should have spent getting to know you better.”

A loud boom of thunder sounded in the near distance, and both women jumped.

Chaz turned to look behind her. “We better get into the tent soon. That will hit us before we know it,” she said, studying the sky. A solid wall of dark charcoal clouds was approaching fast from the northwest. “I just love storms.” A huge grin spread across her face. She always felt energized when a big storm was coming, like her body was one giant barometer. “The power of nature exerting itself. Elemental, you know? And when you’re out here, surrounded by it, at its mercy...well, I just love it. Makes me feel *alive*.”

“Storms scare the crap out of me,” Megan said. “At least they usually do.” But she was feeling no fear at the moment, she had to admit. She was feeling it too...the excitement and energy and raw anticipation that were written all over Chaz’s face.

“We’ll be fine,” Chaz said reassuringly, and Megan believed her. So far, leaving it all up to fate had worked out pretty well for her. It had brought her to Alaska and to Chaz. She wasn’t going to fight it now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Even Chaz, who had a much better understanding than most of the volatile unpredictability of Alaska's weather, was surprised at the ferocity of the storm that barreled down on them. As the thunder edged closer and the rain picked up, the wind began to increase, pushing and pulling against the thin fabric that surrounded them until it seemed as though the entire tent was breathing in and out.

The sky turned so dark that it appeared as though the sun was going to defy its normal summer path and really sink beneath the horizon this time. The air around them was charged with electricity. But Chaz wasn't sure whether it was the storm, entirely, or the chemistry that was now crackling between them as they lay side by side and only inches apart.

The long rip that Sally had repaired was directly over her head. She raised one arm and traced her finger along the length of it, pleased that the seam seal was keeping out every drop of moisture, at least for now.

"That was a pretty terrifying moment for me," Megan said.

Chaz turned on her side and leaned on one elbow to look down at Megan. "I'm sure it was. I won't forget it any time soon, either."

"You know, I really admire you, Chaz. The courage you showed against the bear. Your calm control over the most harrowing circumstances. The patience you have with everything." She smiled up at her. "Including me."

Chaz grinned back. "Thanks, Megan. That means a lot to me."

"You kind of seem to...have it all together, more than most women. You know exactly what you want."

Chaz looked away, her expression hard to read. "I would probably have said that was very true just a couple of weeks ago," she said slowly. "I *am* absolutely content with where I live. I couldn't imagine being

anywhere else.” She glanced at Megan with regret in her eyes, then looked away again. “And I love what I do. I feel a sense of passion and purpose about my job, and who could ask for more than that? *But...*” She let out a long sigh. “I have been thinking a lot the last few days about...how content I really am with living alone.”

“The last few days?” Megan repeated.

“I have a much better idea of what I might be missing out on.”

“Look at me, will you?” Megan asked gently.

Chaz turned her head slowly until their eyes met, their faces two feet apart.

“I wish to God you’d kiss me right now. If you don’t, my heart is just going to burst right out of my chest.”

Chaz’s own heart seemed to skip a beat or two as it accelerated rapidly to match Megan’s. As Megan’s words repeated themselves in her head, her eyes involuntarily trailed down Megan’s body to watch the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. *Sweet Jesus.*

“Now, Chaz. *Please.*”

She looked again at Megan’s face and saw a depth of wanton desire that she had never seen before in a woman’s eyes. Her body was electrified by it. Her every nerve ending sang. No one could have resisted that look. No one.

And then, Megan’s lips became all she saw. Full, and red, and as she watched, Megan moistened them with her tongue in a teasing invitation, and that was all she wrote. Her final conscious thought was to be careful of Megan’s injuries, and so she cautiously edged her body closer and leaned over Megan so that Megan would not have to move at all.

“About damn time,” Megan whispered with a breathiness that shook Chaz to the core.

She closed the final distance and brought their faces together.

That first touch was only a brief caress; Chaz brushed her lips along the length of Megan’s and then retreated for only a moment before descending again, to nip gently at Megan’s luscious lower lip. Once, then twice.

Megan moaned, a soft sigh of surrender.

Chaz wanted to take it slow; to make it last, and to imprint it on her mind, every single detail, because she knew she would want to recall it often in the months ahead. But when Megan made that sound,

a hunger flared up in her that was unrecognizable, an almost animalistic hunger that made her feel more alive, and more driven for one purpose, than she could ever remember.

She pressed hard against Megan then, devouring her mouth, thrusting her tongue into the warmth. Megan's tongue found hers with equal enthusiasm. And then, oh then...the sounds that came from Megan—a whimper of need, a groan of desire; it was a chorus she recognized because it sang inside her own body.

They kissed and kissed, and kissed, snatching a breath when they needed to, shifting momentarily to nip at each other, until Chaz was so turned on her arousal was almost painful. Much more of this, and she would come right then and there. She broke the kiss and raised up off of Megan a few inches to look at her. Megan's eyes were heavy-lidded with arousal, and their fevered kisses had left her full lips swollen and flushed.

"God, what you do to me," Megan whispered.

Chaz's heart hammered so fast she found it hard to breathe. "Megan, I know that I said I don't do one-night stands, but I want whatever time I can have with you. Even if tonight is *it*, for us. If...I mean, if you think we *can*...make love...with your injuries." She stammered in her nervousness, but she was encouraged by the look in Megan's eyes.

Make love. The words separated themselves from all the others that Chaz had said. Megan was so incredibly, *unbelievably* aroused, that her mind was having a hard time hearing words at all. How could her brain function anyway, when all of her blood was between her legs?

But those words cut through her haze of desire.

That's it. It was the answer to all those questions that had been skimming around on the periphery of her consciousness ever since she'd met Chaz. Why this felt different than all the others. Why it mattered more. Why she'd begun to question so much in her life.

She had had plenty of sex in the last five years. But never once had she made love. After Rita, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to make love to anyone, ever again.

But with Chaz, that was exactly what she wanted. For with Chaz, it could be nothing less, nothing else.

"I feel the same way," she said. "I would like...very much...to have much more than one night with you. But if that's not possible, I want to have tonight to remember."

“You’re sure?”

“Never more.”

A burst of heavy rain hit the tent, the sound so loud it drummed out any further attempt at conversation. But they were beyond words now anyway. Lightning flashed nearby, as if feeding from the highly charged atmosphere they were creating between them. A moment later, the following boom of thunder seemed to shake the ground beneath their bodies.

Megan was very glad she was lying down. She felt so absurdly light-headed she wasn’t sure she could remain on her feet if she were upright. Her entire body seemed to pulse, at one with the primitive and wild forces of nature raging outside the tent. It was exhilarating beyond measure.

Chaz reached between them and unzipped both their sleeping bags, then sat up and slipped off sweater and turtleneck in one easy movement, then sports bra, exposing the naked splendor of muscled arms and back. The smooth, tanned skin was so enticingly close that Megan couldn’t help but reach out for it.

When her fingertips touched the warm flesh, Chaz froze, momentarily startled. Then she half turned to flash a smile back at Megan, before resuming the cavalier removal of her clothes. Pants, boxers, socks. Stripped, she turned to Megan and lay on her side, smiling as Megan’s eyes traveled the length of her naked body, appreciating every curve and ripple of musculature. From the broad shoulders to the firm, round breasts: not too large, dark areolas, nipples already erect.

Megan sucked in a breath as she felt her own nipples harden in response; then her eyes continued downward to the thick, dark triangle of hair, the rock-hard thighs, the legs that went on forever. She said a prayer of thanks for whatever experiences had contributed to Chaz’s total lack of inhibition. Her lithe sensuality was intoxicating.

“God, you have an incredible body,” she said, meeting Chaz’s eyes.

What she saw there—a fiery heat, smoldering, ready to flare—surprised her. Chaz’s relaxed posture belied what Megan could see clearly in the honest depths of those eyes: a coiled, raw sexuality, powerful and barely contained.

“I’m very glad you think so.” Chaz’s voice was thick with need and want. Her hand trembled as she reached for Megan’s unzipped sleeping

bag and peeled it back. “I have to see you. Touch you.” She shifted position until she lay pressed against Megan, their faces close together. “And taste you,” she added, leaning down to kiss Megan again as her hand found the button of Megan’s jeans.

The implied promise sent a rush of heat to meet the cool intrusion of Chaz’s fingers against her abdomen. In every sexual encounter she’d had since Rita, Megan had always been the one calling the shots. It was all about control. Initiating every touch, orchestrating every position. There were no surprises for her in bed any more. Satisfying releases, yes. But little more. So she found it briefly puzzling that she had no difficulty whatsoever in submitting to Chaz’s lead. For some reason she was unable to explain, she was perfectly content to surrender to whatever Chaz might have in mind. Her body told her she would not be disappointed.

Chaz’s lips found hers as she felt her pants being loosened. This kiss was as unsettling as the earlier ones. And they were kisses that reached parts of her that had been dormant for years, hidden and forgotten, awaiting the right touch to come alive. She was so lost in the warmth of Chaz’s mouth that she barely registered the fact that somehow most of her clothes were gone. She realized it only when Chaz broke their connection to slip her shirt off, so gently her shoulder felt only a momentary twinge of pain, quickly forgotten.

Chaz stared down at her with open approval, unconsciously licking her lips as she surveyed the pale smooth skin she had uncovered, her gaze like a caress, lingering first on Megan’s ample breasts, then on the silky patch of light brown hair below.

Megan trembled under that penetrating assessment.

“Cold?” Chaz asked.

She was, if anything, quite the opposite. Her body was on fire. But before she could answer, Chaz was pulling the sleeping bags over them and zipping them together to form a cozy nest for two.

And then they came together as both of them had imagined many times, Chaz covering Megan’s body with her own, weight on her elbows, careful of Megan’s shoulder but determined to touch skin to skin, breast to breast, pelvis to pelvis.

The same sound—a moan of contentment—escaped them both as Chaz settled her weight against Megan’s, insinuating one hard thigh between her legs. Megan’s center rose to meet hers, and their mouths

met for another warm, slow, wet kiss as their bodies began moving against each other, increasing the friction where it was needed most. Unhurried but insistent, the pressure for release building with each rock and sway of their hips.

Chaz's lips left Megan's to trace a provocative path along her jaw, pausing to nip at her earlobe. Then a wet tongue caressed her neck and tasted the hollow of her throat, where the rapid beating of her heart could be seen and felt.

She sure has a talented mouth. Oh, yes, she certainly does, big points for that, Megan thought hazily. A shudder of anticipation shot through her as that talented mouth headed south. Chaz shifted her weight slightly so that she would be able to feel Megan's right breast with her hand while her mouth claimed its twin.

"I'm so close already, I think I'm going to explode as soon as you touch me," Megan gasped, as Chaz's hand and mouth found their destinations.

Skillful fingers cupped, lightly caressed, firmly fondled, and then pinched—hard—as Chaz's mouth did things that made Megan feel as though her nerve endings had been rewired: lines crossed, direct currents newly running between her nipple and groin.

She heard sounds. Gasps, moans, whimpers, all coming from her. Unrecognizable. Unfamiliar. Their bodies were moving against each other again, more insistent now.

Megan became aware of how wet her thigh was, where it met Chaz's center. Instinctively, she pressed more firmly against Chaz right where it mattered. Chaz groaned and her body stiffened slightly, but she never paused in her tortuous oral seduction. To Megan, it felt as though her mouth was already elsewhere. How was that possible?

I am going to come, Megan realized, just a millisecond before Chaz seemed to read her mind and withdraw enough to keep her poised just on the brink. The mouth and tongue and hand returned to teasing caresses, not quite firm enough to finish the job.

"Not yet," Chaz said, her voice much lower than normal, as though freshly roused from slumber.

God, she could drown in that voice. No one had ever been able to see inside of her...and know precisely what she was feeling...the way this woman apparently could. She found out how when Chaz raised her head and looked directly into her eyes.

“So close,” Chaz said, and Megan could see in her eyes the joyous strain of acute arousal, orgasm contained by sheer force of will, and painfully so. Withheld, she knew, so that they could come together. Chaz knew what she was feeling because she felt exactly the same.

“Yes,” she answered, her breathing erratic. Chaz’s was, too. “Touch me, Chaz. Feel how wet you make me. And let me touch you.”

Her consent unfettered Chaz, released her from whatever had bound her to a slow and deliberate seduction. It unleashed that powerful and fierce sexuality that Megan had glimpsed earlier in those hazel eyes. Chaz kissed her, hard, as she shifted her weight to allow them access to each other.

She had a moment to think again: *God, you can kiss*. It was almost better than sex itself with all the others she had been with. She felt it in every bit of her, every cell, every inch of skin.

Then her mind became incapable of thought, as Chaz’s skilled fingers slipped into the wet, silky folds between her legs. *Jesus*. She arched her back involuntarily to meet the touch, forgetting entirely about her shoulder. A sharp stab ran through it, and she exhaled a grunt of pain as she slumped backwards.

Chaz’s fingers paused but did not leave the warmth of Megan’s center. “Are you all right?” she asked hoarsely.

“Yes, don’t stop,” Megan pleaded, spreading her legs wider and reaching down for Chaz.

Chaz’s whole body tensed in anticipation, and when Megan’s fingers passed through the coarse hairs and sank into the depths of the folds beyond, already soaked and swollen, Chaz made a sound she’d not heard before, a soft, keening cry.

And then they were stroking in tandem, helping each other to prolong the sweet ache, moving in synch, their bodies as one, backing off enough at the moment of eruption to push it still higher, the pressure incredible.

Both of them were gasping for air, their bodies rigid in those excruciating moments just before release, when Chaz’s voice, husky, came from close above.

“Open your eyes, Megan, I want to see you,” she said.

She had always thought it too personal...too intimate...to let someone into her eyes at that moment. Like they could see all the things that she safely kept hidden all the rest of the time. She never allowed it.

But she did not hesitate this time. She opened her eyes and sank into the depths of Chaz's, and they soared together over the precipice, crying out in unison, and she had never before seen anything more starkly, breathtakingly beautiful than Chaz was, when she came.

And she had never felt the overwhelming rush of heat that poured through her and lit her up from within...than when Chaz brought her to orgasm.

She was still shuddering with the aftershocks when she heard the sound of a zipper and realized Chaz had opened their sleeping bags again so she had room to maneuver, room to slowly descend down Megan's quivering body, kissing every inch as she went, no time to recover.

Megan spread her legs and Chaz slipped down between them, and before she knew it, Chaz's warm mouth was on her, the tip of her tongue playing along her wet folds with a maddeningly light touch.

Chaz looked up at her, eyes dark, pupils enormous, her lips bruised from their kisses. "I can't get enough of you, Megan," she said, breathing heavily in and out, before resuming a slow and tantalizing campaign to bring her to climax again.

Chaz's tongue explored every inch of her at leisure, discovering every place that made her hips rise up for more. Returning often to those strokes that made Megan moan, and gasp, and especially those that made her clench her teeth and cry out.

That accomplished tongue stroked the length of her, nipping, sucking, dancing in tight little circles around her painfully swollen clit, until she could stand it no longer. And somehow, Chaz knew the moment. The precise moment. For it was then that she entered Megan with her long fingers, filling her completely, and Megan roared to climax.

The storm, at its height, raged outside; the wind was howling and thunder boomed all around them, and it seemed somehow perfectly appropriate. The atmosphere both inside and outside the tent was fraught with the same kind of wild energy, elemental and totally uncontrollable.

"This is sure going to be a hell of a hard act to follow." Megan sighed, as Chaz settled beside her, one arm and one leg draped over her protectively.

Chaz raised her head so they could look at each other. “It’s never been anything like this for me, either.”

She kissed Megan again, a soft, sweet kiss this time that lingered long so they could memorize every second of it. Eventually they were quiet for a long while, cradled together, listening to the rain. As they drifted off to sleep, Megan wondered whether she’d ever again feel quite as content, quite as happy, quite as blissfully whole as she did at that moment.

She prayed the bad weather would continue. Anything to delay her departure.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Some time later, Chaz was awakened by the sensual caress of fingers running through her hair, languid and soothing. Next she became aware of the naked body she was draped around. Finally, she opened her eyes to find her face pillowed against Megan's left breast.

The heady smell of sex reached her nostrils, reminding her of the way Megan tasted, and she went from fast asleep to fully awake in an instant. She raised her head to find Megan watching her with the same intensity she'd had in her eyes right before she'd climaxed.

"I don't want to waste what little time we have sleeping," Megan said.

Chaz opened her mouth but nothing came out. She cleared her throat. "No?"

"No, I want more images for my mental scrapbook. Photographic memory, remember?"

Chaz really liked the provocative tone in Megan's voice. Her body began to move against Megan's as her hand cupped Megan's breast.

Megan's chest swelled as she inhaled sharply. "Jesus, Chaz," she said shakily. "I swear to God it's like you have electricity in your fingertips when you touch me."

"Do I?" Chaz trailed her hand lower, along a teasing path that skimmed through the hair at the apex of Megan's thighs before returning to her breast.

"But as wonderful as it is," Megan added, as her nipple sprang to attention, "I had something else in mind at the moment."

Chaz's hand stilled and she looked at Megan. "Of course. What would you like?"

Megan's eyes held hers. "I just *have* to taste you. Please?"

The coil of desire in Chaz's belly flared until it threatened to

consume her. Her body started to shake. “Damn, Megan, just telling me you’re going to nearly puts me over.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. This shoulder kind of puts a crimp in my style.” Megan cocked her eyebrows expressively. “So I could probably use some creative positioning on your part...”

“Oh, I think that can be arranged.” Chaz smiled at her, enjoying their easy banter.

“First things first, though.” Megan moistened her lips.

“Yes?”

“Have I told you what an absolutely fabulous kisser you are?”

Chaz felt her cheeks get warm as she leaned down and brushed her lips against Megan’s, then slowly, almost reverently, claimed her mouth. Every kiss between them had been different, but memorable in its own way. This one had equal parts of the passion of the night before and the sadness of the separation ahead. It was bittersweet, and a harbinger of how much she would miss Megan.

Over the hours that followed, they made love in as many ways as they could think of and that Megan’s injuries allowed. Slow, and fast. Gentle, and rough. Playful. Seductive. Cramming every possible experience into their limited time left together.

In the wee hours of the morning, scant moments after Chaz had reached yet another climax, just seconds after Megan, a wolf howled in the distance. Both women froze for a second, mesmerized by the sound, then Chaz howled back—a long, jubilant cry.

It was lifelike enough that the wolf replied, then Megan started up, too, and they all howled together until the howls turned to laughter that went on and on and on.

Chaz wiped tears off her cheeks as she collapsed back against Megan. “Well, that’s a first. No woman has ever made me howl before.”

“Just one of my many talents. How will you ever get over me?” Megan asked, with a flippancy that wasn’t convincing.

Chaz picked up on it and looked her in the eyes. “That’s a good question.”

“Can we keep in touch?” Megan asked.

“I really hope we do,” Chaz said. “Maybe you’ll come back and visit one day, and I’ll show you some of my favorite places.”

“I get four weeks’ vacation a year, and I’ve got a million or so

frequent flier miles. I'll come back if you want me to."

"Good. Because I do. Very much." Chaz kissed Megan again and tried not to make it feel like good-bye. But it was already beginning to. Far too much. She couldn't help it. Three or four weeks a year would not be nearly enough.

They lazed back into a spoon without further words, Chaz wrapping her body around Megan's, front to back, always mindful of her injured shoulder. Soon she felt the deep even breathing she could already recognize as Megan asleep, and she had to fight back sudden, unexpected tears that sprang from nowhere.

How is it possible to feel so much for her, so soon? It's not fair. To finally feel something like this and have it be so impossible. It was nothing at all like she'd expected. The women she had seriously dated were all just like her. Wilderness devotees. Monogamous. Perfect fits, all of them, at least on paper. They had the same interests, outlook, priorities in life.

She and Megan, on the other hand, had very little in common on the surface. Sure, Megan appreciated the uncommon beauty of their surroundings with a sensitivity that not everyone possessed. That much was clear. *She picked up kayaking pretty fast and seems to enjoy it, despite the accident. No complaints about the primitive camping experience. She's bright, and funny, incredibly sexy, and...she makes you feel things that no one has ever made you feel.*

But the differences between them seemed insurmountable, distance being only one. They had different priorities. And even though it seemed to her, when they were making love, that Megan was feeling exactly as she was feeling...that this was incredibly *different*, and special...she knew it wasn't so.

For her, it's only an affair. And she has them all the time. You know that you'd want much more than that. If you kept seeing her, it would only make it that much harder to say good-bye when she moved on to someone else.

Yes, it was probably just as well that they had only one night. For every additional hour that she spent with Megan was an hour spent getting closer and closer to her. Already, she could not imagine how she would ever say good-bye.



When next Chaz woke, the light streaming into the tent and the bird calls outside told her that the storm had passed, and it was probably well into the morning. She knew she should find the radio and turn it on; they would be sending a helicopter as soon as possible. But she couldn't bring herself to move right away.

She wanted a final moment to relish what it was like waking up next to Megan, after the most incredible night of lovemaking in her life. She was on her back and Megan on her side, tucked up against her with her head in the crook of her shoulder. Her soft breathing against Chaz's chest felt like brief, airy caresses. Chaz's nipples started to get hard.

One of Megan's legs was carelessly draped over hers, weightless and unmoving but, placed where it was, between *her* legs, still extremely provocative. She could feel herself getting aroused again. *Jesus, get a grip. Aren't you worn out yet?* Apparently not.

Her common sense won out. It wouldn't do for the chopper to arrive with them lying like this. She managed to reach her watch without having to move too much. Megan slept on. 8 a.m. *Shit.*

She glanced outside. There was a touch of fog; that was good, it meant probably that rescue wasn't imminent. But the rain had stopped, and morning fog often burned off by midmorning. She really did have to check in, and in order to reach the radio, she'd have to move Megan off of her.

She tried to slowly extricate herself from Megan's embrace, but as soon as she moved a few inches, Megan moaned, and, still half-asleep, nestled her body even more snugly against Chaz. The languid movement of Megan's body along hers did nothing to help quench Chaz's growing excitement. *I'm just going to have to wake her. Or pretty soon I'm not going to care whether the chopper is coming or not.*

"Megan?" she said gently.

Megan sighed a long sigh of contentment. Chaz knew she was still asleep, but the gentle exhalation sounded so much like the sigh she'd made after orgasm number three that it kicked up Chaz's arousal another notch.

"Megan!" Louder this time, her voice betraying the level of her fear of losing control. "I have to radio in."

She slowly stretched to reach her pack, and her movement made Megan come fully awake. She yawned sleepily and blinked at Chaz. "Hi, there. Good morning."

Her eyes were twinkling at Chaz, and she had a shyness to her voice that in light of what they'd been doing to each other all night, sounded incredibly sweet and endearing. *Why do you have to be so irresistible?*

Chaz did the only thing she could do. The only thing that made sense, when Megan looked at her like that. She kissed her, like she meant it. Like she never wanted to let her go. Damn, she was going to miss those kisses.

"Good morning," she replied some time later when they came up for air.

"I could get used to having that every morning as my alarm clock," Megan said lazily as she relaxed back against Chaz's chest.

The hint of regular domesticity about that statement made Chaz's stomach clench. *If only that was true.* Stoically, she reached for the radio. "It's late enough that I really need to call in and see when they're coming for you. Probably would not be real good to have them come up on us unexpectedly."

"So, what happens next?" Megan asked.

"The air ambulance will fly you to the hospital in Fairbanks. Orion will be contacting you there and will make arrangement for your flight home and anything else you need after you're released."

"I don't suppose I can suggest we postpone getting me out of here another day or two or three?" Megan asked in a quiet voice, not looking at Chaz.

"I wish that was possible. But you need to be looked at. I know they'll be sending someone as soon as the weather allows."

"This sucks. I don't feel bad, considering. Just a sore shoulder. The headache is pretty much gone. I want to spend more time with you."

"I wish we could, too, Megan. But I also have to rejoin the group. I have a job to do and they need two guides." With that, Chaz reluctantly turned on the radio and reported in to the Alaska State Troopers.

The news couldn't have been worse. The chopper was on its way. They roused themselves and got dressed, and Chaz put some water on for coffee, then packed up their gear and took down the tent. They didn't say much to each other as they waited. But they sat side by side, leaning back against a gray boulder, legs stretched out in front of them and their bodies touching.

"You have all my information on the registration forms, right?" Megan asked.

"Yes. I'll copy it all down when I get back to the lodge." Chaz reached into a pocket for a small pad of paper and pen and wrote down her name, address, phone, office information, and e-mail address. "Here's mine," she said, tucking the note carefully into the breast pocket of Megan's jacket.

"Better be careful where you put those hands," Megan kidded playfully. "You don't want to start something you can't finish."

"Damn, woman, don't you ever get tired?" Chaz's comment was offset by the fact that she leaned over to nuzzle Megan's neck as she said it. She would more than happily go again if they had the time.

But there was no time. They heard it before they saw it. Chaz got to her feet as the chopper came into view over a nearby mountain peak. Their alone time was at an end, and she felt it as a very real ache in her chest.

"I guess this is it," she said, leaning down to help Megan to her feet.

Megan gazed up at the approaching chopper. "I hate good-byes anyway. And this ranks up there with the class-A worst ones."

"Yeah, I'd agree with that."

"I know you had reservations about getting involved with a client." Megan lowered her gaze and turned moist green eyes on Chaz. "How do you feel about public displays of affection?"

"What are you proposing?" Chaz asked with a smile.

"I'd about kill for one more of your kisses."

Chaz cradled Megan's face in her hand. Made one last caress of that sun-kissed cheek before she leaned down to claim that mouth a final time. Megan's arm came around her waist and pulled their bodies together.

The sound of the helicopter landing on a small patch of level tundra nearby forced them apart.

"Stay in touch," Chaz said, looking into Megan's eyes while they waited for the air ambulance crew to disembark.

"I will. Thanks for everything." Megan wanted to say something profound and meaningful, but how could she think when Chaz looked at her like that? "I'll never forget last night."

Chaz couldn't keep her eyes from misting up. "I won't either. I'll miss you."

“Me, too.”

That was all the time they had.

Five minutes later, Megan was comfortably ensconced in the helicopter. She gave a final wave, and the chopper lifted off and headed south. As she watched Chaz’s silhouette get smaller and smaller, an ache began in her chest. It grew with each mile that separated them.



Chaz waited until the helicopter was out of sight and then got into her kayak and on the river, happy to have some time alone before she had to resume her guide duties. She felt unsettled, even mildly disoriented. Megan had turned her world upside down in the space of twenty-four hours, and Chaz couldn’t imagine how it would right itself again. She kept telling herself that it was all for the best, but there was no way that her separation from Megan after their night together felt like anything but what it was: a sudden cold and hollow place, where there had recently been an abundance of heat and belonging.

The rest of the group was finishing a late lunch when she reached their campsite two hours later. She briefed them all on Megan’s departure and caught up with how they had fared in the storm; then they all set off in their kayaks to resume their trip downriver.

They reached their next stop about seven that evening and fell into the now-familiar routine of setting up tents and getting dinner started. Sally knew her well enough that she sensed something was different, but she gave Chaz some space to think things out on her own. She asked only if Chaz was all right and offered a shoulder if she needed someone to talk to.

Justine was not so easily deterred. At the first opportunity to talk to Chaz alone—which happened to be while Chaz was doing dishes—she corralled her and began peppering her with questions about her night with Megan. “So, Chaz...I know this is going to sound like I’m butting in, but I’m Megan’s best friend so I think I’m entitled.” That out of the way, she found a flat rock to sit on and made herself comfortable. “So did you two finally admit that you have a thing for each other before she left?”

Chaz felt her whole face get hot as images of her and Megan in various positions of lovemaking flashed into her mind. “Uh...” she

stammered. But she couldn't suppress a silly grin at the memory.

"Great!" Justine said. "So I see it went *very* well, in fact, from the smile on your face and that nice shade of crimson you're sporting."

"Well, we did hit it off," Chaz managed finally. Despite the third degree, Chaz developed an immediate respect for Justine. She was direct, and outspoken, and she obviously had nothing but Megan's welfare uppermost in her mind. Chaz felt okay about talking to her. "I really don't...get involved with clients generally, but—"

"I'm glad you made an exception in this case," Justine said. "Are you two planning to keep in touch, I hope?"

"We exchanged addresses and e-mails, phone numbers." Chaz finished the dishes and sat down beside Justine. She missed Megan already far more than she even imagined she would. Here was her best friend—a potential font of information about the woman who had captured her attention, and she apparently wanted to talk about Megan so Chaz was certainly going to let her. "So was it that obvious that we're attracted to each other?"

"Maybe not to everyone. But Megan confides in me more than most."

"You're lucky, then," Chaz said.

"Yes. She's not close to a lot of people. Doesn't volunteer much and doesn't trust easily."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question that I'm curious about? You don't have to answer."

"Shoot."

"How did this Royal Ice Bitch thing come to be?"

Justine laughed. "Well, Megan does have an intensity about her when she's in the newsroom during a big story...calling the shots and directing coverage. No nonsense, for sure. But she got the nickname from a bunch of malcontents she inherited."

"Inherited?"

"There's a running joke at WNC that you have to do something notoriously bad to get fired. The company is so afraid of lawsuits—for age discrimination or whatever—that they make it almost impossible to just fire someone because they do a half-assed job. You pretty much have to be a complete and certifiable psycho, and even then you get two warnings before they let you go." Justine laughed. "Well, before Megan took over, the newsroom ran totally on seniority. The best shifts

and perks went to the people who had been there the longest. Megan put everything on a merit-based system.”

“And made some enemies,” Chaz concluded.

“Exactly. The people who had the primo, nine-to-five shift but who were only skating along and just showing up—suddenly found themselves working overnights. People who worked hard, had great attitudes and innovative ideas...they got raises, better hours, and first shot at being the one chosen to go overseas when a plum assignment opened up. I’m a reporter because of her—I was a writer with on-air ambitions, and she provided me with the opportunity to show what I could do.”

“She’s good at her job, isn’t she?”

“The best. Corporate loves her because ratings across the board are up every year since she took over. And most of the people in the newsroom love her, because hard work and creativity are recognized and rewarded. She’s got high standards, sure, but she doesn’t ask for anything she won’t do herself. She genuinely cares about her staff and feels a responsibility for them. If you need anything—time off for an emergency, a change of jobs, she makes it happen. She’s always available to her staff.”

“She told me she puts in a lot of hours,” Chaz said.

“Workaholic personified,” Justine agreed. “Way too much so. I’ve been worried about her. That’s why I think coming here and meeting you was the best thing that’s happened to her in a very long while.”

“You do?”

“I haven’t seen her really come up for air—and take a vacation, where she really relaxed—since Rita. She just goes out once in a while to blow off steam. Did she tell you about Rita?”

“No. She did tell me she hadn’t had a vacation in five years.”

“I’m not real surprised she didn’t tell you about her, but I’d hoped she would. You’d understand some things a lot better.”

Chaz’s heartbeat picked up. From Justine’s tone, it was obvious that this Rita was very important to Megan. *Rita*. Then it hit her. Clients had occasionally told her she looked like a reporter named Rita Thompson. So she’d looked her up on the Internet and had noted the resemblance. That was a couple of years ago; she’d forgotten all about it because she couldn’t get WNC on her TV.

Intrigued, she asked, “Will you tell me about her?”

"They were together for five years. Married, at least as far as Megan was concerned—they said vows to each other. She was sure it was forever, until Rita cheated on her and left her for someone else."

Chaz remembered Megan's explanation for why she'd been so cold when she arrived in Alaska. *You reminded her of someone she liked very much, once upon a time. But not at the end.* "I look like Rita?"

"Very much."

"She wasn't attracted to me because I look like her ex, was she?" The possibility depressed her after the evening they'd had.

"Just the opposite. She kind of despises Rita now, I think. Megan likes you *despite* the fact you look like her," Justine said.

"From...well, from something I overheard, I got the impression that Megan doesn't stick with anyone very long. That she isn't into commitments. Kind of surprises me to hear that she was married."

"She's been running from any real emotional involvement ever since Rita was such a shit to her," Justine said. "But something tells me she may have stopped running when she met you. I think you mean a lot to her."

Chaz shrugged. "Well, even if that's true, I don't see how we can have any kind of future. I can't even bear the *thought* of leaving Alaska. Could you imagine Megan leaving her job?"

Justine shrugged. "Maybe not."

"How do you have a relationship when you live hundreds of miles apart?"

"I don't know, Chaz. I don't have any answers for you on that. I just wanted you to be aware that Megan *does* have feelings for you. Pretty powerful ones, I think, even if she's not ready to admit them." Justine got to her feet. "I hope you two can find a way to be together. She's a keeper, and so are you. I think you could be very good for each other."

She walked away and left Chaz contemplating all that she had said. She could think of little else the rest of the trip.



Before she knew it, she and Sally were back at the airfield in Winterwolf saying good-bye to the Broads in Broadcasting. Chaz pulled Justine aside as they waited for the plane to arrive to fly them

back to Fairbanks. “I presume you’ll see Megan pretty soon after you get back?”

“Sure,” Justine said.

“Would you give her this for me?” Chaz held out the envelope containing the letter she’d written the night before. She could have mailed it, or even e-mailed it, but sending it through Justine just seemed more personal, more intimate. She hoped Megan would think so too.

“Of course.” Justine took the letter and gave Chaz an impromptu hug. “Thanks for everything—it was the adventure of a lifetime. And think about what I said. Chicago is a great city to visit.”

Chaz didn’t doubt that, but something told her that if she ever did make it to Chicago, she’d see very little of the place.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Chicago, Illinois

Megan was only in the fourth hour of her first day back at work, and already she missed Chaz, and Alaska, with an intensity that took her completely by surprise.

Her experience had changed her perceptions about nearly everything in her well-ordered routine. She noticed for the first time as she flew into O'Hare that the air over Chicago was a dirty yellow-gray, in no way resembling the vivid blue of the Arctic sky. The bumper-to-bumper traffic from the airport was no different than any other day, but it frustrated and rankled her ten times worse than normal. The noise level in the city was nearly unbearable after ten days of birdsongs.

It was as if she now saw her environment anew through Chaz's eyes. She was amazed to discover she could count the trees in her neighborhood on one hand, and there was hardly a patch of green to be seen in the crowded urban landscape. Nearly every person she saw on the street looked stressed and in a hurry. *She really would hate it here.*

Her condo was claustrophobic after the vast landscape of Alaska, and so was her office, with two weeks' worth of accumulated work piled high on her desk and credenza. She had a list of people who wanted to see her. Her phone rang nonstop—always with something that demanded her urgent attention—and hundreds of e-mails were waiting in her inbox.

I must have been insane to think I could take two weeks off.

Despite the hundreds of distractions, her eyes kept returning to the photo on her desk. Chaz on the hilltop where they'd watched the caribou herd, windblown hair and rosy-cheeked complexion accentuating her rugged good looks. Megan had copied it to her computer and printed it out as soon as she'd gotten home. *God, you're beautiful.*

She'd had no contact with Chaz since their separation nine days earlier. She tried to catch her between trips, but the first time she called the lodge, Chaz had been at the airstrip seeing Megan's friends off. And by the time she called back, Chaz was off on another ten-day trip into the wilderness.

A knock at the door forced her eyes reluctantly away from the photo.

"Bet I know who's in that picture you're staring at. How's the shoulder?" Justine stood leaning against the doorway, a big smile on her face.

Megan got up and gave her a hug, then shut the door so they wouldn't be disturbed. "Shoulder's fine. Kind of stiff. So how was the rest of the trip?"

"Fabulous." Justine took a seat. "Sorry you had to leave early, but everybody took lots of pictures so you'll see what you missed. Speaking of which, we're all getting together at the Cool Breeze Friday night to share photos."

"I'll be there," Megan said. The chance to relive the trip and see new photos of Chaz was something she'd look forward to all week. And she had already decided she'd been working too hard and needed to make sure she made time for her friends.

"Wow, no fight at all? Have you finally learned to relax, or is it the prospect of seeing a bunch of pictures of Chaz, all gorgeous and buff?"

Megan couldn't help the smile that spread across her face at the mental image that sprang to mind—Chaz sunbathing on the rock.

"Ah, I *see*," Justine said.

"It was amazing being with her. I miss her like crazy," Megan admitted.

"No kidding," Justine deadpanned. "I think the feeling is mutual, by the way."

"Did she talk about me? Ask about me?"

"You sound like you're back in high school. But yes, she did. And I won't keep you in suspense any more." She pulled Chaz's envelope out of the pocket of her blazer. "She asked me to deliver this."

Megan ran her hand over the envelope reverently, fingertips caressing where Chaz had written her name. "Thanks." She looked up at her friend, anxious to read but mindful of her manners.

“Go ahead, I know you can’t wait.” Justine got to her feet and headed for the door. “I’ll tell Grace to hold your calls for a few minutes and come back later so we can catch up.”

“Thanks, Justine.”

As soon as Justine had closed the door behind her, Megan carefully opened the envelope and took out a two-page letter written in Chaz’s precise penmanship. It began

Hello, Megan. I miss you more than I can say.

Seeing those words first, right off the bat, made her heart flutter in her chest. She ached for reassurance that their time together had meant as much to Chaz as it had to her.

She glanced at the photo again, before returning to the letter.

And it’s not just because you are incredible in bed (though you most certainly are, and thank God for your stamina).

That line not only produced a big smile, it started up a slide show in her mind of some of things they’d done to each other during that long, incredible night. She had never been more grateful for her ability to recall events in absolutely perfect, vivid detail, down to the accompanying tastes and smells. *No telling what might happen when we get together and I don’t have a bum shoulder to work around.* She glanced at the photo again. *Damn. I’ve got it real bad for you, don’t I?* She returned to the letter.

It didn’t take me long after you left, to realize that you already mean more to me than perhaps any woman ever has.

Her heartbeat kicked into high gear at that line.

Megan, I don’t know how or when, but I want to see you at the very earliest opportunity. And at every opportunity thereafter. I hope you meant what you said about those million frequent flier miles because I miss you fiercely.

Oh, God. Chaz. You have to have a way with words, too. An ache of longing blossomed in her chest. It was going to be absolute hell not to be able to communicate with Chaz for at least another week.

I've fallen for you. In a big way. I guess there are many who would say that after only one night together, telling you how I feel is jumping the gun. That it's too much, too fast, too soon. But I know how I feel. I just pray to God you feel the same.

I know that making a relationship work when we have such radically different lives, so far apart, seems impossible. Maybe it is. But I want to see where this might lead.

Her heart was thumping hard in her chest now, and it was getting more difficult to read as tears welled up in Megan's eyes. *Oh, yes. She feels it, too.*

I can't stop thinking about our night together, Megan, the next line read. I miss you, and I need to feel your body.

Oh, shit, Megan thought. *Perhaps I shouldn't be reading this at work.* The memory of Chaz's hands on her, burned vividly in her mind, flared to life. *Oh, hell.* Her nipples were instantly hard, and she felt a sudden urge to press her thighs firmly together.

I would certainly run out of superlatives if I tried to describe what it was like for me to make love with you. Incredible. Exquisite. Unbelievable. It's like you awakened a part of me I didn't know existed. No one has ever made me feel more alive than I felt that night, Megan. You stir my blood.

More memories flashed through her mind. She could feel herself getting more and more aroused. *Shit. Shit. Shit. This is definitely not appropriate at work.*

I'm sorry it's going to be so hard for us to communicate with each other while I'm leading trips the rest of the summer. I'm especially anxious, of course, to hear how you'll react to this letter. I hate it that it'll be several more days before I can try to reach you. I will call as

soon as I can. Know that you are never far from my thoughts.

Chaz.

The second page of the letter was Chaz's itinerary for the rest of the summer. For the next month and a half, Megan would be able to talk to her only every seven to ten days.

Something tells me these are going to be the longest weeks of my life.

She pulled out a piece of her business stationary, a heavy bond of ecru with her name and title in embossed letters. Everything else could wait. She wanted Chaz to have a letter waiting for her when she got back from her trip.



Megan buried herself in work all week to try to make time move faster. Not that she had any choice; so much had piled up in her absence that she worked twelve-hour days and still wasn't caught up by Friday night.

But she was not about to miss seeing new photos of Chaz. So she locked up her office and actually beat all the others to their regular booth in the back of the Cool Breeze.

"Oh, my God!" Justine exclaimed when she arrived. "You're the first one here? You really are smitten, aren't you?"

"Shut up and pull out your pictures," Megan grumbled good-naturedly. "I can't believe you wouldn't spring for one-hour photo processing. I'm buying you a digital camera for Christmas."

"Hey, there she is!" Pat hailed them as she and Linda approached, Elise not far behind. "How you doing, Megan? No sling, I see."

"I'm fine. They kept me overnight for observation in the hospital, but I flew home the next day and had the sling off not long after."

"Anybody talk to Yancey?" Elise asked. "She coming?"

"Would I miss this?" Yancey said from behind her. "May I see a show of hands of who wants to go back to Alaska tomorrow?"

All hands shot up, Megan's a fraction faster than anyone else's.

"So who wants to go first?" Linda asked, as everyone settled into a seat in the big circular booth.

"I'll start," Elise said, pulling out a thick stack of four-by-six color snapshots, the colors so vivid and the landscape so picturesque that each one could have been a postcard.

"Ah, the one that got away," Elise lamented when she got to the first one of Chaz. She had captured Chaz the day of the rolling lesson, her formfitting wet suit paying sexy tribute to her excellent physique.

You wish, Megan thought smugly as she took the photo from Elise.

"I don't think she got away from everyone," Linda said, looking pointedly at Megan with a grin.

Megan shot a look at Justine that said, *You didn't!*

But Justine shrugged innocently. "Don't look at me. I didn't say anything."

"I'm just perceptive," Linda said.

"What am I missing here?" Yancey asked.

"You're not the only one," Elise said. "Did you and Chaz get something going, Megan?"

Hell, what's the problem? You got the gorgeous woman that everyone wants. And she's crazy about you.

"Well, as a matter of fact," Megan said, "we did get something going. Something pretty great. I think I'm going to be seeing a lot of Alaska."

Winterwolf, Alaska

"Megan Maxwell, please." Chaz settled into the nearest comfy chair as she waited to be patched through to Megan. *Finally*.

She'd come straight to the pay phones in the lobby as soon as they hit the lodge, while Sally and their backpacking clients headed for hot showers and turns in the large outdoor hot tub.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Maxwell is in a meeting. May I take a message?"

Damn. "Yes, please. Would you tell her Chaz Herrick called and will try again later. She is also welcome to call me." She recited the lodge's phone number.

"I'll give her the message," the polite voice replied.

Chaz's heart sank at having to wait any longer to talk to Megan than she already had. She'd been restless for days, impatient to hear Megan's response to her letter.

Sighing, she headed toward her room, but Paul Bartlett, one of the lodge's owners, hailed her from the front desk.

"Hey, Chaz! Got a letter here for you!"

Megan! She hurried to the desk and felt her spirits soar when she saw the Chicago postmark and WNC return address.

"Thanks, Paul." She ripped open the envelope as she headed to her room, her hands trembling in anticipation of what she would find inside. A chance at happiness? Or a polite sorry, but not interested?

She sat on the bed and began reading.

Dear Chaz,

There are many things I really like about you. Foremost, at the moment, having just read your letter, I really like your courage and your straightforward honesty.

I feel the same, Chaz. I'm head over heels in love with you, too.

But I think it probably would have taken me a lot longer to admit it.

I'm buried in work here, but I can't stop thinking about you. (And, yes, most certainly about that night. And you're one to talk about stamina!)

You've shaken up my life a lot more than you know. In a good way.

I can't wait to talk to you. See you. Touch you. Kiss you. Hold you. Taste you.

Uh, oh. Maybe I shouldn't be writing this at work.

Call me.

I miss you terribly.

Megan

Chaz leaned back against the headboard of the bed with a contented smile. *Now we just have to figure out a way to be together as often as possible.* She could access her fall class schedule online. *I'll take a shower and then e-mail that to Megan so she can compare it to hers and see when we can get together. Then I'll grab a bite to eat and try calling her again.* She had to keep busy. The minutes until she could try phoning again would absolutely drag.

At least I can talk to her every day once I get home from guiding. But these weeks until then are going to be torture.

Chaz tried Megan again an hour later. “Ms. Maxwell, please,” she said when Megan’s assistant answered.

“Ms. Maxwell is in a meeting. May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Chaz Herrick. I tried earlier, and—”

“Oh! Ms. Herrick, yes! Ms. Maxwell left instructions that you were to be forwarded through to her if you called back. Please hold and I’ll connect you.”

Chaz’s heart picked up in anticipation.

“Hello, this is Megan. Chaz? You there?” There was a lot of noise in the background, like Megan was in a crowded room with a lot of people talking.

“Yes, I’m here.” *Finally!* “God, have I missed you...” Chaz got half of it out, but Megan was talking over her before she finished.

“I’ve missed you so much! I was worried I was going to miss your call.”

“I caught you at a bad time, didn’t I?” Chaz asked.

“No! Hang on! I’m heading to my office so I can have a little privacy, but don’t hang up. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

The sounds behind Megan diminished. “So...that’s better. How are you?”

“Good. I’m good, now that I’m talking to you. This week has just *crawled*.”

“Tell me about it.” Megan laughed.

“Thank you for your letter,” Chaz said.

“Well, thank you for *yours*.”

There was a short embarrassed silence, then the two of them began laughing.

“Let’s not waste our precious phone time being shy with each other *now*,” Chaz said. “I mean, considering what we did to each other...in every conceivable position—”

“Oh, God, you can’t do that to me.” Megan stopped her. “I’m at work, and I have meetings in a while. I’m supposed to be all cold and bossy, and here you’re going to make me all mushy and warm inside. My staff won’t know me.”

“I can’t be held responsible for how your voice enchants me.”

“Damn, you’re a smooth talker, Chaz Herrick.”

“So I take it you’re all healed up? Everything’s all right?” Chaz asked.

“If you were here, I’d ravish you in all those ways we couldn’t in the tent,” Megan said, in a breathy, seductive voice.

Chaz felt a sharp twist of arousal at the juncture of her thighs. “Jesus, Megan. Now who’s being provocative? I’m in the lobby of the lodge!”

“Oh, am I getting you all hot and bothered?” Megan asked in the same sexy voice. “Does it show? Are people watching?”

“Stop that!” Chaz was really heating up now, and starting to fidget. She glanced around. No one in sight at the moment, but that could change at any time. “You’re a cruel woman.” But the playful banter and the effect that Megan had on her body, even long distance, only reinforced the growing attraction between them.

“Oh, I think you *like* it,” Megan murmured. “In fact, you like it a *lot*. You sure liked it when I teased you that night, remember?”

“You could make a fortune as a phone-sex provider, not that I’m advocating a change of careers for you,” Chaz said. She felt light-headed, not surprising since all her blood was traveling south a mile a minute.

“You think so?” Megan said. “Well, maybe as a hobby. Just for one exclusive client.”

“Is that an offer?”

“Oh, I think we’re going to have to find all sorts of creative ways to get through the long periods when we can’t be together. Do you have a webcam?” Megan asked.

“A webcam? No,” Chaz answered.

“Get one as soon as you get home,” Megan said. “They’re really cheap now, and they really are the next best thing to being there. At least then we can see each other when we talk.”

“Oh! That would be great.”

“Yes, and let me tell you right off the bat I thoroughly encourage you to wear as little as possible when we chat.”

Chaz laughed. “Hmm, well, I’m beginning to see the possibilities here.”

“Thought you might. So when *are* we going to be able to get together? Have you looked at your schedule?”

“I e-mailed it to you a while ago.”

“Great. Hey, I can maybe get away for a long weekend over Labor Day. How about you?”

“Can’t. I’ve got some departmental meetings then—curriculum development for the coming year.”

“Damn.”

Chaz could hear the disappointment in Megan’s voice. “Sorry. How about Thanksgiving?”

“November is sweeps month—our most important rating period. I can’t get away that month at all.” Megan groaned.

“Christmas?”

“Christmas I can definitely do. But damn! That’s so far away!”

“I know.”

They both went quiet. Much of the enthusiasm they had built up with their flirting deflated with the realization they wouldn’t see each for five more months.

“You sure you want to pursue this, knowing how tough it’s going to be?” Megan asked in a quiet voice. “How long before we see each other again?”

“I’m absolutely certain,” Chaz affirmed. “I meant what I said, Megan. I know how incredibly difficult it’s going to be to have a relationship with you, with all the strikes against it. But I feel something for you that I’ve never felt before. I *have* to try to see where that can lead. I will always regret it if I don’t.”

Megan sighed. “I’m glad. It’s the same for me, Chaz. I want to do whatever it takes. Even if it’s a long while until we can truly be together the way we want to be.”

“We’re sure going to become extremely patient people, I think,” Chaz said.

“Or experts at phone sex,” Megan answered wryly.

Chicago, Illinois

Megan had to settle for long, similarly frustrating phone calls every week or so during the next month and a half, while Chaz was leading trips. In between, they exchanged long letters and e-mails, filling the other in on the bits and pieces of their lives: family and upbringing, schools and pets, friends and jobs. They were happy to find they had

many more things in common than they knew: politics, movies, books, music. Ethics and morals. A deep concern for the environment.

With every written exchange and telephone call, they further cemented the bond between them. But talking by webcam once Chaz returned to Fairbanks was both a blessing and a curse, because seeing each other without being able to touch was the most excruciatingly frustrating torture.

By mid-September, Megan knew it would never be enough.

It wasn't a startling revelation. She didn't wake up one morning and decide that things had reached critical mass. There was just a nagging discontent with her life as it was, and a growing realization that what mattered most in her life were those long talks with Chaz in the evening.

Something had to give.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fairbanks, Alaska

Chaz stared out of the window of her office, in the general direction of Denali. It was a view she never tired of, but her mind was entirely on Megan. It was 3:00 p.m. in Alaska, which meant it was 6:00 p.m. in Chicago, and Megan would likely be headed home about now. Chaz often paused in her daily routine to glance at the clock and imagine what Megan might be doing at that moment. She had also begun to watch the news more often than ever before, because she knew if a major story broke that Megan would be unavailable for a while.

Her last class of the day, Mammology, didn't start for half an hour, and she was restless. It was as though the only time she felt entirely happy now—completely whole and content—was during those moments she was talking to Megan. Swiveling in her chair to face her desk, Chaz picked up a framed five-by-seven photo of the two of them together that Sally had taken. She had a second copy beside her bed at home.

Unbeknownst to either of them at the time, Sally had captured that moment on the hilltop above the caribou herd when she had very nearly kissed Megan. From looking at the picture—their expressions, their faces close together—it would have been hard to believe they *hadn't* kissed a moment after the photo was taken.

Seeing it set off a visceral, involuntary reaction within her body, a warm rush of feeling as it recalled the heat of Megan's kisses. There was just no way she could wait until Christmas to be with her.

"You're sure somewhere else," Gareth Rosenberg said from the doorway. "You have a melancholy look on your face, my friend. Everything all right?"

Chaz leaned back in her chair and didn't answer immediately. *You*

have to spend some real time with her. “How upset would you be with me if I asked to take a sabbatical?”

Gareth frowned. “Is something wrong, Chaz? Not sick or anything?”

“No, nothing like that,” she hastened to reassure him. “I’m fine. I just have some personal things that need my attention, and I will probably need some time off to do them.”

“How long are we talking?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a year.”

“And you’d want to start right away? Next term?” he asked.

“Yes. I think so.” *Probably would be wise to get Megan’s input on this. I certainly hope she’ll be up for me coming to Chicago for a while.*

“Well, of course you can have whatever time you need. I’ll just be anxious to get you back. We need you around here, you know.”

“Thanks, Gareth.” She glanced at the clock. “I’ll have a better idea of my plans in a day or so, I think.” She gathered up some papers on her desk and got to her feet. “Gotta head to class. Going my way?”

“You bet.”

Her last class of the week was her least favorite. Not that she wasn’t enthusiastic about the subject; she loved talking about the wildlife of Alaska, and she had some great new photos from her summer trips to show the class. But this was a required class, so it was held in one of the large impersonal lecture halls, and every time she handed out a test she had 168 papers to grade. Her other classes were all small enough that she could get to know each student somewhat during the course of a term.

The stacked tiers of seats were only half filled when she arrived; students were still filing in from two sides so she busied herself getting her materials ready.

Today on the big screen that dominated the front of the room, the students would be treated to 400 or so breathtaking photos that Chaz had shot during her countless trips, alone and as a guide. She had close-up shots of all the major mammals that populated the state, including some of the more reclusive: polar bears and grizzly bears, wolves and wolverines, lynx.

“Hi, everybody. If we can settle into seats, please,” she asked to get the stragglers moving. “I’d like to pick up where we left off—chapter

10. Today I'm going to be talking about the magnificent mammals that inhabit this great state."

She flicked the switch that lowered the lights above the students and turned on the digital projector. "First up is *Ursus arctos horribilis*... or our friend the Alaska grizzly bear..."

The ninety-minute class flew. Perhaps she had brought a few too many photos. Or maybe she had paused a bit too long on the ones she'd taken of the caribou herd that summer, because those photos always reminded her of Megan. Before she knew it, the time was nearly up, and she still had pictures left to show.

"I'm going to just let the slide show play out here, to give you all a look at the rest of what I brought," she said. "But I'll stop now...in case anyone has any questions? Comments?"

There were four.

The first was a query about where musk ox could be found.

The second, a compliment of her excellent photography skills, drew a smattering of applause from other students.

The third asked when midterms were.

She thought that was all. In fact, she had already begun to hear that pervasive rustling that was the sound of students gathering up belongings to leave, when a familiar voice rang out from the dark last row.

"Ever come face to face with a grizzly bear?"

She was stunned into silence.

A long moment passed. The rustling had stopped and the room was quiet. The students were all watching her intently.

"Yes," she replied, a smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. "Once."

There was dead silence in the room.

"But there's not time to tell that story today." This elicited a loud groan from at least three-fourths of the class, but she stepped to the wall switch and turned the lights back up, saying, "See you all next week."

Megan was seated in the dead center of the last row. She remained where she was, staring at Chaz with a positively beaming smile on her face, as students got up all around her and filed out. Finally, once they were alone, she rose and made her way forward, her eyes never leaving Chaz's.

Chaz's breath caught in her throat. *Oh, God.* Megan had never been more stunning. Like she stepped off the cover of a magazine. Hair shining, eyes glowing. Lips full and moist. She was wearing a pair of dark gray dress slacks, topped with a red silk blouse and charcoal sweater.

Megan slinked slowly toward her. Until she got to within a few feet—then she flew into Chaz's arms and hugged her with a fierceness that took her breath away.

"You're really here," Chaz said, inhaling the herbal fragrance of Megan's perfume.

"Indeed I am. In the flesh." Megan drew back from their embrace to look her in the eyes. "And very anxious to be alone with you. I think you're done for the day, aren't you?"

"How are you here?" Chaz was still in shock. "How *long* are you here, more importantly?"

"I'm here on assignment," Megan answered. "I've got at least a couple of weeks." She pointed to a small suitcase, shoved beneath a row of coat hooks along one wall. "That's mine. Know a place I can stay?"

"Oh, boy, do I ever."

A minute later, they were in the vast parking lot. It was only mid-October, but it was already white as far as the eye could see.

"Didn't you tell me you lived quite a ways out of town?" Megan asked as they climbed into Chaz's big pickup truck.

"Forty miles."

"There is absolutely no way I can wait that long to kiss you."

Chaz started toward her at once, but Megan still managed to meet her halfway.

Their lips pressed together, softly at first—tentatively, reacquainting after nearly four months apart. Then their too-long-denied heat for each other took hold and ignited the kiss into a scorching, hungry exchange.

"Jesus," Chaz said shakily when they parted to breathe. "We'll never make it to my place."

"Yes, we will." But Megan was breathing heavily, too, and her lips were bruised and tender. "I'll be good." She leaned back into her seat and buckled her seatbelt, while she gestured with her head for Chaz to do the same. "Once we really get started, you know we won't be able to

stop. So you better get this truck going before I lose my resolve not to touch you until we get there.”

Chaz fumbled the key into the ignition and got the pickup moving. For the first time ever, she wished she lived a hell of a lot closer to town. She kept glancing in Megan’s direction. “You’re going to have to stop looking at me like that, Megan.”

“Like what? How am I looking at you?” Megan’s sexy tone indicated she knew damn well what she was doing.

“I mean it, now! Stop! It’s hard enough to keep my eyes on the road as it is. Be nice!”

“Can’t help it. God, I’ve missed you so much. I can’t wait to get my hands all over you.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. You’re looking at me like I’ve already got all my clothes off.”

“Never seemed to bother you before,” Megan said with a grin.

“Well, I have absolutely no problem taking off my clothes with you,” Chaz said. “But you can’t be putting these images into my head when the road is slippery and we have miles and miles to go yet.”

“You are such a wet blanket sometimes,” Megan griped. “But okay. I’ll behave.”

“So talk to me. Keep my mind off of where it is right now so I can get us home safely. Tell me about this assignment you’re on.” Chaz glanced sideways at her and refrained from stopping the truck so they could kiss. “I still can’t believe you’re actually here. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I wanted to surprise you. I’m here to do a series of special reports on the refuge.”

“No kidding! Was this your idea?”

“Yes. I’m executive producing. My crew arrives next week. I’m here to scout locations and do some research.”

“Well, you know whatever I can do...” Chaz said.

“I was hoping you’d say that. We’ve talked to the university about getting someone to act as our guide and resident expert—I’ve requested you.” Megan grinned at her. “They gave me the go-ahead to see if you’re interested. It’d be good exposure for the school and good for the refuge. You know I’ll cover it right—really make people interested in helping to make sure it stays a protected wilderness.”

“*And* we get to spend a couple of weeks together,” Chaz said.

“Sounds like a wonderful plan to me.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“You know, the next time we talked I was going to ask you what you thought about my maybe coming to Chicago for a very long visit.” Chaz slowed the truck to turn off the main road onto the one that led to her cabin.

“How long are we talking?”

“Maybe a year?” Chaz glanced over to see the reaction. Megan had a very happy grin on her face.

“And how would you manage that?” Megan asked.

“Take a sabbatical. I could probably be there in January. I ran it by the head of the department today, but I wanted to talk to you before I made a formal request.”

“You’d take a year off from your job...and leave Alaska for Chicago...for me?” Megan’s voice was soft in disbelief.

“Of course. I said I’d do whatever it takes to give us a real shot.”

“Yes, you did.” Megan was quiet for a long while, staring out the window. “I’d like to tell you about someone, Chaz. From my past. I told you that you reminded me of someone.”

“Rita,” Chaz answered. “Justine told me a few things about her.”

“Did she?”

“Not that much, really. I think she wanted me to know that you weren’t really a one-night-stand-only kind of person, at heart. That you had fallen in love and had gotten serious with someone, but she hurt you very badly.”

“That sums it up pretty well.” Megan’s voice was resigned and sad.

“I thought it was love. I thought we were happy. But she was cheating on me behind my back, and when she left, she hired an attorney and wanted to make it all very messy. I just wanted to stop the pain, so I let her have everything. The house. Most everything in it. The nice new car. Our two cats. I walked away with nothing much but my clothes.”

“I wish I knew what to say,” Chaz said. “It’s inconceivable to me that someone who purportedly loves you could do such a thing. My heart aches for you, that you had to go through that.”

Megan shrugged. “You know, I carried around a lot of...bitterness. Anger. Resentment. Lots of negative shit, from that relationship. For a very long time. I really didn’t realize I was doing it...until I met you. But I see now it’s what kept me from really getting close to anyone else.

I was just too damn afraid of it all happening again. Making myself vulnerable enough for someone to be able to cut me so deeply.” She put a hand gently on Chaz’s thigh. “I really trust you. And I have to say...that I feel things for you that I never felt for Rita.”

“Thank you for telling me about her,” Chaz said.

“I want you to know everything.”

“As I want you to know everything about me.” Chaz hated that Megan had suffered so in her relationship with Rita, but she felt almost giddy that she had pushed past all of that in order to find her in Alaska. “So does that mean you’re up for my coming to Chicago?”

“Well, I think we have another alternative that might be better,” Megan said, as Chaz’s cabin came into view in the distance.

“Do we?” Chaz asked.

“This assignment could turn into something more long term.”

Chaz’s heartbeat picked up. “Define long term.”

Megan was watching her intently. “Well, it could be permanent, if that’s what we both want.”

The truck ground to a halt. Chaz turned to her. “Permanent?”

“If that’s what we both want,” Megan repeated. “You don’t have to decide today.” She gestured at the road. “Come on. Keep going.”

Chaz put the truck into gear. “How is it possible?”

“Well, I pitched an idea to the network president, my boss. I told him I wanted to start up an environmental unit—that it was high time WNC had one—to do documentaries in the public interest.”

“And he went for it?”

“Well, I had to threaten to resign first, to show him I was serious that’s the only way I would continue with the company,” Megan said. “He likes me well enough that he wanted to keep me on the payroll.”

“But how can you be here permanently?”

“Well, that was one of my conditions. That I would be based wherever I choose. I’ll be on the road some, of course, but it won’t be too bad.”

Chaz shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’d do all this for me.”

“Why? You were ready to do it for me.” Megan’s staff couldn’t believe it at first either, and she knew it appeared to most like a pretty monumental change she was making in her life. But the decision had actually been pretty simple when it came right down to it. “I get to be

with you, in Alaska...which I've grown rather fond of, by the way. And I'll get to do something I feel passionate about. Something that might make a difference. Besides, I was beginning to be very unhappy with where I was, without you there."

The truck came to a stop in front of a well-kept one-story log cabin. A matching garage sat off to one side. In every direction were magnificent, snowcapped mountains, and behind the cabin there was a picturesque lake, already frozen over except for a few small patches of open water that glistened in the sunlight. It couldn't have been more inviting.

"We're here," Chaz said, shutting off the engine and turning to Megan. "Welcome. Welcome home."



Megan paused just inside the doorway, her eyes taking in the comfortable and homey great room as Chaz darted about, picking up a sweater she had thrown over a chair, the loose mail on the coffee table, the empty coffee cup from that morning.

"Sorry about the mess," Chaz said. "Please...come on in and make yourself comfortable. I'll get a fire going and pour us some wine. How does that sound?"

"That would be lovely," Megan answered.

A massive stone fireplace dominated one wall. The other walls were crowded with bookshelves, jammed to overflowing with books and with framed photographs from Chaz's travels. Her concertina, unlatched as though it had been recently played, sat on an end table beside the couch.

Everywhere was evidence of Chaz's love of the out-of-doors. Snowshoes hung above the mantel, cross-country skis and poles were propped in one corner. Inuit art and sculptures were scattered about, on bookshelves and in small glass display cases. Megan wandered about the room, taking things in, as Chaz built a fire.

Within a few minutes, a cheery blaze was going, and Chaz lit a few candles to add to the romantic ambience. Then she excused herself to get some wine from the kitchen.

"Join me," she said, when she returned to settle on the couch in front of the fire, with two glasses of Lambrusco.

Megan took one and held it up for a toast as she sat beside Chaz. “To us,” she said.

“I’ll certainly drink to that.” Chaz clinked her glass against Megan’s and took a sip. “I still can hardly believe you’re here.”

“Well, then I guess it’s time I start convincing you I’m not only here, but here to stay a while.” Megan put her glass on the coffee table, then took Chaz’s and set it down as well, before she repositioned herself—facing Chaz, straddling her, one knee on either side of Chaz’s lap.

She cradled Chaz’s face in her hands and leaned in for a long, slow kiss. They had all the time in the world, now, and Megan wanted to make it last. She kissed Chaz with all the passion that four months of longing had built up inside of her, and Chaz kissed her back in equal measure.

Her body came alive then, teased by Chaz’s body undulating beneath her, and her hips began to move of their own accord. Before she knew it, Chaz’s hands had worked their way beneath her clothing and were caressing her sides, her back, her hips, her stomach, with increasing pressure and purpose. Soon her heart was pounding so loud she was certain Chaz could feel it, hear it. It sent a warm wave of blood pulsing between her legs.

She gasped for air when Chaz’s fingers found both of her nipples at once. Each tweak, firm and insistent, resonated to her core and sent her higher. She ground her pelvis against Chaz and moaned, long and loud, arching her back and letting the sensations wash over her.

The sound seemed to fuel Chaz’s purposeful touches—she lifted Megan’s sweater and shirt and took one of her breasts in her mouth, sucking hard, while one arm wrapped around Megan and pulled her close.

“I love your mouth on me,” Megan whispered, breathless with excitement. “But I need to feel you, Chaz. We have far too many clothes on.”

“Your wish is my command.” Chaz slipped Megan’s sweater off and fumbled for the buttons on the red silk shirt underneath.

Soon she was naked from the waist up, and Chaz followed a moment later with the swift removal of her own fleecy top and turtleneck. They came together then, breast to breast, mouth to mouth,

their bodies moving more urgently against each other as the passion between them flared higher.

“Jesus, Chaz,” Megan cried out. “You’re driving me crazy! Clothes! Off! Now!”

Chaz lifted her, one strong hand beneath each thigh, and shifted Megan until she was lying on the couch. *Thank God for those long hours spent kayaking and backpacking*, Megan thought. *Muscles to spare. And she’ll need them tonight.*

She stared into Chaz’s eyes as her slacks and panties were stripped from her body. She could drown in those eyes. Dark pools, the pupils enormous, lids heavy with arousal.

She watched as Chaz got to her feet to slowly remove her own jeans and boxers in a seductive striptease. The warm amber glow from the fire lit her skin, casting shadows that accentuated every curve and hollow and taut muscle of that exceptional body.

“Come lay on me,” Megan whispered.

“You don’t want to move to the bedroom?” Chaz asked, her voice hoarse and unfamiliar. She offered a hand to help Megan up.

“For the next round, perhaps.” Megan took the hand and pulled Chaz down on top of her, opening her legs to surround Chaz’s body and pull her close.

She felt Chaz shudder as their centers came together, and she couldn’t contain an answering tremble of her own body. When they were together like this, nothing else mattered. And everything, *everything*—made sense.

The travel brochure had promised Megan that she would have an unforgettable experience in Alaska. One that would change her life. It had certainly lived up to all of that and more. It had given her perspective and purpose, and for the first time in her life, here in Chaz’s arms, she felt truly complete, filled with a sense of belonging she had yearned for all her life. She was home at last, and in the calm that enveloped her as Chaz stole the breath from her body and noisy doubt from her mind, she could hear her heart’s truth. This was for keeps. And she wanted it no other way.

“I love you, Chaz,” she said.

Chaz drew back slightly and stared down at her with solemn yearning. “I could get used to hearing that. How does every day for the rest of our lives sound?”

Megan brushed her mouth across the soft lips just a breath from her own. “I think I could sign up for that. But I’ll need to practice.”

Chaz grinned. “Then let’s not waste any time. I love you, too, Megan Maxwell, and now I’m going to show you how much.”

About the Author

Kim Baldwin started writing fiction in 2001 after a 20-year career in journalism. She has published three novels, including the 2005 Golden Crown Literary Award finalist *Hunter's Pursuit*, and two short stories in the Bold Strokes Erotic Interlude series. She is currently at work on her fourth book, *Flight Risk*. Her interests include kayaking, motorcycling, collecting books, and music. She and her partner live in the north woods of Michigan.

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by
Kim Baldwin



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Acknowledgments

Some years ago, I visited Alaska, dogsledding above the Arctic Circle for ten days in a challenging and unforgettable adventure of a lifetime. The awesome beauty of the Brooks Range inspired my first Alaska-based novel, *Whitewater Rendezvous*, but I felt compelled to revisit the state for a winter-themed story that could incorporate some of my own experiences. I have set Bryson Faulkner's cabin in the exact spot where my own trip culminated, and the photo used as the backdrop for the cover was taken there. It's my profound hope that this book inspires at least a few readers to join in the battle to preserve our greatest national treasure—the Alaskan wilderness—from the threat of oil drilling and other perils.

Breaking the Ice is also a very personal story in that I began the manuscript on the first anniversary of my mother's sudden death after a long battle with Alzheimer's. Revisiting some personal recollections and experiences in this novel proved cathartic in a way I could not have imagined.

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Dedication

For my Mother
I feel you watching over me
I miss you so very much

And my Father
With deep respect and gratitude
And always love

CHAPTER ONE

*October 21, 9:30 a.m.
North of Bettles, Alaska*

Bryson Faulkner jerked up the collar of her coat as she stepped off the porch of her cabin. She lingered there, basking in the amber light of the late-morning sunrise, surveying her surroundings for any hint of change. Beneath the rough-hewn table she'd lashed for cleaning fish and game, she spotted fresh wolf tracks in the mud, the animals no doubt lured there by the lingering scent of the sockeye salmon she'd had for dinner. There was no sign of the lurking predators now. Nothing stirred except the large raven that took off from a black spruce twenty feet away and zigzagged past her in an amazing display of aerial acrobatics to land on the porch railing.

The bird studied her with intelligent black eyes and let out a raucous croak that ruffled the shaggy ebony feathers of his throat.

"Mornin', Bandit." Even before she reached into her pocket he was in the air again, beating his wings slowly to hover a moment before lighting on her shoulder. She held up her hand and he gobbled the offered raisins, nuts, and sunflower seeds, careful to avoid pinching the callused skin of her palm with his stout bill.

As he ate, she looked past him to the white-capped mountains that surrounded her cabin. Mathews Dome, due north, was the most photogenic peak in her part of the endless Brooks Range. A rounded granite crest 4,600 feet high, it was set off from its neighbors by the Wild River, curving west, and Flat Creek, forking around its base to the east.

But she used an unnamed mountain three hundred feet higher to the northwest, a jagged and fiercely sharp pinnacle, as her weather gauge. The roiling slate gray nimbostratus clouds blowing past the top confirmed the news she'd just received on her satellite phone. A fierce storm was headed her way, fast.

The one-room cabin she'd built with her own hands was nestled in the taiga forest that lined the Wild River at its confluence with Flat Creek. The valley floor between the mountains was wide here, nearly a mile across. Built on a rise to shield it from the high water of spring breakup, the log structure had a matching outbuilding for her snowmachine and tools, an outhouse, and a small cache on high stilts to keep her winter supply of game and salmon out of reach of opportunistic wolves, grizzlies, and other predators of the far north.

She regretted not refueling the plane after her last hop, but she'd barely made it home before dusk. Though Bryson had memorized every boulder and stump that littered her makeshift airstrip, it was still suicidal to take off or land in the dark. The gravel bar was less than a hundred feet long. Any slight mistake and she'd end up in the swift, icy currents of the Wild River.

Once the river froze and she could land on skis, she'd have a longer, wider runway, but the daily window of opportunity to land at her homestead would be frustratingly narrow. The days were shortening fast. In another two months, at the winter solstice, daylight would last only two hours in her little piece of paradise above the Arctic Circle. Almost any job she might take would require her to remain overnight at the nearest improved and illuminated runway thirty miles away in Bettles.

She dropped the few remaining seeds on the ground, and as the raven hopped off her shoulder to go after them, she headed down the trail to her red Piper Super Cub. While the plane warmed up, she freed it from its lashings and carefully inspected the exterior for damage before beginning her preflight checklist. Though she needed to leave soon, she refused to be rushed through her meticulous and methodical preparations.

The high wings of the Super Cub allowed her to taxi close to uprooted trees and boulders as tall as she was, and the model was one of the best at handling impossibly short runways and uneven terrain. Like many other bush pilots, she'd had it specially outfitted for the

punishment it endured on a daily basis, with long, heavy-duty struts, reinforced axles and springs, and a dual landing apparatus that allowed her to set down on skis or oversized tundra tires.

The trip to the Bettles airstrip took less than a half hour. Flying low, she followed the river south as it curved through steep canyons, the clearance to the cliff faces on either side of her wingtips a mere twenty feet or so. Though she knew nearly every mountain, boulder, and tree en route, she was always hyperalert when in the cockpit, because no matter how clear the sky above, the geography of the mountain ranges made the wind a constant and unpredictable threat to small aircraft.

The proprietor of the Den jogged out to say hello as she filled her wing tanks. The Den was the center of all socializing in Bettles, with a bar and restaurant on the ground floor and twenty rooms upstairs to accommodate the hunters, fishermen, hikers, photographers, and other adventure-seekers who used the village as a jumping-off point for forays into the bush. Most were headed to the nearby Gates of the Arctic National Park or Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which together covered more than twenty-seven million acres.

“Hey, kiddo, what’s shakin’?” Jerome Hudson was known by all as Grizz, and it was immediately obvious how he’d come by the nickname. A big brute of a man with massive shoulders, he’d had the unkempt silver-tipped brown beard and swept-back, shoulder-length hair for half his sixty-two years, and his dark eyes and slightly pointed incisors completed the resemblance to his wild ursine cousins. Since the death of Bryson’s father, Grizz had taken it upon himself to look out for her. “Real ball-breaker coming in.”

Bryson glanced once more to the northwest, to assess the thick wall of charcoal clouds streaming rapidly in their direction. “Yeah, I’m headed up past Gunsight Mountain to get that photographer. He’s not equipped for a long-haul deep freeze.”

Grizz followed her gaze. “Gonna be cuttin’ it awful close to get there and back ’fore we’re socked in.”

“What else is new?” She unhooked the fuel hose and tightened the cap on the Piper’s wing. “No worries, Grizz,” she said, smiling at him reassuringly. “Probably won’t be able to get home tonight, though, so save me a bed, huh?”

“Will do.” He laid a beefy hand on her shoulder as she opened the door of the Cub. “Watch yourself up there.”

“Always.”

The photographer’s objective was Dall sheep, which kept to the higher alpine elevations, so Bryson had dropped him off at the edge of a glacier three thousand feet up the side of an unnamed mountain. As she circled above it, she cranked down her skis and checked the glacier for the subtle color changes that pinpointed the hidden crevasses that dotted its surface. The ancient ice inside the crevasses was a deep blue that often shone through the thin, fragile snow bridges that covered them. The overcast sky was a blessing, for it helped her delineate the landscape and calculate her approach. The glare off the snow on a sunny day often made it impossible to adequately judge depth of field, let alone any crevasses or other hazards.

After three passes, she chose her spot, a four-hundred-foot-long expanse of solid white near a moraine at one side of the glacier. Landing uphill, she braced herself for the impact of her skis against the uneven ice beneath the snow and set the Piper down, reducing her speed to thirty-five miles an hour. When the plane had nearly stopped, she tweaked the throttle and turned the Cub around, readying for an immediate downhill departure.

A blast of icy air flash-cooled every exposed inch of flesh and insinuated itself deep into the open collar of her jacket as soon as she opened her door. Muttering a string of curses, she zipped up and pulled on a woolen cap and extra pair of gloves before leaning out to assess the snow depth. A fine powder completely covered her skis and half her oversized tires, so she strapped her snowshoes to her boots before she exited the plane.

The photographer was nowhere in sight, but Bryson wasn’t worried. She’d seen his campsite from the air not far away, and the man had been instructed to hoof it back there, pack it up, and return immediately to their rendezvous point if he heard her plane approach before his scheduled pickup. Unless the wind was fierce and constant, the acoustics in the mountains were exceptional—you could hear the buzz of a small plane long before you could see it approaching.

While Bryson waited, she tramped out a runway with her snowshoes and inspected the exterior of the plane as thoroughly as she had just ninety minutes earlier. By the time the photographer appeared with his pack, she was done with her preflight checklist and had turned her attention to the rapidly deteriorating weather closing in on them.

Dark clouds obliterated all the highest peaks in every direction, the wind was a steady twenty-five miles an hour, and the temperature had dropped to a degree or two above freezing.

"I take it there's a problem?" her client shouted over the wind as he neared. A fiftysomething freelancer for *Big Game Hunter* magazine, the man wore a ski mask, thermal gloves, and brand-new Carhart insulated coveralls bulging from several layers beneath. He was so horribly out of shape he was gasping for air by the time he reached the Cub.

The plane was idling, and Bryson was standing by the open door to the cargo space behind the seats. "Big storm coming in." She gestured impatiently for his pack.

He frowned and stood his ground. "I'm not done. I need to—"

"No chance," she replied curtly and yanked the pack roughly from his shoulders. "Climb in, we gotta get moving." When he still hadn't moved by the time she'd stowed his gear, she fixed him with a glare and added, "*Now*, 'less you want to be stuck inside your tent freezing your ass off for a couple weeks."

Normally, she was nothing but polite with clients, most of whom were middle-aged businessmen from the lower forty-eight. She was used to the looks of apprehension that crossed their faces when they realized their bush pilot was a trim and taciturn five-foot-seven brunette who appeared ten years younger than her forty years, and not what they'd envisioned: some larger-than-life Harrison Ford look-alike who oozed machismo and bragged about his exploits in the air.

But most of her passengers refrained from anything more than the seemingly casual question about how long she'd been flying. This guy's grilling on the way up had bordered on rude and chauvinistic, and she'd had to force herself to rise above it and remain professional.

They were airborne in two minutes and only fifty feet from the surface of the glacier when they got their first hint of the turbulence to come. The tiny plane shook like it was caught in a high-speed Mixmaster, then dropped twenty feet without warning, the ground rushing up at them with alarming speed.

"What the...is this normal?" the photographer shouted from his seat behind hers. Bryson could picture his expression. Even the most arrogant, macho guys went lily-white at a time like this, but she didn't have time to confirm her suspicions in her mirror. She was too busy trying to keep the Cub in the air.

"We'll be fine, just hold tight. It'll be over before you know it." She fought the downdraft, pulling hard on the controls, but the plane plummeted another fifteen feet as she curved away from the glacier and over the steep, rocky face of the mountain. They were so close to it she could see the pale hint of a trail etched by decades of goat hooves.

"Fuck!" the client yelled, just before losing his breakfast in a splash of pink-speckled yellow against the right-side window.

"Not helping." Bryson gritted her teeth against the stench as her own stomach roiled, but she kept her focus on trying to regain control of the aircraft. The wind fought back with a vengeance, however, straining the muscles of her biceps. For every few feet of hard-won altitude she gained, the wind reclaimed half of it again, in bone-jarring lurches that threatened to shake the plane apart.

Finally they reached a bit of calmer air in a wide valley between two mountains, but the low, dense cloud cover kept her flying near the treetops, which did nothing to ease the unyielding grip her passenger maintained on the strap above his head. And the reprieve didn't last. Soon they were back in the Mixmaster, and thick, heavy sleet began to hammer the windshield.

It was now a race to get back before ice coated the wings and cowlings, but the steady headwind limited Bryson's speed and forward progress. Among the myriad of matters demanding her attention she added one more: to constantly scout for places she could safely put down in a hurry, if it came to that.

Her radio crackled to life. "BTT to A2024B Piper. Bryson, you copy?" The voice, a raspy baritone, belonged to Mike "Skeeter" Sweeney, a fellow bush pilot who worked part-time manning the minuscule FAA station at the village airstrip.

"A2024B Piper," she replied, relaying the identification tag emblazoned in large black text on the side of the Cub. "'Sup, Skeeter? Kinda busy here."

"Grizz asked me to give you a shout. Really squirrely here. Ceiling's down below two hundred feet, sustained winds thirty and better, and it's startin' to ice up like a sonofabitch."

A glance at her GPS told Bryson she still had eight miles between her and the airstrip. It didn't sound like much, but it was an eternity in conditions like this, so she kept checking the terrain below for suitable places to land. "Should be okay. Dicey, but seen worse."

“Roger that. I’ve got the strip lights up full, and I’ll watch you on radar until you get in. Bettles out.”

She spotted another narrow canyon ahead, so she gripped the controls and risked a quick glance in the mirror at her passenger. “’Nother roller coaster coming up. Barf bag’s under your seat.” She hoped the warning would prevent any further splatters on her windows. Visibility was tough enough already, without another dose of half-digested powdered eggs and Spam.

As the man fumbled for her stash of bags, she added, “If you keep from messing up my plane again, I’ll give you a discount on future flights.” It was an easy promise, because the greenish tinge on his face made it clear this was the last time he’d set foot in any kind of bush plane.

Just as she expected, the downdraft in the narrow canyon was fierce, but she’d gained as much altitude as possible before it hit them, so when the bottom dropped out again she was able to keep the Cub from plunging into the river below. More worrisome now were the cliffs on either side of her wingtips. The wind buffeted the plane from side to side with alarming unpredictability, twice putting them within arm’s reach of the rocky façades.

She ignored the mumbled recitation of the Lord’s Prayer from her passenger but took a few deep breaths herself when a subtle change in the whirr of the propeller told her the blades were accumulating a coat of ice.

It was bare-knuckle flying from then on, a steady battle against the wind and sleet, and those last few miles tested every bit of her considerable experience in the air. By the time she lined up for her approach to Bettles, the ceiling was only thirty feet, so she was grateful for her GPS and intimate knowledge of every mile of terrain in the surrounding area.

She cranked the skis back and peered anxiously through the haze of sleet for the airstrip, holding her breath. Skeeter had supplemented the dual strip of landing lights with four blazing fires in fifty-five-gallon drums, two on each end of the runway, and it was these she saw first.

As she made a mental note to buy him a beer, she descended the final few feet and made a perfect three-point landing. Her passenger exhaled loudly in relief, and she glanced in the mirror in time to see him making the sign of the cross.

“Thank you for flying with Thrillride Airlines,” she said cheekily as the Cub rolled to a stop at the edge of the runway. “You can pick up your complimentary beverage at the Den, since our stewardess was too preoccupied to serve you during your flight.” If the eclectic group of individuals who did what she did had anything in common, it had to be their readiness to daily stare death in the face with a sense of humor.

Still clutching his barf bag, the photographer staggered from the plane and headed directly to the roadhouse without a word, oblivious to his gear or the weather. Bryson chuckled. Grizz would get a few dollars from him tonight, at least the cost of several glasses of good Scotch.

CHAPTER TWO

*October 21, morning
Atlanta, Georgia*

“Karla? I know you’re there. Come *on*, already, *please* pick up. I’m way past worry and halfway to panic.”

During the brief silence, Karla pictured her best friend Stella pacing around the nurses’ station with her cell phone. She was restless, the kind who rarely lit in one spot for more than five minutes, and Karla had given her good reason to be concerned. This call was the latest in a string of messages left since the funeral, none of which Karla had returned.

“Hon, I know you’re hurting and don’t want to see anyone right now. But this just isn’t good. I’m coming by after work, and you’d damn well better open the door this time. At least let me take you out for a bite to eat or something. Love you.”

Karla had no intention of allowing Stella in, for even in her fog of grief and confusion, she knew her friend would be shocked by the state of both her appearance and her apartment. She didn’t have any energy to fend off well-meaning efforts to alleviate her downward spiral.

She’d lost so much weight that her pajamas hung loosely on her five-foot, four-inch frame, and dark circles under her eyes from too many sleepless nights marred her otherwise delicate features. Her collar-length, light brown hair was a shade darker than usual and plastered to her head, and at odd moments even she could detect the stench of her unwashed body.

Her two-bedroom apartment hadn't fared the turmoil any better. Dirty mugs, most half full of cold, stagnant coffee, littered the living room, some on tables and some on the floor. Here and there were a few plates of crusted foodstuffs, uneaten and unrecognizable. The heavy curtains, drawn tight, blocked the sun so well she barely registered day from night. Only the pale glow of a single floor lamp saved the room from cave-like darkness.

Scattered around where she sat cross-legged on the carpet beneath the lamp were a half-dozen photo albums and several boxes, large and small, their contents in such disarray it looked as though she'd been burglarized.

The boxes that held memories of her four years with Abby had consumed the first days of her current despair. It had been a month since her partner left, but the wound of Abby's betrayal was as open and raw as it had been the day she'd announced she was leaving Karla to follow her heart, having fallen in love with a coworker at her law firm.

Karla was still having a hard time wrapping her mind around the abrupt, unexpected ending of their calm domesticity. One day they were sitting down to dinner together as usual, chatting about what movie to go see, and the next, Abby was packing her bags. Since then she'd asked herself over and over if Abby's apparent happiness and devotion had been an illusion. Those boxes, full of ticket stubs and vacation souvenirs, small stuffed animals and other mementos, held no answers, no clues to how she could have been so wrong about their life together.

And then, two weeks ago, her mother died in her sleep, an apparent heart attack. Somehow, Karla had made it through the funeral, a walking zombie, feeling more alone and abandoned than ever before. She hadn't left her apartment since, or spoken to any of her well-meaning friends and coworkers. She'd opened her door just once, the day before, only because her visitor from the nursing home was there to drop off her mother's belongings. Fortunately her leave of absence from her job as an ER nurse at Grady Memorial Hospital was open-ended, because she couldn't fathom when she might have the strength to rejoin the living.

Karla hadn't summoned the courage to examine the contents of the delivery until now, but she finally pushed aside the boxes of her life

with Abby for a new round of grieving. She didn't think she could cry any more, but the tears rarely stopped as she considered each item she withdrew from the cache of her mother's things.

The first box contained jewelry and the few scarves and clothes her mother had obsessively insisted on wearing after Alzheimer's claimed her once-impeccable fashion sense. In the end, she'd become so agitated if Karla tried to launder her favorite lavender blouse that Karla had searched the city's shopping malls without success for a duplicate.

The blouse was faded and nearly threadbare in places, but because her mother had worn little else in the months before her death, it was hard to picture her without it. Karla felt guilty for not burying her in it, opting instead for the new cream-colored dress she'd bought for her mother's fifty-seventh birthday. She clutched the blouse and held it to her face, inhaling deeply, seeking the familiar scent of patchouli, but the garment had obviously been washed. She felt as though she'd been robbed.

Sorting through the contents of the jewelry box consumed half the night. Her mother had saved the pearl necklace for special occasions: her college graduation, birthday dinners, weddings, holidays. All happy occasions that evoked fond memories. But her mother had worn the delicate tigereye necklace that matched her eyes so often it seemed almost a part of her, right up to the end. Karla stroked her thumb over the cool stone for more than an hour, lost in the past, sobbing until her sides ached. Then she tucked the necklace into her pocket, unable to let go of it.

After the jewelry she reminisced through a box containing a collection of bunny figurines and other keepsakes. The lopsided clay vase she'd made for Mother's Day in the fourth grade. Her old report cards and class photos. A lock of her baby hair. Several items she'd never seen before: another lock of hair, curly and red, which matched no one in the family. A colorful ashtray that looked to be a child's art project, when neither of her parents had ever smoked. Why had her mother saved these mementos?

Finally, about dawn, she began to sort through the final box, this one full of photos and documents: a copy of the will, insurance papers, bank-account statements, marriage and birth certificates, and

her mother's long-expired passport. And beneath it all, she discovered a sealed envelope addressed in her mother's handwriting.

For Karla. In the event of my death.

Her mother had been unable to recognize words for at least two years, and it had been four or five since she'd been able to write legibly, so the missive clearly predated that. It had been so long since her mother had been able to communicate rationally—she hadn't even recognized her in the final months—that Karla felt as though God had gifted her with one final, bittersweet reunion. The three sheets of heavy bond paper transported her back to a time when her mother had still been the vibrant and intelligent woman of her youth.

My darling Karla,

I am watching you scurry about the kitchen as I write this, putting the final touches on the cake you are making for my forty-fourth birthday, pausing now and then over your lopsided creation to smile at me and apologize for your lack of culinary skills. But all I can think is that I am so proud of the woman you have become, so thoughtful and kind to all you meet. Your unwavering moral compass and commitment to helping those in need. And most of all, I admire your ability to rise to every challenge you have faced in life with optimism and determination.

You will need all of those qualities in the future. The inevitability of my decline seems certain, and if we are blessed to have many more years with each other, I have no doubt that you will make the right decisions for me when the time comes and ensure I have the best quality of life possible. I know it will be hard on you, my darling. I'm so sorry for that.

Take comfort in our many wonderful years together and view my passing as a blessing, for I will likely have long abandoned my body and already be looking out for you from Heaven, happily reunited at last with your father.

I know it will be much tougher on you than on me in the

years to come. I pray as you read this that you are able to remember me as I am now. And most of all, I hope you will seek to understand what I have to tell you and forgive me for not telling you until now.

You have a sister.

Karla stared at the words until they seemed to separate themselves from the others on the stationery, creating white space around them that wasn't really there, blurring the other words and becoming bolder, almost three-dimensional.

You have a sister.

How had her parents kept this from her? All her life she'd thought she was an only child, the progeny of two people who preached honor and truth and the importance of family. As a child, she'd wanted a sibling playmate so much she'd created an imaginary one, a little sister she called Emily. Her parents had patiently indulged her fantasy, tucking Emily in beside her at night and setting an extra place at the table for her at mealtimes, never hinting that a real Emily existed somewhere.

The sudden knowledge of their duplicity made her question everything she thought she knew of them and left her feeling more alone and adrift than ever.

She read the words a dozen times, then began to sob again, great wails of anguish that shattered the silence and seemed to echo off the walls. She couldn't read the rest for a long while.

Five years before I met and married your father, I became pregnant. I was only sixteen, still a child myself and naïve about such things, but I fancied myself in love with a boy at school named James O'Hara.

After talking with Jim's parents, mine sent me immediately to a home for unwed mothers to have the child and convinced me that it was best for both me and for the baby to give it up for adoption as soon as it was born. It was what girls did then, especially those from Catholic families. I knew from my brief glimpse of her that I'd had a daughter,

born healthy and with curly red hair, like her father. Then the nuns took her away.

I regretted that decision many times and wondered what happened to my baby, but as the years passed, I came to accept that my parents' decision had been the right one.

When I met your father, I struggled for a long time over whether to tell him about the baby I'd had. I wanted to, but I worried that he would think less of me for what I did, and my parents urged me to keep my "youthful indiscretion," as they called it, a secret. Once I'd made the decision to do so, there seemed to be no going back. How could I tell him after a year of marriage? Or five? Or ten? Besides, I had no way of knowing what had happened to the baby, so I could think of no good reason to confess to your father what I'd done.

It was not until he was gone, and my mother deathly ill with cancer, that she told me she had known all along who raised my baby and where she was. She and my father gave my daughter to a couple they knew, Richard and Joan Van Rooy. The Van Rooyes were unable to have children of their own, but desperately wanted one.

Unknown to my father, my mother asked only two things of this couple in return: that they move to another state but keep in touch over the years. They agreed and sent my mother photographs of the child growing up, pictures of her birthday parties and prom dates, vacations. She threw them away as soon as she received them, afraid that either my father or I would discover the evidence.

When she knew she was dying, she finally told me the truth.

Your sister's name is Maggie. She grew up in Alaska and married a man named Lars Rasmussen. They are living in an apartment in Fairbanks. As far as my mother knew, Maggie's adoptive parents never told her the truth about her parentage, so she, too, does not know that she has a sister.

I hope you can find her, so you can finally have the sister you always wanted. If you do, please tell Maggie I thought of her often and wished I'd had the chance to tell her I'm sorry, and that I love her.

*All my love to you, my darling. Be strong.
Mom*

So many secrets. So many lies.

Maggie Rasmussen. If she'd been born when her mother was sixteen, that meant she was forty or thereabouts, some four years older than Karla.

She wasn't alone. She still had family. Despite the lifelong deception, she felt as though someone had just thrown a life preserver into her churning sea of despair. What was this secret sister like? Would she welcome this news? And was she even still in Fairbanks? The letter was written thirteen years ago. Maggie Rasmussen could be anywhere by now.

Karla stood, still clutching the letter, and went to fire up her computer. You could track down almost anyone on the Internet these days. Couldn't you?



*October 21, evening
Bettles, Alaska*

Despite the early winter snowstorm raging through interior Alaska, twenty-six of the twenty-seven residents of Bettles were happily enjoying dinner, drinks, and an evening's entertainment in the Den, provided by four of their own: Grizz on bass, his wife Ellie on piano, Bryson on drums, and Lars Rasmussen on alto sax.

The place was a typical Alaskan roadhouse, one large room with dark oak paneling and a wood floor dotted with peanut shucks. A stuffed grizzly bear greeted customers at the door, and the walls were decorated with mounted moose heads and caribou antlers, neon beer signs and dogsled paraphernalia. A bar ran along one side, booths ringed the walls, and a scattering of tables with mismatched chairs filled the rest.

The Bettles Band, as they called themselves, sat on a small raised platform in the back corner. Their performances were usually impromptu, dictated mostly by the weather and the number of tourists in town. If the sky was clear and clients ample, Bryson was usually flying and Lars was guiding some fisherman or hunter to their quarry.

But oftentimes when a whiteout or fog stranded the two of them in town, the call went out that the party was on. And tonight was jazz night, always a popular favorite.

Bryson and Lars were the only far-flung homesteaders present. It was too early in the season for snowmobiles or dogsleds, and the weather was too poor for boats, so those hardy souls who lived off in the bush somewhere were unable to make it in. But a handful of Athabaskan Indians from the nearby native village of Evansville were here, along with a half-dozen Japanese tourists who'd come to the Arctic Circle hoping for a glimpse of the aurora borealis, or northern lights. The only other outsider in town, Bryson's photographer client, had spent a long while at the bar before he stumbled upstairs to his room hours earlier.

The band finished a rousing rendition of "All Of Me" to wild applause before pausing for a break. Bryson was stowing her drumsticks when Geneva De Luca, a waitress at the Den, appeared at her elbow.

"Heya, Bry. You guys are really cooking tonight." Geneva was a curvaceous brunette with flawless olive skin, smoky gray eyes, and full, pouty lips that invited kissing. Bryson had succumbed to them for three months before she decided it was best to keep their relationship platonic. Six months had elapsed since then, but Geneva never missed an opportunity to try to change Bryson's mind.

"Good easy crowd." Bryson got to her feet to stretch. "Not hard to please," she added with a smile.

Geneva laughed. "Neither am I, but that's beside the point, right?"

"Gen, we've talked about this, and—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Anyway, Ellie's getting better. She's in here all the time practicing."

"It shows," Bryson said. "Her repertoire's growing. Bet by spring breakup she'll be pretty damn good." All of the players got exponentially better during the long winter months when they often didn't have much else to do but practice. Ellie had only been playing for about a year. She'd taken up the piano when their last player, a wilderness guide, had packed it in for easier work in Yosemite.

"Pity there's so few outsiders in town, though." Geneva scanned the crowd before returning her gaze to Bryson. "I was kinda hoping we'd be full up and you'd have to stay with me tonight."

“Let it go,” Bryson said, not unkindly. “You know that’s not going to happen again.”

Geneva let out an exaggerated sigh and pursed her lips in disappointment. “You can’t blame a girl for trying. When I think back to that last time...”

The last time they were together, Geneva had surprised her with some new toys she’d purchased by mail order. Playing with them had been a lot of fun, until Geneva confessed that she was falling in love with her and wanted them to move in together.

Lars’s return to the stage with two cold bottles of Black Fang saved Bryson from a detailed reminiscence of that particular evening. “Thought you looked like you needed saving,” he said, once Geneva was out of earshot. “Though for the life of me I don’t see why. Not like you two have a lot of other options at the moment.”

“I get plenty of action, thank you very much.” Bryson’s outward appearance and glamorous occupation were an unbeatable combination. A high percentage of the town’s female visitors, even straight ones, flirted with her shamelessly. And if a ready partner wasn’t available locally, she simply got in her Cub and made the two-hour trip to Fairbanks, where she could arrange a quick rendezvous easily.

“Don’t doubt that.” Lars grinned. “Still, she’s a sweet girl, and it seems a shame to turn down such pretty company.”

“We have little in common, beyond...well, *that*. And while that may be plenty with someone I’ll never see again, it’s not enough. Besides, I’m not about to create hard feelings with one of the few women who live within a couple hundred miles.” Though she was buddies with a lot of the men she came in contact with, she craved female company, even if for a drink or a movie. “I don’t want to hurt her, and the spark I need just isn’t there. Simple as that.”

In her twenties, Bryson had dreamed of having more than a series of brief affairs, of finding that special someone who twisted her insides and made her walk on air the way they described true love in the books she read. The kind of supportive partnership her parents had shared: two souls united in building a future together.

But she needed the wild places, the truly wild places, as much as she needed air. When she looked out over her unspoiled mountains, she felt serene. Blissfully content and fully alive. And connected, somehow, to the primal and timeless nature of the universe itself.

Her four years in Fairbanks attending the University of Alaska drove home how ill-suited she was for an urban lifestyle. She'd loathed the feel of concrete and pavement beneath her feet, the smell of exhaust fumes, and waking up to a view of steel and brick and billboards.

No, she was different. She knew that. She didn't need most of the modern conveniences others relied on, except her MP3 player and a small, battery-operated DVD player. She had a generator, but rarely used it, heating her home and cooking on a woodstove, washing her clothes and her body in a big steel tub, and reading voraciously by the light of kerosene lanterns.

When tourists came to town, chatting about some hot new TV show or Internet gossip, she had no clue what they were talking about and didn't care to know. She had chosen an earlier, primitive way of life in one of the most inhospitable and ruthless environments on the planet, and she'd long ago accepted that she'd probably never find a woman willing to embrace it as she did. Someone who could share her dream and thrive here.

In her lonely moments, her close ties to her like-minded friends and neighbors comforted her. Of them, Lars and his wife Maggie were the closest she had to family.

"Got some nice caribou steaks from the Teekons for running them up to Anaktuvuk, and they need to be eaten," she told Lars. "When the weather clears, you two come over and I'll fire up the grill." Like most bush pilots, when Bryson wasn't booked with a tourist, she was filling whatever needs arose in her community. Her plane had served as hearse and ambulance, mail and supply transport.

She also frequently ferried the native peoples of Alaska, primarily Athabascan Indians and Nunamiut Eskimos, between the villages where they predominated. When she did, they usually paid her in moose meat, caribou, or salmon, and the arrangement worked out well. She had no refrigerator, only a thick metal box buried in the corner of her cabin and filled with straw, to keep food cool in the warmer months, so she had to eat perishables quickly. This way she had a steady supply of fresh game in addition to her stores of dried and canned food, and she rarely had to hunt. She did so only in extreme situations to survive, because it pained her to take the life of any animal.

"We'd like that," Lars said. "Maggie's getting a real bad case of

cabin fever. Most days she's not up for going far, but she can probably tolerate the skiff to your place."

"Sorry I haven't been by more, but things are really slowing down now, so I'll drop over whenever I can."

"Do her good." He grinned. "But I'm warning you, she's a right ornery cuss at times these days."

Bryson had been sipping her beer. His words brought an image to mind that made her laugh so hard she choked. "You forget she chucked a ladle of stew at me for offering to help her wash her hair."

"You should see my clothes. Most of 'em are stained so bad I can't wear 'em around clients." He pulled back one side of his oversized flannel shirt to reveal a long ketchup stain running down the side of his T-shirt from chest to belt.

Bryson roared.

"What'd I miss?" Skeeter joined them with his own bottle when he saw them laughing, never one to miss sharing a good joke. Stocky but solid, he was recognizable at a distance by his bushy red beard and the black wool cap he wore year-round to cover a prominent bald spot. He'd gained his nickname shortly after he migrated to Alaska five years earlier, for complaining that the mosquitoes here were nearly as large as his four-seater Cessna 180.

"Just discussing Maggie's recent interest in flinging food," Lars replied, offering Skeeter a glimpse of the stain. "Good aim on that woman. I was at least ten feet away."

"Kinda resembles California," Skeeter observed, drawing another round of chuckles. When they subsided, he turned to Bryson. "Say, I'm grounded for a bit while I wait for a new prop. Any chance you're headed to Fairbanks when the weather clears?"

"Lemme see." Bryson reached into her back pocket and pulled out a growing "needs list" that contained the unavailable-locally items that the residents of Bettles wanted her to search for during her next trip south. She had added several items just this evening: a soccer ball, magnifying glass, microwave, down pillow, size 36C bra (black), four cartons of Virginia Slims menthol cigarettes, and two boxes of Frosted Flakes cereal. After she studied all the items on the list and calculated who had the money to actually pay her, she told Skeeter, "Guess there's enough here to cover my gas."

“Great. Add a couple dozen D batteries, a heavy iron skillet—big as you can find—and a couple gallons of OJ for me, would ya?”

“That fresh-squeezed stuff with the pulp, right?” Bryson penciled in the additions at the bottom of the paper.

“Yup. Bryson, I bet you and I know more about the people around here than most of their kinfolk do.”

“Yeah. Fascinating stuff, too. Like I really needed to know that Dirty Dan has a bad case of hemorrhoids, and Pete has warts somewhere he wants to get rid of.”

They all were laughing again as Grizz and Ellie made their way back to the stage for another set.

They launched into “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” which Ellie was still pretty rough at, but the crowd had had a few drinks by then, so they responded with the same raucous applause.

Geneva planted herself in Bryson’s line of sight, and every time their eyes met, she licked her lips or winked flirtatiously. Bryson tried to ignore the come-ons, but she *was* human, and it had been a while. Damn, she wished Gen hadn’t reminded her how much fun it had been breaking in all her new mail-order toys. Flying to Fairbanks pretty soon was sounding better and better. She had her own addition to the “needs list.”

CHAPTER THREE

Atlanta, Georgia

"I'm not going away," Stella shouted through the door before Karla could rise to answer it. She'd forgotten entirely that her best friend had vowed to come by and was startled to realize it was after six p.m.

She'd spent most of the day searching online phone records for Rasmussens. Lars and Maggie were not among those listed in Fairbanks, but Whitepages.com had supplied her with a list of 148 individuals in the whole of Alaska that included their rough ages and even the names within their households. Her heart started to pound when she spotted an entry for a Lars Rasmussen living in Anchorage. He was over sixty, but she refused to give up hope. With shaking hands, she punched in the phone number. He wasn't the man she wanted; this one was a recent transplant to the state and his wife's name was Inga, not Maggie. He was sorry he couldn't help her, he said, but he'd never come across another Alaskan with his name.

Undeterred, she spent the next couple of hours calling every single Rasmussen, hoping for a relative. Those she reached couldn't help her. She left messages for the rest, asking them to call her back and reverse the charges. As she worked her way through the list, she began to clear away the debris of her depression, washing the dirty mugs and plates and packing up the boxes. She opened the curtains and let the sun in, and even took a long, hot shower and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. She paused at a mirror to look at herself before she opened the door to Stella. Her face was gaunt, and she'd never seen such dark circles around her eyes. Her hair had dried all willy-nilly, but at least she was

clean and dressed. Her search for her sister had given her a purpose and a welcome distraction from her grief.

"If you don't open the damn door right this minute..." Stella's threat trailed away at the loud click of the deadbolt. She hadn't bothered to change from her whites, or even remove her hospital ID and name tag. Sometime in the last couple of weeks, she'd had her honey-blond hair cut, from shoulder-length to just below her ears. It suited her.

"You'll what? Pitch a tent out here? Call in reinforcements?" Karla tried to smile but knew it came off as forced and unconvincing. Stella was an expert at reading people, almost psychic, which made her an exceptional nurse. She could often determine what was going on with a patient even if they were too young or too ill to communicate effectively.

"I was about to say break a window, so I'm glad I don't have to." Stella frowned as she studied Karla with narrowed eyes, as though inspecting a bug under a microscope. "You look like shit. When's the last time you ate or got a full night's sleep?"

"Hello to you too, Little Mary Sunshine. You coming in or do you plan to stand there and insult me all night?" She stepped to the side, but Stella paused to hug her tight instead.

"Just because I love you, you know," Stella said into her ear without releasing her. "How you doing, hon?"

"I've been better." She eased away from the embrace and led Stella to the couch.

There, Stella glanced about the apartment, her gaze lingering on the boxes marked *Therese Edwards*. "Your mother's things?"

"I've been going through them." She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Not easy. Especially when I got to the very bottom of the last box. Apparently I have a long-lost sister. My mother left a letter for me about it that she wrote years ago."

"Say *what*?"

"No shit, right? She had her when she was sixteen and gave her up for adoption. And I'm not the only one she kept in the dark about it. She never told my father either."

"Wow." Stella sat still for a moment. "That sure doesn't sound like your mom. I mean, she was such a...such a..." Karla's buddy since their days in nursing school together, Stella was one of the few people who knew her mother before she became ill.

"I know. Poster girl for 'honest as the day is long.'" A bitter laugh escaped her. "But she apparently got the ability to lie really well from *her* mother. My grandmother acted as though the adoption was the end of Mother's 'mistake.' But she kept track of the baby through the adoptive parents and never told my mother about it until right before she died. Goes to show you, I guess, that everybody, and I mean *everybody*, has secrets. It makes me feel like I didn't know either one of them."

"I bet it does. So...your grandmother kept track of your sister? Do you know where she is now?"

"Her name's Maggie Rasmussen. She was living in Fairbanks, Alaska, with a husband named Lars when my mother wrote the letter. But that was thirteen years ago." She glanced over at her computer. Her e-mail was on the screen, and she could see that she didn't have any new messages. "I've spent all day trying to track her down. No luck so far. Apparently she doesn't know anything about me, either, or even that she was adopted."

"What're you going to say to her if and when you reach her?"

"Hell, I don't know. I really haven't thought that far ahead."

Stella laid a hand on Karla's shoulder. "What can I do to help?"

"I wish I knew." She leaned her head back against the couch and closed her eyes, her sleep deprivation finally kicking in. "There's got to be a way to find them," she mused aloud. Then it hit her, and she sat up abruptly. "You don't happen to know anyone in law enforcement, do you? Maybe I can trace them through a driver's license or something."

"Sorry. Sure don't. But I'll ask around at the hospital. Someone's got to have a relative or friend who's connected." Stella squeezed her shoulder. "We'll find a way." When Karla frowned in disappointment, she added, "Hey, cops are in the ER all the time. If I have to, I'll pick out a cute, single one and throw myself at him. Anything for you."

Karla couldn't help but smile. "The supreme sacrifice, right?" Cops were definitely not Stella's type. She had a thing for bad boys, especially the tattooed, rough-hewn types who rode motorcycles.

Stella grinned. "Like I said, whatever it takes. I'm there for you. How about you let me take you out for a bite and we talk about this some more? Maybe we can come up with some ideas."

"I'd rather stay here and keep surfing." Karla glanced again at her computer. Still no new e-mails. "I'm checking out a bunch of Web sites that might give me something."

"In that case, I'll head home and change." Stella rose and reached for her purse. "I'll grab my laptop and come back and help you sort through them. Maybe get some Chinese takeout? You're starting to look like a skeleton."

"You worry too much." Karla followed her to the door. "But if you get some Mongolian beef, I might be coerced to have some."

"That's my girl." Stella hugged her close again. "We'll find her. Keep your spirits up, and I'll be right back."

After she left, Karla returned to her computer. Did both she and Maggie have their mother's eyes and oval face? Did she, too, have a dimple in her left cheek when she smiled? Did they sound the same? If they stood beside each other, could anyone tell they were sisters? And what would she say to her if and when she found Maggie? *"Hi there, you don't know me. But you're the only family I have left in the world, and I really need you right now."*

She braced herself for the possibility that Maggie Rasmussen could be living a very comfortable, happy life with plenty of family and friends and want nothing to do with her. And even if she did want to connect, would they have enough in common besides blood to bond them?

Don't think so far ahead, she told herself. She had to find Maggie first. She'd deal with the rest as it came. She knew she wouldn't rest until she did.



Bettles, Alaska

Bryson Faulker stared out the large picture window of the Den, catching glimpses of red through the blowing snow—her Cub, parked at the edge of the airstrip. The blizzard had continued through the night, but the snow was light and powdery, and accumulation was minimal. The hazard was the wind, which whipped the four inches that had fallen into an absolute whiteout.

The door blew open and Skeeter appeared, shaking the snow from his parka and stomping his boots automatically before he crossed the room to sit on the padded bench opposite her.

"Any news?" she asked as he removed his coat and hung it on a hook at the end of the tall booth.

"Nothing's flying from here to Juneau. And the weather service has no idea when it'll let up. You're socked in for a day or two, at least." He pulled out a pack of Marlboros and lit one, then glanced around for Grizz or Ellie, but the two of them were alone at the moment. The music had continued late into the night and everyone else was sleeping in.

"Ellie's still in bed, and Grizz is in the kitchen," Bryson volunteered, getting to her feet with her coffee cup in hand. "I was about to pour myself another. Want one?"

"Read my mind."

She returned with two mugs and set one before Skeeter. "Any word on your prop?"

"Two, three weeks at least." He sucked on his cigarette and drummed his fingers noisily on the tabletop. "I'll go damn stir crazy if it's any longer."

She bit back a laugh. Bush pilots all got a bit antsy if they were grounded too long, but Skeeter was worse than most. Though he'd had a lot more mishaps than she'd had—including more than a dozen forced landings and three wrecks—they never affected his passion for flying. "What was it this time?"

"Nothing worth writing home about. Just the usual." Their frequent landings on gravel bars during the warmer months always kicked up stones into the propeller, and after some months the dents started to affect the plane's performance. With winter coming on, everything had to be in top working order. "Hear about Red Murdock?" he added, a glum expression darkening his features.

"No. What's up?"

"Had to ditch south of Barrow last night. Got a message out he was icing up. Nothing since. He was flying a guy and his sled dog to a vet in Fairbanks."

It could have been her just as easily, but she had learned not to dwell on the *what ifs* a long time ago. "When it clears enough to start looking for him, I'm in."

"Told the troopers that already. I'll ride along, if you don't mind."

“Sure thing.” A second set of trained eyes was always welcome when you had to scour thousands of acres of wilderness, and that was especially true if they went looking for Murdock. He’d arrived in Alaska three years earlier in the same plane he’d used for crop-dusting in Iowa, a white de Havilland DHC-2 Beaver. With the new snowfall, he’d be almost impossible to spot from the air unless he built a fire or some other visible distress signal.

Bryson had chosen a red plane partially because of the frequent need to ditch, and Skeeter’s was orange and gold. Anything to help your chances of survival.

Skeeter stubbed out his cigarette and almost immediately lit another. “Say, you seen Lars this morning?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“Got the damndest e-mail on the site this morning.” Skeeter was one of the few locals who was well versed in computers, so he maintained the Web site for Arctic Independent Outfitters, a consortium of freelance bush pilots and wilderness guides based in Bettles. Bryson and Skeeter were two of four bush pilots listed on the site, and Lars was one of six guides.

“Weirdest thing. Just one line: ‘Does Lars Rasmussen have a wife named Maggie?’” The long ash from his cigarette fell onto the table, but he ignored it. “Signed it ‘Karla.’ No last name, no phone number, nothing.”

“Kind of strange.”

He glanced around to make sure they were still alone. “Think Lars is having an affair?” he asked in a low voice.

“Lars?” The mere idea made her laugh. Not that women wouldn’t take to Lars. He was tall and blond, with chiseled features and a body honed by hard work chopping wood and hiking miles upon miles with clients. Only the crow’s feet around his eyes gave away that he was forty-two, not thirty-two. He was sweet and considerate, too, which was rare among Alaskan men. “Not a chance. He’s devoted to Maggie.”

“Well, you know ’em best.”

“You answer the e-mail?”

“Yeah.” Skeeter squirmed in his seat, as though he expected her to disapprove. “Wrote back that he did. But then I got to thinking about it and wondering if I maybe should’ve run it by Lars first.”

“Don’t see how it could do any harm.” But something was

definitely *off* about the odd inquiry. What could possibly have been the motivation behind it? “Lars’ll know.”

Lars came through the doorway that led to the rooms upstairs and headed toward them, stifling a yawn. “What’ll I know?”

Bryson got up to bring another mug and the coffeepot back to the table.

“Remember a client named Karla?” Skeeter asked as he slid over in the booth to make room.

“Karla?” Lars scratched at the pale stubble of beard on his cheek. “Can’t recall. There might been one in that big bunch of women went kayaking. Why?”

Skeeter relayed the contents of the e-mail and his reply. “Thought it might be a former client, since she sent the note to the Web site.”

Lars shrugged. “Could be. Just can’t remember. We’ve had a lot of trips with women the last few months. Odd, though, her mentioning Maggie. Maybe it’s somebody she knows, trying to track her down.”

“I’ll give you a holler if I hear back from her.” Skeeter downed the last of his coffee, then shrugged into his parka. “Better get back. See if there’s any news about Red.”

Bryson and Lars watched him go, following his dark form as it disappeared into the whiteout beyond the glass.

“Red Murdock?” Lars’s tone was as solemn as if they were at a funeral. He didn’t say more, because he didn’t need to. The mention of a pilot’s name during a storm usually meant only one thing.

“He’s a good flyer,” Bryson replied. “And here long enough to know what to carry.” Winter and summer, experienced bush pilots always carried survival gear: tent, sleeping bags, fuel, stove, food, and other emergency equipment. She’d had to rely on hers more times than she could count and had also, like many of her peers, learned how to make most simple repairs to her plane.

Lars leaned across the table and put his hand over hers. “I know you gotta be thinking about your pop.”

Five years, and still the mention of his name brought tears to her eyes. “He died the way he lived. Least he didn’t suffer.” Some bush pilots survived their crashes only to die of starvation or exposure. Her father’s plane had slammed into the side of a rocky cliff, the apparent victim of a williwaw—those violent arctic whirlwinds that arise out of nowhere and howl unseen through mountain passes toward the coast.

"You'll be heading out then, when it clears." Lars turned his attention back to the window while Bryson regained her composure, and she was grateful for his sensitivity.

"Course. It'll be crowded up there. Always is." Her father was well known and well liked, and when his plane went missing, dozens of small planes from all over the state joined the search. It had still taken two weeks to locate the wreckage.

Lars patted her hand and then withdrew his. "Haven't forgotten those steaks you promised. So get back here fast, huh? Maggie's not getting any smaller."

"You both worry too much." Bryson rose and reached for her coat. She got antsy when a pilot went missing, so to pass the time, she'd head over and man the radio with Skeeter. Spread the word.

If her time came, and the odds were good that it would, she knew the others would do the same for her.



Atlanta, Georgia

Karla tried her best to block out the noise from a tarring company that was fixing potholes in the parking lot of her apartment complex, but finally the din came too near for her to ignore. She held on to the dream as long as possible. She was nine again, busy peeking in the many closets of the old brick two-story in suburban Hapeville where she grew up.

The familiar routine never lost its magic. When she was a child, her parents never placed the present she wanted most for Christmas under the tree, but concealed it somewhere in the house or basement. She would rise before dawn to search for it, always in vain.

After breakfast, she'd open all her other gifts, knowing the true object of her desire wasn't there, and her parents would pretend for a while they couldn't find or couldn't afford that one precious thing. A pogo stick. A pair of hamsters. A guitar. Finally they yielded and gave her a clue where to find it, and she would go hunting, amazed at how cleverly they had hidden it.

They'd come through every single time except the year she was nine. The year she asked them to make Emily real, to give her a sister.

Her parents tried to prepare her, telling her in the weeks before Christmas that they couldn't deliver this present. What else did she want? But by that time, she'd gotten her heart's desire so reliably, the outcome was so predictable, that she was bitterly disappointed to find a brand-new bicycle under the tree instead of a sister.

Karla tried to cling to that netherworld halfway between sleep and awareness, though she knew she was dreaming. She wasn't really nine again, but the images were so vivid she was somehow certain that this time she would find the sister she longed for, hiding in one of the closets. She wouldn't resemble the Emily of her imaginings, but that didn't matter. Because this time she would be real.

Cursing the workers outside her apartment for chasing away her fantasy, she reluctantly pulled herself out of bed. Stella had stayed until after midnight, and Karla had remained at her computer for another three hours, sending e-mail after e-mail into cyberspace, until she finally couldn't fight off sleep any longer.

After a long, hot shower and a large mug of coffee, she booted up her computer and held her breath as she accessed her e-mail account.

She began to sort through the sixty-seven responses to her barrage of blanket inquiries. Most were as terse as her e-mail had been. *No, I'm sorry. Or, Afraid I'm not the Lars Rasmussen you're looking for. Don't know any Maggie.*

She opened the forty-ninth e-mail expecting more of the same. But there it was. She blinked hard to make sure she wasn't seeing things. *Yes. Lars has a wife named Maggie.*

Her heart pounded as she gripped the edge of the table and read the words over and over. It had seemed like such a long shot that she was dizzy with relief. *I found you, Maggie. Now what?*

She'd looked at so many Web sites the day before she couldn't immediately remember anything about the one that had finally hit pay dirt, so she went back and scoured it.

This Lars Rasmussen was a wilderness guide in Bettles, Alaska.

She typed the location into Google maps and got her first indication of just how far away her sister was. Just shy of forty-five hundred miles. Europe was closer.

For the next hour, she read everything she could find online about Bettles. "Began as a trading post during the 1898 gold rush. Smallest incorporated city in Alaska. Classified as an isolated village center."

The only school had been closed due to low enrollment. Not surprising, she thought, since the 2000 census gave the population as a mere forty-three people. Apparently her sister could not have chosen a more remote place to live. No roads led to it, except in the dead of winter, when lakes and rivers, marshland, and spongy tundra were frozen over and a solid pathway could be plowed over them to connect the village to the paved Dalton Highway.

“Ranks second on a national list of cities with the largest annual temperature variation, with summer highs in the eighties and nineties, and long periods of minus forty degrees in winter. The lowest temperature ever recorded was minus eighty-two.”

Born and raised in the South, Karla despised the cold. Give her a sunny beach and temperatures above eighty, and she was content. On those rare occasions when Georgia got a dusting of snow or an ice storm, she saw no beauty in it, only a headache for getting to work. “Average annual total snowfall: 82.4 inches.” In other words, she lived in Siberia. They couldn’t be more different.

Why would anyone choose such a place? She kept reading. Okay, so it was apparently a great area for seeing the northern lights. And a lot of people went there to visit the Brooks Range and the massive national parks it contained. She was definitely not into camping out. Doing so in Georgia meant black flies, fire ants, copperheads, and water moccasins. And she liked her creature comforts, not sleeping on rocks. But some people enjoyed that sort of thing for vacations. A week or two maybe, but to live there?

The photographs she called up of the area gave her some insight. Majestic peaks stretching forever. Mountain valleys so crowded with wildflowers they looked like paintings. Herds of migrating caribou, thousands upon thousands of animals. Awesome curtains of red, green, blue, and yellow stretching across the night sky.

People who had traveled there extolled it with superlatives. Unparalleled beauty. Unforgettable views. Unbelievable scenery. Breathtaking. Magnificent. The trip of a lifetime.

The ringing of her phone jarred her back to her civilized apartment.

“Any luck yet?” Stella inquired.

“Yeah. She lives in Bettles, Alaska. A little village in the middle

of nowhere. And I mean *really* in the middle of nowhere. Above the Arctic Circle.”

“No shit. Long way away. Who can possibly want to live at the North Pole?”

“Who knows? Someone with thicker blood than mine, that’s for sure. Shows how different we are.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No. Not yet. I just got an answer to my e-mail that the Lars there has a wife named Maggie. He’s a guide for a wilderness outfitter.”

“So what’s next?” Stella asked. “What are you going to do?”

What should I do? Karla turned in her chair and stared at the boxes of her mother’s things. There was only one thing *to* do. Her mother had set her on an irrevocable path of discovery. Cold or no cold, half a world away or not. A phone call would never be nearly enough.

“I’m going to buy a plane ticket.”

CHAPTER FOUR

*October 25, 5:50 p.m.
Over Mount McKinley, Alaska*

Karla stared down in wonder at the nation's highest peak, the mountain that natives called Denali, the Great One, shining reddish-gold in the alpenglow of the setting sun.

Those superlatives she'd read about Alaska were no exaggeration. She'd kept her face glued to the window ever since they took off from Seattle. The landscape was surreal in its immense, endless beauty. Stark and forbidding, devoid of any sign of human habitation. But somehow it was serene and peaceful. A world untouched and unscathed by war, pollution, and urban crowding.

When the view outside the plane grew black, she thought about her sister and the still unresolved questions about what she should say to Maggie when they met.

In the three days it had taken Karla to make arrangements to leave, she'd thought of little else. She had battled with herself over whether to contact the Rasmussens first, to prepare them for her arrival. It would certainly be polite and prudent to do so, and under any other circumstances she certainly would have.

But the fear that Maggie might tell her not to come overrode her usual sense of decorum. Because she was arriving unexpectedly, Maggie might reject her totally or welcome her warmly and invite her to stay for a while.

So she'd paid her bills in advance, arranged for Stella to water her plants, talked to her supervisor at the hospital, and gone shopping.

She'd had to go to REI, a specialty store, to find clothes warm enough for her adventure. This time of year, the temperature in Bettles could drop well below freezing at night, so for the trip up, she chose silk long underwear beneath jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, fleece pullover, and a new down-filled jacket. The lined Sierra hiking boots were too warm for the plane, so she had tucked them beneath the seat in front of her. In the overhead bin were her new ski gloves and fleece-lined bomber's cap, which looked ridiculous on her but was the warmest thing in the store. Her new outfits had cost more than a week's salary.

The pilot announced they were beginning their descent into Fairbanks and apologized for the delay. Earlier weather problems had backed up flights in a chain reaction, so she'd already missed her connection to Bettles.

If she couldn't find another one this evening, she'd have to overnight in Fairbanks, which she dreaded. It had been hard enough to wait three days to leave. With her mother and Abby both so abruptly gone from her life, she had only her sister left to cling to. And though normally not the superstitious type, Karla couldn't shake a growing unease that pushed her to get to Bettles as fast as possible. Bad things came in threes, and the fear that something might happen to Maggie before they had a chance to meet nagged her. She was being irrational but couldn't dispel the prevailing sense of urgency about this trip. As soon as they landed, she'd find another way to close the final miles.

There just had to be another flight out tonight.



October 25, 7 p.m.

Fairbanks, Alaska

Bryson had to make four trips between the van and Cub to load all the bags and boxes from her massive shopping expedition. The van belonged to Grizz and was permanently parked at the small hanger that Arctic Independent Outfitters leased at the airport. Fortunately most of the items on her list were small, so everything fit into the back of the plane with her survival gear. Even the passenger seat was packed with goods, and the added weight made her glad she had a long runway both in Fairbanks and Bettles.

She had spent hours accumulating the wide diversity of objects and hated to disappoint any of her friends or have them spend a dollar more than necessary. She hit Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Sam's Club, as well as Fred Meyer for food and one small specialty store, Cold Spot Feeds, for dogsled supplies.

When everything was ready, she locked the van and headed into the terminal to file her flight plan and check out the latest weather conditions, anxious to get home before another storm blew in. She was ready to kill for a good night's sleep. She'd been in the air except for brief refueling stops for nineteen of the previous twenty-four hours, searching for Red Murdock's plane. As soon as she got word he'd been found—his plane a mess, but he and his passenger unharmed—she'd diverted immediately to Fairbanks.

The weather forecast checked out fine, with some low-level turbulence reported just north of the airport, but no sleet or snow yet. Earlier storms, however, had backed up commercial flights so much it would be forty minutes before she could get clearance for takeoff.

She grabbed a cup of coffee and headed over to the Bettles Air gate to see who was working tonight. The small firm handled ticketing and check-in for Arctic Independent Outfitters in addition to their own clients. Sue Spires was manning the counter.

Though Bryson didn't have the energy or time to hook up with the curvaceous blonde this evening, she did have a few minutes to set up a date in the not-too-distant future. If only the customer Sue was waiting on would finish her business and give her the opportunity.

She stood to the side at a distance and studied them. The last flight to Bettles had left twenty minutes earlier, and evidently the customer was supposed to have been on it. She was alone, and her frustration was evident. She frowned and fidgeted, gesturing frequently with her hands. She was obviously anxious to leave and determined to find a way out before the next scheduled flight. She glanced up frequently at the departures board, as though she hoped another alternative would magically appear there.

Bryson couldn't recall ever seeing the woman before in Bettles, and she'd have noticed her. With her shapely but slender body, she was close to Bryson's age, perhaps a few years younger. And a couple of inches shorter, probably five-four or five-five. Her light brown hair with blond highlights featured soft waves that ended at her shoulders.

It framed an oval face with flawless skin and delicate features: high cheekbones and a small, slightly upturned nose. But her beautiful hazel eyes looked haunted, and her expertly applied makeup couldn't hide the dark circles beneath them.

Sue was being her usual patient self, listening intently and smiling in empathy as she typed away at her computer. It was a common scene these days, but this time the customer apparently wouldn't take no for an answer, even when Sue stopped typing, shrugged, and shook her head helplessly.

It was a shame, she thought, that so many beautiful women were so completely self-absorbed they acted like the world revolved around them. What could possibly be so important in Bettles that a few hours made that much difference?

But the woman continued to harass Sue, leaning over the counter on her elbows as she talked to crane at the computer screen, as though she wanted to see for herself if there was any way possible for her to get to Bettles tonight.

Come on, already. Let's go. Move on. Give it up. Bryson chanted the words to herself over and over like a mantra, hoping to somehow psychically implant the suggestion in the cute but irritatingly persistent customer who was monopolizing Sue's attention. If Bryson lingered much longer, she would miss her takeoff slot. She stepped a little closer, near enough to overhear snatches of their conversation.

"Check again. There just has to be another way there. Something you haven't thought of." The woman sounded frantic. "You can't have checked every single small carrier."

"I'm sorry, Miss Edwards." Sue was trying her best to remain congenial, but Bryson could hear the irritation in her clipped tone. "As I've said, the flight you missed is the only evening one out. The very earliest you can leave is on Wright Air's ten a.m. departure. I show one open seat on that flight."

"What about a charter?" the woman asked. "How much are those? I saw all sorts of brochures for them near the restrooms."

"A last-minute solo charter at night would be quite expensive," Sue replied. "Probably in the neighborhood of nine hundred dollars or more to Bettles, I would expect."

Considering that was roughly five times what the woman had probably paid for her original ticket, Bryson wasn't too surprised to

see shock and dismay cross her face. “Nine hundred dollars? That’s outrageous. Who would pay that for a two-hour flight?”

When Sue didn’t answer, it seemed for an instant that it was finally sinking in that the woman wasn’t going anywhere tonight. Her shoulders hunched in disappointment, and she seemed almost ready to cry. But the change was short-lived. She took off her new-looking coat and hat and laid them on the counter, preparing for a long entrenchment. It was clear she didn’t plan to leave until she got what she’d come for.

“Try again,” she commanded. “Make some calls, don’t just rely on the computer. Maybe if you actually *talk* to somebody at these other carriers, you can find somebody willing to get me there tonight.”

Bryson glanced at her watch. Her slot was in fifteen minutes. She couldn’t hang around much longer. Ordinarily, she’d never think of interrupting Sue when she was with a customer. But what she had to say would only take a minute—*Are you free tomorrow night?* And it looked like Sue could use some rescuing. Maybe a brief interruption would push the dogged customer on her merry way.

She stepped out from behind the column where she’d been watching them and moved into Sue’s line of sight. The gate attendant’s face lit up when their eyes met.

“Bryson! Hi.” She waved Bryson forward as the customer turned to look, scowling at the intrusion. “How’re you doing? I was—”

“Excuse me,” the stranger interrupted angrily. “I was here first, and you’re not done helping me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m *trying* to do,” Sue replied through gritted teeth. Her eyes beseeched Bryson for help. “Please tell me you’re heading back home tonight and that you’ve got room for a passenger.”

A flicker of hope registered in the stranger’s eyes. This close to her, Bryson could see tiny specks of gold in the hazel. The scowl on her face faded. “Wonderful!” she said, as though the decision was a fait accompli.

Crap. This wasn’t in her game plan at all. No way was she taking Miss Gripe-a-lot in her plane. “Sorry, no can do. Full up.”

“You have to. I’m desperate! I have to get to Bettles tonight.” The woman took a step forward and grabbed Bryson’s leather coat at the elbow. “Let me talk to your passengers. Maybe I can get someone to swap with me, take the morning flight.”

Bryson shook her head. “Not possible. There’s no way—”

“How do you know if you don’t let me try?” The woman’s demeanor changed again. In a flash she’d gone from angry, to hopeful, to frantic, and now angry was back for a return engagement. “Just give me five minutes with them. What the hell harm can it do?”

Bryson extricated her elbow from the woman’s manic grip. “You don’t understand. I’m flying supplies, not passengers, and I have a very full plane. I mean packed-tight full. And I have to be leaving, or I’ll miss my takeoff slot.” She started to wave good-bye to Sue, but the stranger grabbed at her elbow again.

“Supplies?” she said incredulously. “Well, surely there’s no problem leaving a few *things* behind for the time being so I can go? I’ll pay extra for your inconvenience.”

The nerve of this woman. To presume that she couldn’t be carrying anything more important than this impatient princess with a big wallet. Okay, so her baggage was mostly stuff like wart remover and toys, not critical medical life-support equipment. But the princess here didn’t know that. And the intended recipients certainly considered her cargo precious freight. Hell, they were all probably at this very moment celebrating its imminent arrival. “Like I said, I’m sorry. But no can do.”

“It’s not that you can’t.” The woman let her go and slumped against Sue’s desk with a resigned look of disgust on her face. “It’s that you won’t. Don’t you have an ounce of humanity in you? Where’s this infamous Alaskan hospitality I’ve read so much about?”

Bryson bit her lip, determined to remain polite and professional, since this woman was a client of Sue’s. “I’ve got a lot of people—friends, mostly—looking forward to what’s in my plane. Half the town will be waiting for me to land, and I don’t want to disappoint them. The weather might keep me from getting back here any time soon to pick up what I’d have to leave behind.” She was about to add a final, firm *NO* when Sue came around from behind her counter and hustled Bryson off to one side.

“Bryson, *please*,” she begged in a whisper. “She won’t let up. You don’t want me stuck here all night, do you? Do me this favor, and I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’d hardly take up any room,” the stranger said. “And this is all the luggage I have.” She gestured toward the REI duffel bag at her feet. The bag was brand-new, Bryson noted, just like the woman’s clothing.

Her boots hadn't been out of their box long, and the down jacket draped over the counter was so pristine and shiny she half expected to find the price tag still attached. Obviously this woman came from a much warmer climate, but at least she had the common sense to dress appropriately for where she was going.

And the mysterious Miss Edwards got a few more points for not being the type of woman who traveled with a half-dozen pieces of enormous, hard-backed luggage. Clients hated being told they'd have to leave most of their belongings behind because they wouldn't fit in the Cub. She half turned to Sue. "You owe me so big-time for this," she said in a low voice.

"I look forward to you collecting." Sue gave her a quick wink of promise. "You're the best, Bryson. Thanks."

"I'm just too tired to argue any more." Forcing herself to smile, Bryson turned toward the stranger. "Okay. If you're coming, grab your bag and follow me." She headed toward the access door nearest the hangar with the client on her heels.

"We haven't discussed payment." Miss Edwards dug into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out the boarding pass for the flight she'd missed. The name printed along the top was "Karla" Edwards. "I didn't get a chance to get a refund on this."

"You can do that in the morning in Bettles." Bryson pushed the door open and they stepped out into the night. The temperature was around twenty-five, she guessed.

The sound of a duffel bag hitting the pavement made her pause and look around. Her client scrambled to get her down jacket on, then a pair of enormous ski gloves, and finally, a fleece-lined bomber's hat two sizes too large.

Bryson bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

"So how much are you charging me?" Karla Edwards asked suspiciously as they resumed their trek to the hangar.

"I'm okay with whatever you get for your ticket. I won't charge you extra because you'll be cramped all the way. I want to take out as little cargo as possible."

"That's very generous of you," the woman said. "The gate attendant told me you guys usually charge an arm and a leg for a night charter flight."

The accusatory tone made Bryson bristle. *Quit while you're*

ahead, honey. We're not off the ground yet. I can still change my mind. "Some pilots charge a higher rate at night, yes," she admitted. "It's more dangerous to fly then, especially some routes. And they want an extra incentive to work overtime, when they'd rather be at home with their families. That so wrong?"

"No. I guess not. Why aren't you charging me more, then? You certainly could, you've got me over a barrel."

"This wasn't my idea," Bryson reminded her.

"Oh, right." The woman went silent as they crossed the tarmac to the hangar. "You look awful young to be a pilot," she said as they reached it. "You are qualified to carry passengers, aren't you?"

"I've had my license twenty-three years." She rolled the door open and flipped on the lights. "Been flying in Alaska all that time, in every kind of weather you can imagine." The words didn't convey the reassurance they normally did, because her client's response was not what she expected.

"Oh. My. God."

Bryson whirled to face her. Miss Karla Edwards was staring in horror at the Cub.

"We're going up in *that* little thing?"

CHAPTER FIVE

That looks like a stiff breeze would blow it right out of the sky.” Karla had certainly seen such tiny planes before, though never up close. Only in films: chasing after Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, crashing in *The Edge*, *Six Days Seven Nights*, and *Hey, I’m Alive!* Falling into the ocean in dozens of old war movies. TV news broadcasts always seemed to show them in pieces, after slamming into homes or plowing into fields. They seemed to be such fragile things.

Lots of celebrities had died in them. Buddy Holly. John Denver. Patsy Cline. JFK Jr. She had an aptitude for such trivia. It came in handy at bar contests and radio call-in shows, but she wished to God she could purge it from her mind right now.

“I’m well qualified,” her pilot reiterated with confidence. “And this is an exceptional plane for bush flying. Super Cubs are very maneuverable, and I can land most anywhere.”

“What have I gotten myself into?” Karla spoke aloud, though she didn’t mean to. Her feet refused to move any nearer to the plane.

“Hey, no skin off my back if you don’t want to go. You can always wait for the Wright Air flight tomorrow,” the pilot said. “It’s a nine-seater.”

Peachy. So it was a few feet longer. It would still be a wretchedly tiny thing compared to any plane she’d ever flown in. Better to get this over and done with as fast as possible. “No, I’ll go with you.”

“Suit yourself.” The pilot glanced at her watch, then opened the passenger door of the plane and the cargo hatch behind it. “Gotta hustle to make my takeoff slot. Could use your help.”

“All right.” She forced herself forward and set her duffel bag near

the pilot's feet. The moment she'd decided to go, her heart began to beat furiously and she felt a bit woozy. She took a few deep breaths to try to calm her nerves.

The pilot handed her a set of keys and gestured toward a beat-up van parked in the hangar. "Unlock the rear door, would ya? Then you can take whatever's on your seat there and move it over, while I make room back here for your bag. Take out only what you need to get seated."

"Okay." The plane looked even smaller from the inside, especially since it was absolutely jammed from floor to roof with boxes and bags. Three large bags were seat-belted to the passenger seat. As she carried them to the van, she glanced inside one. Orange juice. Cereal. Oreos. In another, bras and a large down pillow. Vital supplies indeed, she thought. Millions would suffer a terrible fate if this shipment didn't get to Bettles tonight. She gazed surreptitiously at the dark-haired woman she was about to entrust her life to. *You just didn't want to take me. You couldn't be bothered. What an ass.* Pity, too, because the woman was attractive. She had on a thick leather coat, so it was hard to gauge the physique of her upper body, but her jeans were molded tight to her legs. Her thighs and calves were smooth and firm, and when she leaned into the cargo area to stow her bag, Karla noticed her well-toned ass. It was hard to determine the woman's age, but she'd have guessed thirty or so at most, which was impossible if she'd had her license for twenty-three years.

She sure didn't look much older than thirty, though—no trace of crow's feet around her dark brown eyes, no lines around the full, lush lips. Her jawline was rounded, but firm. Her long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and with the ball cap she wore, emblazoned with the slogan I Can Take You There, she wouldn't have looked out of place on a college softball team. She seemed youthful and exuberant, but something about the way the pilot carried herself, a look in her eyes, made her seem mature. She might not be the nicest person on the planet, but she conveyed a self-confidence that helped alleviate the unease in Karla's stomach.

She walked back to the plane to transfer two boxes that were taking up the floor space in front of the passenger seat. One was marked Sorel Mounty II Boots, Men's, size 12. The other contained drugstore supplies: hemorrhoid cream, wart remover, antifungal cream, hair dye

to remove the gray, laxatives. *Charming friends you have.* She glanced over at the pilot. *Big-footed friends, with hemorrhoids, athlete's foot, and constipation. And let's not forget the warts.* She couldn't help giggling at the visual. A little more of her anxiety faded.

The pilot paused and turned to her, confusion in her tone. "Did I miss something?"

Her cheeks warmed. "No. I just had a funny thought."

This was the first time she'd laughed in weeks. And just as quickly as the brief euphoria came, it evaporated, pushed aside by grief and uncertainty. This emotional roller coaster was exhausting, but she had no control whatsoever of her feelings from one minute to the next.

What the hell was she doing? Flying halfway around the world to surprise Maggie wasn't like her at all. Her impetuous decision to fly to Alaska hadn't stemmed her feelings of isolation. If anything, it had amplified them, for she'd left all that was familiar—friends, home, job.

Yet again, Karla considered the irrationality of this trip. From the moment she opened the letter, the idea of chasing down her secret sibling had possessed her. She felt almost out of control, and now that she was here she understood her urge more clearly. In a mere matter of days, all that was truly important to her had been stripped away—her sense of family and belonging, her happiness, her plans for the future. She was hollow, with nothing left to lose. Her vision swam, and she gripped the edge of the door.

"You all right?" The voice came from beside her as a steadying hand grasped her elbow.

"I'm fine." She shook off the hand. She'd had it with people wanting to help. This was something she had to get through on her own. "Just more tired than I realized."

"Whatever you say." The pilot sounded a little hurt as she buckled Karla firmly into her seat. "You can sleep on the way if you like."

Fat chance. Tired or not, once she was in the plane, staring past the pilot's seat at the controls, the full force of the risk she was taking on a mere *chance* her sister might welcome her squeezed the breath out of her. As the pilot slowly circled the exterior of the plane, inspecting the wings, the cowling, the tires, and the fuselage, Karla fought the urge to bolt.

The pilot towed the plane outside and locked up the hangar door.

Then she climbed into the seat in front and half turned to Karla. "I'm required to do the in-the-event-of-emergency spiel that most people have memorized," she said. "But it is a little different, being it's just you and me in here, and Alaska is a more unforgiving environment than most." Her tone implied that the speech was only a formality, but Karla hung on every word.

"You may feel turbulence more than you're used to in a big plane. There's some rough air just north of here, but nothing I haven't encountered a thousand times before and nothing the Cub can't handle. We won't be flying high enough to need oxygen for any reason." The pilot's voice remained matter-of-fact. "In the unlikely event we have to ditch, your seat cushion can be used as a floatation device. There's a fire extinguisher strapped beneath my seat and a first-aid kit in the back. Pry bar is there." She pointed to a small iron bar clamped to the side of the pilot's seat. "And there's a red duffel in the back with survival gear in it. Tent, sleeping bag, stove, food, water, and a gun."

Survival gear? A gun? That hammering in her chest returned with a vengeance.

"Clear on all that?" the pilot asked.

She nodded, afraid her voice would betray her rising panic.

"Then we're good to go. The name's Bryson, by the way, Bryson Faulkner," she said as she buckled herself in and put on her headset. "Let me know if you have any questions."

She started the engine and the propeller began to spin. It sounded alarmingly loud, but the pilot gave no indication that anything was amiss.

The Cub began to move, and Bryson spoke to the control tower as they taxied into position behind another small plane. Then they were on their way, lifting off after an amazingly short roll down the runway, and the lights of Fairbanks faded from view. Within minutes, there was nothing but black beneath them.

Karla had seen enough of Alaska from the window of a plane, however, to be able to picture the landscape they were flying over. White-capped mountains stretching in every direction to the horizon. Wild rivers. Endless desolation.

The plane hit a pocket of rough air, but it wasn't too bad. Bumpy, like riding the Mind Bender roller coaster at Six Flags Over Georgia. And Bryson had warned her, so Karla was able to ride it out without

becoming too alarmed. Then the plane dropped abruptly, ten feet or more, and her stomach lurched.

"I'm cold," she said, bunching her fingers around the tigereye necklace in her pocket. "Can't you turn up the heat any more?"

"Yeah, sure." The pilot turned a knob on the control panel but Karla couldn't feel any measurable difference. She craned her head, trying to spot where the heat was coming from, and saw Bryson yawn and rub her eyes. Not a minute or two later, she yawned again.

"Are you sure you're all right to fly? You look like you're about to fall asleep."

She sat up a little straighter and blinked several times. "I'm fine."

Karla's unease grew when she soon yawned again. Maybe if she got Bryson to talk, she would stay awake. Karla could also perhaps forget that she was careening over a vast winter wilderness in a flying sardine can with a sleepy pilot. "Don't get me wrong, the scenery is nice and everything, but why does anyone want to live here?"

"Sure not for everyone," Bryson replied. "Most people can't live without their big-screen TVs and cell phones, never mind having to do without things like refrigerators and electric lights, if you live in the bush like I do. Heck, it's hard sometimes even getting the basics, like Band-Aids and aluminum foil. Especially during fall freeze-up and spring breakup. Everything stops for weeks, or weather can keep you homebound for really long stretches and you gotta rely on what you have on hand. You learn to improvise."

"So you don't live in Bettles?" From what Karla had read, the village itself was isolated enough. What did living in the bush mean?

"Got a cabin thirty miles from there, in the mountains," Bryson said. "Well, thirty miles by air. By boat, it's almost double."

"So you really do spend a lot of time in this plane."

"Yup. Ferrying clients, mostly. And a couple times a month, I run supplies for the village. During the warm months, anyway. Once everything freezes, they plow a temporary road that links up to the main highway, and semis haul in everything, including all the big, heavy stuff planes can't handle. Lot cheaper to get stuff that way, so that's when everybody stocks up for the whole year."

"I read online there are only forty-something people in the village."

"Got to be from the 2000 census. Just twenty-seven now. Once

the school closed, we lost some families. And a couple of cheechakos moved on.”

“Cheechakos?” It sounded like a breakfast cereal.

“Newcomers. Outsiders who come here loving the idea of Alaska and *think* they want to live here, till they find out how tough it is. You spend a couple of hard winters here, you’re a sourdough. Term started during the gold rush, ’cause prospectors used to survive on the stuff. Think we have it tough today, you should see the way they had to live.”

“So that brings me back to my original question.” The plane abruptly fell several feet again, and Karla gripped the edges of her seat. She didn’t continue until the plane had evened out. “You said you’ve been flying in Alaska more than twenty years. Why does anyone choose to live here? Why did you?” Maybe she could get some insights into the kind of person her sister was.

“As many reasons as there are mountains, why people live here.” Bryson recalled the many discussions she and her friends had had in the Den on that very topic. Some locals were secretive about why they’d come, which provided ample fodder for lengthy speculations over a few beers. On the run from the law. Antisocial. Unabomber. Illegal alien.

Most folks, though, were pretty forthcoming about what drew them to Alaska. Grizz and Ellie were eternal flower children, homesteaders who came to live off the land and start a commune that never really materialized. Instead they founded a roadhouse as a way to draw the community together, which it had accomplished in spades. Their past showed in the peace-symbol T-shirt that Grizz wore a lot, fashionable again with a new generation, and in the preponderance of classic tunes from the sixties and seventies that made up the bulk of the 120 selections in the jukebox, a 1954 Rock-Ola 1438 Comet that Ellie found online in a Seattle antique shop.

Skeeter had been a commercial pilot with a major airline, and his routes often took him over Alaska. Seeing it from above had made him determined to experience it up close in a small plane, and when he had a taste of it during a month-long vacation, he was hooked. He quit his job and found a plane of his own, settling in Bettles to join the freelance cooperative after a month of tagging along with Bryson, Red Murdock, and half a dozen other veterans of Arctic Circle flying. Skeeter made the

transition pretty easy, especially since he'd been based in Minneapolis and had seen his share of bad storms and bitter temperatures. He loved the scenery and independence of his new job, along with the fact he could chain-smoke if he wanted to and stop shaving every goddamn day.

Lars and Maggie had met in the Gates of the Arctic National Park when they were just out of their teens. Maggie was backpacking, doing field studies for her courses at the University of Alaska, and Lars had decided to spend his spring break from Michigan State on a solo fly-fishing adventure in the bush. Both were immediately smitten. When Lars's charter pilot, Bryson's father, returned to pick him up eight days later, Maggie went with him.

They married and lived in Fairbanks long enough to get their degrees—Lars in ecology, conservation biology, and environmental science, and Maggie in wildlife biology and plant biology—then settled north, near where they'd met, to work and raise a family.

"Most folks, I guess, are just the rugged-individual type," Bryson explained. "They move here for the chance to live simply—off the land, by their wits. Testing themselves against the worst nature can offer. A few are running away from something or someone, and don't want to be found. Or they want to get as far as possible from stupid laws and regulations that restrict how they can live. For me, Alaska is in my blood. I was born here."

She didn't ordinarily volunteer a lot of personal information to her clients, but the chitchat was helping her fight her fatigue. "Lived in Fairbanks for a while, and even that was too much big-city for me. Can't fathom being anywhere else. Have to be able to breathe fresh air, see the stars, hear the wolves howl at night. Wake up to a view that always stuns me."

"But you sure have to sacrifice a lot to get all that, don't you? You really don't have a refrigerator?"

"That's just what I mean. People like you who've never known any difference think those are such big necessities, but they're not, really. You get back so much more here than you ever have to give up. I've pretty much always done without such things, so I don't miss 'em. I live a very comfortable life." She rarely wanted to explain or justify her choices, but this stranger had put her on the defensive. "Hear my clients

talk about how a simple power outage for a day or two makes 'em crazy, worrying about pipes freezing and doing without their Internet. Free yourself from all of that, you live a lot less stressful life."

"You definitely have different priorities than most of us."

"Won't argue that. One of my favorite quotes is from the Greek philosopher Epicurus. *If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; but if according to opinions, you will never be rich. Nature demands little, opinion a great deal.*"

"No offense," her passenger said, "but you don't strike me as a philosophy student."

Bryson wondered, not for the first time, why so many outsiders perceived Alaskans as ignorant hicks. "Reading is a popular pastime up here. And you get lots and lots of time to think and reflect."

"Precisely what I don't need," Karla Edwards mumbled.

The answer didn't strike Bryson as odd or unusual. Many people who were constantly on the go were afraid of taking a long hard look at their lives and the choices they made. Some of the people she and Lars met had their first chance to do so during their trips to Alaska, and they weren't always happy about what they discovered about themselves.

"Lot of benefits to living here," she said. "Hardships draw people together. Neighbors and friends become your extended family, 'cause you have to rely on each other. Can't tell you how many clients I talk to who live in big cities, never even met the people living next door."

Her passenger was silent for a long time. "That's true of me. I live in an apartment building in Atlanta, and I don't know the name of anyone on my floor, even though I've lived there six years. I nod or wave sometimes at familiar faces as I come and go, but that's about it. When news reports of local shootings, break-ins, and people stealing your identity constantly bombard you, you become leery of inviting strangers into your home. Afraid of people knowing too much about you."

"That's just what I mean. Here, you got bush hospitality. Most people in the wild never lock their door when they're away, 'cause you never know when someone might get lost, or hurt. Your home might be their only chance to survive. Gotta trust they won't take advantage of that." Bryson thought back to the time she and her father needed to enter a stranger's unoccupied cabin because they'd had to ditch the plane in a sudden blizzard, when the wind chill was thirty below zero.

They'd left behind some money for the firewood and food they'd used, and a note thanking the owners for keeping to the tradition of providing an open, well-stocked shelter for those in need.

"I can't imagine being that trusting," Karla said. "Then again, I can't imagine living so far out in the wilderness that such a thing could be necessary. How do you deal with the isolation? Don't you get lonely?"

"Sure. Doesn't everyone, regardless of their geography? Do your location and luxuries mean you never get lonely?"

There was a very long pause before she got an answer. And Karla's voice, when she finally spoke, was melancholic. "No. They don't."

Bryson had obviously hit a nerve. "Didn't mean to pry."

"You're not. Besides, I asked you first."

"But *I* didn't have to *think* before I answered."

Another long silence followed. Bryson glanced in the mirror, but it was too dark to see Karla's expression. The dim light from the control panel only let her see that she was staring out the window into the darkness. "You can't run from it, you know," she said. "It'll follow you wherever, even up here."

"I'm not running from anything," Karla shot back angrily.

For a while there, she'd been almost pleasant, but the reprieve was short. The petulant child from the airport was back. "If you say so," Bryson replied. "Then why are you here?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I guess you could say I'm on a voyage of self-discovery."

If you ask me, you're already a little too self-absorbed. Bryson spotted the welcome lights of Bettles in the distance. "What makes you think you'll find yourself here?"

"I'm not sure," Karla said. "But a part of me believes that whatever I'm looking for is here."

CHAPTER SIX

You'll soon find out. That's the village up ahead." Bryson wasn't sure whether it was her fatigue or the company, but the trip up had seemed to take an eternity. She'd had more than enough of her difficult passenger. Sue was due to pay up in spades, and soon. Bryson hit the transmit button on her radio. "A2024B Piper to BTT."

"BTT to A2024B Piper. Where ya been, Bryson? Everybody's waiting for you." The voice wasn't the raspy baritone she expected.

"Got held up. Where's Skeeter? Why're you manning the radio?"

"You're the only traffic left tonight. Skeeter ate somethin' baaad. Way bad. He's been in the can the last hour."

"Coming in on final approach. Pass the word, will you, Lars. I don't have everything. Only about half."

"You better have a good reason ready." The reply was lighthearted, but Bryson knew Lars well enough to catch the undercurrent of concern in his voice.

The warning wasn't necessary. Bryson was already doing a mental checklist of who was expecting something, which included most of Bettles, a few Evansville natives, and a handful of bush residents. She focused on the ones who might react poorly to the news they'd been waiting for her in vain.

Everyone was cautious around Dirty Dan, because even though he seemed harmless, no one knew anything much about him, and there were plenty of crazies in Alaska. Crazies who holed up there because society had shunned them elsewhere, and people who cracked from the strain of cabin fever. Both types could be unpredictable. There were

also the chronic alcoholics who occasionally got mean when they were soused, and more than a few of those were around.

Bryson glanced at the illuminated dial on her watch. It was almost nine thirty. She might have been back as early as four or five, if she hadn't had to make so many shopping stops only to get further sidetracked by her unexpected passenger. The folks waiting for their orders had probably started gathering at the Den around three—such supply trips were a highlight of the week, or month. So everyone had certainly had ample time to get loaded while they all sat around waiting for her.

The double strip of lights ahead was set on low, which was all she ever needed on a clear night like this. But she was so bleary-eyed she clicked her mic seven times, which automatically triggered the lights to brighten to full. As she did, Bryson heard a sharp intake of breath from the woman behind her.

"You said...Lars? God. I just realized. Bryson Faulkner. You're on the Web site, too, aren't you? Arctic Independent Outfitters?"

"That's me. You know Lars?" They were dropping fast, the ride smooth as silk as they descended. They'd be wheels down in another two minutes.

"Lars Rasmussen?" It came out as a squeak.

"Yeah." *What the heck is going on?*

"I can't do this! I can't." Her passenger's voice shook. She was clearly in a state of panic. "I'm not ready. I thought I was, but I'm not. This is crazy. Just crazy. I'm not ready." She was talking to herself more than Bryson, a kind of reverse pep talk, but Bryson couldn't ignore it. "We can't land. Pull up!" the woman ordered.

"Spare me the drama-queen routine, huh? First you can't wait to get here, and now you—"

"Take me back to Fairbanks. Right now."

"Are you nuts?" They were thirty feet up and closing in fast on the runway.

"I can't face them. I'm not ready." The woman's tone was desperate.

Bryson could make out the lights of a handful of cars and ATVs at the end of the runway, near the Den. And in the glow of them, at least a couple dozen dark silhouettes of gathered townspeople.

Suppressing a sigh, she pulled back on the controls, gave the Cub

some gas, and began to lift away from the ground just as they reached the first lights of the runway. She wouldn't be winning any popularity contests tonight. "Who are you afraid of facing? Lars?" she asked as they passed over the crowd. She could pick out a few of her friends by their shape and clothes, but it was too dark to read their expressions.

"Is *she* there, too?"

A hand reached up and grip Bryson's elbow.

"Maggie? Is she there?"

It all came to her, then. It would have sooner, if she hadn't been so exhausted. *The e-mail*. "Are you *that* Karla?"

The woman gasped. "How could you possibly know that?"

"You sent an e-mail to the Web site, right? Asking whether Lars had a wife named Maggie?"

"Jesus. I never thought...I mean, it was just a quick line. How did you find out about it?"

Bryson started circling the village, a wide loop that would give them time to sort this out and figure out what to do. "Just came up, is all. Skeeter—he does the Web site—mentioned it to Lars and me because it was kind of unusual. Anything a little mysterious around here tends to get talked over."

"So Lars knows, too?"

"Well, he wondered who you were and why you were asking about him and Maggie, yeah. Didn't recall ever meeting a Karla before."

"We haven't met." Her client's breathing was so loud and fast Bryson was afraid she might hyperventilate. "I came here to see them. Kind of on impulse. And I know it probably sounds crazy, but I'm just not ready to face them yet."

Lars's voice came over her headset. "Hey, Bryson, what's going on? Problems?"

"Give me a couple minutes, Lars," she replied. "Nothing wrong, just checking something." She switched off her mic. "We have to set down," she told Karla. "I don't have enough fuel to get back to Fairbanks, and there's a whole lotta people down there camped out waiting for me. If it matters, I don't think Maggie's there. Only Lars."

Karla was silent for a minute or two. "I have to ask you a favor. Can you...can we...not tell Lars who I am?"

"You're not giving me a lot to work with here. Lars and Maggie are good friends," she said. "I won't lie to him, especially if this is

about something that'll upset them. Frankly, lady, you're acting a bit unhinged."

"I don't know how they'll react to what I have to tell them," Karla volunteered. "I'm hoping they'll think it's good news. Mostly, anyway. But I need some time to think about what I'm going to say. I can't explain any better than that. I'm just asking you to respect my privacy and not say anything to anyone."

"All right. But you better not make me regret giving you a lift here." Bryson hit her mic button. "Coming in, Lars. See you in a few."

"Roger that, Bryson."

She lined up the Cub for another approach and descended toward the runway. The crowd gathered at the end had increased significantly during their circling.

"Where can I stay?" Karla asked as the wheels touched down.

"Only one place in town, the Den. Right there." She had both hands busy with the controls, so she tilted her head in the direction of the roadhouse. "Should warn you, gonna be some curiosity about you. Especially since a lot of people won't be getting the supplies they're expecting." The Cub rolled to a stop twenty feet from the gathered crowd. Immediately the townspeople began to converge on the plane.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not your concern now," Karla said.

The declaration was welcome news, but Bryson refrained from saying so.

Lars and Geneva were at the head of the pack. They reached her door just as she opened it.

"Aha. Now I see why you got held up." Lars grinned as he looked past her approvingly to Karla, who was unbuckling herself.

"Who's she?" Geneva asked with much less enthusiasm.

"Missed her flight, so I let her hitch along." Bryson climbed out of the Cub and started around to the other side, but a burly six-three pipeline worker named Hank stepped in front of her, blocking her path. He reeked of whiskey.

"Lars says you didn't get evythin'." He slurred his words. "Better have that damn ax I been waitin' for all day."

"And my ointment," said the hulk's shadow, a twitchy ferret of a man named Jerry who'd obviously consumed nearly as much alcohol as his chum. The two shared a cabin several miles outside the village.

"Fucking rash is driving me nuts." He scratched a greasy hand across his chest as if to illustrate the extent of his misery.

"Got everything on the list, just had to leave a few things behind till I can make it back there. Maybe in the morning." Bryson stepped deftly around both of them as they started to protest and reached the passenger door just as Karla emerged.

"You got my cigarettes?" a woman shouted, and Bryson winced. The cigarettes, she knew, had been in the bag that had been on the passenger seat. Those had definitely been left behind.

"Sammy's waiting up for his soccer ball," another voice hollered.

"*She* the reason you didn't get evythin'?" Hank had trailed her, and he and his drunken ferret-shadow were now staring at Karla, Hank with disgust and Jerry with a leer.

And more trouble was brewing. Bryson caught a glimpse of Dirty Dan, pushing angrily through the crowd toward them.

"Hold on, everybody. Chill." She held up her hands. "I promise, what I don't have with me, I'll pick up tomorrow if the weather holds. Now, if I can get some hands to help haul this stuff into the Den, we'll sort out what's here and what's not, *yet*."

Karla looked a bit shell-shocked to be the center of attention. She shrank against the door of the Cub. Bryson glanced around for Lars as she opened the cargo hatch and was relieved to find him positioned directly behind Dirty Dan, who had pulled up short to study Karla with narrowed eyes and an annoyed frown.

She took out the nearest box and thrust it toward Hank. "Make yourself useful." He shouldered it without further complaint, and his companion accepted the sack of groceries that was next out of the plane. Others stepped forward to help unload, and soon most of the crowd had dispersed, all headed back to the Den. Geneva stood off to one side, and Dirty Dan also remained, still eyeing Karla suspiciously, with Lars behind him.

Karla, withering under the glare of attention, had inched ever closer to Bryson's back during the unloading, so that by the time it was done, she was standing so near that Bryson almost knocked her down when she turned around.

Her elbow impacted Karla's side, and Karla, startled, jumped back, off balance. But Bryson's fatigue had faded entirely under the threat of

trouble and her curiosity about Karla Edwards, and her senses were on hyperalert. She grabbed for Karla as she fell back and managed to wrap one arm around her waist. She caught her, though the momentum carried her forward and she landed hard on one knee.

Bryson grimaced in pain and muttered a curse under her breath. The woman in her arms scrambled to regain her feet as Lars shot forward. "Hey! You okay?" he asked, putting an arm around Bryson's shoulder.

"Fine," she said through clenched teeth.

"That sounded painful." Karla stooped next to her. "You sure you're all right?"

"Said I'm fine." Would this nightmare of an evening never end? Bryson struggled to her feet, wincing as new pain shot through her knee. That would leave a bruise. Forcing a smile, she gave Lars a subtle indication with her eyes to keep alert to Dirty Dan and got a small nod of acknowledgment in return. She reached into the hold for her daypack and slung it over one shoulder, then extricated Karla's duffel.

"I'll take that," Lars offered, stepping forward.

"I can—" Karla started to reach for it herself but Lars waved her off.

"No. Let me. I'm happy to." Lars took the duffel in his left hand and offered his right to Karla. "I'm Lars. Welcome to Bettles. You staying with us long?"

Karla's heart was thundering as she reached for her brother-in-law's hand. "It's nice to meet you, Lars. Thank you. I'll be around a while." She hoped so, anyway, but that all depended on Maggie.

Her first impression of him couldn't have been better, a stark contrast to Bryson's aloof demeanor. His welcoming kindness was genuine; she could see it in his sweet smile and feel it in the firm grasp of their hands. And Lars was a strapping, handsome man. Six feet tall. Blond. With a square jaw, high cheekbones, and clear blue eyes.

They all headed into the roadhouse, where a chaos of activity greeted them. Only a few patrons were seated at the bar and scattered tables. Most of the sizeable crowd was gathered anxiously around the boxes and bags from the plane, which were now piled in the corner on a small raised platform stage. A stocky man with a bushy red beard and black wool cap was doing his best to dissuade anyone from rummaging

through the contents, but the irate voices of the drunks in the crowd indicated a few tempers were beginning to boil.

Bryson headed purposefully toward the melee, and Lars followed suit, pausing just long enough to deposit Karla's duffel at her feet.

Karla grabbed the bag and took a seat at the end of the bar, grateful to have the attention of the town shifted elsewhere so she could take a moment to breathe and think about what she was going to do.

"Settle down, folks." Bryson's voice rang out over the crowd as she pushed her way through to the stage. "Got my list right here." She doled out the supplies, with Lars flanking her on one side and the red-bearded man on the other.

"Hey, there. Welcome to the Den. What can I get ya?" The bartender smiling at Karla epitomized her image of the typical Alaskan roughneck. Big and broad-shouldered, with a silver-tipped beard and hair that hadn't seen clippers in a decade or more.

"Mmm. White wine?"

"You got it." He set a well-polished wineglass in front of her and filled it to the rim with Chardonnay. "If you're hungry," he added, tapping one of the menus tucked between the salt-and-pepper shakers and napkin holder to her left, "kitchen's open until midnight."

"Thanks." As the bartender retreated to his other customers, she downed a long sip of her wine. The place reminded her of the Brick in *Northern Exposure*, with its taxidermy décor and quirky Arctic accents. A broken dogsled hung from the ceiling, along with ancient gold-mining paraphernalia: pans and picks and broken shovels. The neon beer signs behind the bar advertised local brews she'd never heard of, with colorful names like Forty-Niner Amber, Solstice Gold, and Caribou Kilt.

The bartender delivered a large bowl of stew to a patron two stools down, and the savory aroma reminded her it'd been hours since she'd eaten anything. She reached for the menu, which was as eclectic as the bar. Reindeer stew. Caribou steaks. King crab. Smoked salmon tacos. And for dessert, wild berry crisp with home-churned vanilla-bean ice cream.

"Go for the stew," Bryson suggested as she claimed the seat to her right. "Specialty of the house."

Karla looked past her and saw that the mob of townspeople had

dispersed back to their tables and booths, some smiling over their purchases, a few glaring unhappily at Bryson's back.

"I didn't realize what a problem it'd create for you to have to leave so much behind to get me here," she said. "Looks like a lot of your friends are pretty upset."

"They'll get over it. Hopefully I can make a quick run down at first light and be back with the rest before they sleep off their hangovers." Bryson hailed the bartender, and he hurried toward them with a smile.

"Handled that like a pro," he told Bryson as he popped the top off a bottle of Black Fang beer and set it in front of her. "How'd you defuse ol' Dan?"

Karla followed Bryson's eyes to the other end of the bar, where the man who'd been staring at them out by the plane was buttoning up his filthy overcoat and preparing to leave.

"Told him I'd do his next delivery freebie."

"Pretty hefty price tag."

"Not so much." Bryson glanced her way. "Take it you two've met. You get a room?"

"No, not yet," she replied, looking uncertainly toward the bartender. "You're the proprietor?"

"Grizz." He folded both large hands around hers in a warm, extended greeting. "Sorry to say, though, we're full up tonight." He looked to Bryson. "Lars snagged the last couple of rooms for you two when he realized you wouldn't be able to make it home before dark."

Oh crap. "I should've called ahead. Any suggestions?" She glanced from one to the other.

"I've got a solution." One of the waitresses materialized on the other side of Bryson, the curvaceous brunette who'd lingered by the Cub and followed them inside. "Bryson can bunk with me. That frees up a room."

Bryson took a long swig from her beer and seemed to consider the suggestion. She turned away from Karla to face the waitress. "No ulterior motives, right, Gen?"

"That's entirely up to you," the woman answered. She was smiling at the pilot with a look full of mischief and promise. For some reason Karla didn't expect to find lesbians so far out in the boonies, and she was so absorbed with other matters that it hadn't crossed her mind that

her hunky pilot and she might have that in common. Though perhaps it should have. That gate clerk back in Fairbanks had given Bryson a similar come-on smile.

On the surface, anyway, she could understand their interest in Bryson Faulkner. She was easy on the eyes, with her natural beauty and athletic build. And Karla imagined some women might be attracted to her adventurous lifestyle as a pilot. But give Karla kind and sweet over daring and detached any day.

However, this revelation might be a positive development in terms of the reception she might get from the Rasmussens. If they were close to Bryson, they obviously had no issue with her being gay. At least Karla apparently didn't have to worry about that.

"All right, then," Bryson told the bartender. "She can have my room."

"I don't want to put you out..." Karla began, but in truth she was grateful for the opportunity to crash for a while. And she didn't imagine Bryson would feel too inconvenienced, considering the enticing alternative.

"Oh, she'll be comfortable, don't you worry," the waitress interjected. "Not like we haven't done it plenty of times before, right, Bryson?"

Bryson turned to meet Karla's eyes. "We're old friends. It's fine."

"Thanks." Addressing the bartender, she said, "I'm pretty beat. If someone can show me to my room now, I'd be very grateful. And maybe I can get a bottled water and a bowl of your reindeer stew sent up?"

"Done." Grizz wiped his hands on a bar towel and snagged a key from a rack behind the cash register. "Right this way," he said, rounding the bar and stooping to retrieve her duffel bag.

She followed him toward the door that led upstairs, then paused to glance around the bar. Lars had disappeared somewhere. It was just as well, because the time had come for her to figure out what the heck she was going to say to them.

The room was comfortable, if modestly furnished. A queen-sized bed, small dresser, and twin nightstands with matching lamps. Two padded chairs flanking a small round table faced the one large window. The truly eye-catching feature was the array of photographs on the

walls—spectacular blowups of the northern lights. “Bathroom’s down the hall at the end. You’ll find fresh towels in the cabinet there. You here just the one night?” Grizz asked as he set her duffel bag on the bed.

Good question. “Um. Not sure. I’ll probably be here at least a couple of nights, maybe more. Are you booked up?”

He laughed. “Naw. Tonight’s an exception, because so many backcountry folks came in to meet the plane. This time of year, we almost always have a fair amount of rooms free.”

“Great. Can I kind of play it by ear, then? Let you know?”

“Sure. Come find me tomorrow, and we’ll get your credit-card info and all that done.” He started toward the door, but stopped with his hand on the knob. “Anything else I can get you?”

“Just the food, thanks.”

“Coming right up. Enjoy your stay with us.”

He left her alone, and she unpacked her bag. At the bottom was a copy of the letter her mother had written, along with a small photo album. She sat on the edge of the bed and studied the pictures of her mother, arranged chronologically from when she was just a girl in pigtails to the last one taken just before her death.

She paused when she came to an Easter snapshot that could have been a Norman Rockwell painting of the idealized American family. She and her parents were about to dig in to a feast of ham and all the trimmings, the table set with their finest china and linens. Her father sat at the head of the table, still in his navy suit from church. Her mother wore a pale yellow dress, and Karla sat opposite, in pink, her basket of candy eggs and chocolate rabbits on the floor beside her chair. Her father had bought a tripod so they could capture every holiday together, and there were dozens of similar photos in a box at home.

But though she’d looked at this picture countless times, Karla only now noticed that the smile on her mother’s face seemed forced, and the look in her eyes was melancholic. Had she been thinking about the child she’d given away, wondering what her daughter’s life was like, imagining how she might be spending the holiday? Surely on occasions like this, her mother must have had some regrets about her decision. Karla was eleven in the picture, so Maggie would have been fifteen or so, already in high school.

The photo allowed Karla a glimpse of the anguish her mother endured. She’d never fully realized how difficult it must have been to

keep that terrible secret. *I miss you so damn much, Mom. I wish you could have told me.*

She felt ashamed that she'd focused entirely on her own feelings of betrayal when she learned about Maggie. She had to respect her mother's decision; she'd done what she thought best for her firstborn child and had suffered the consequences of her actions. Maybe her sister would somehow remind her of the woman that gave birth to them both. *Do you look like her, Maggie? Will I see her in your eyes?*

Two sharp raps brought her out of her reverie. When she opened the door, Bryson stood on the other side, holding a tray with her stew, water, and a basket of fresh rolls.

"Didn't expect to see you again," she said, stepping aside.

"I was headed up here anyway, and Grizz asked." Bryson set the tray on the table by the window and turned to go.

"Hey, you mind hanging around for a couple of minutes?"

Bryson's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What for?"

"You said you were friends with Lars and Maggie, right? Would you mind answering a few questions for me?"

"I guess not."

Karla took one of the chairs, and Bryson the other. "Would it bother you if I eat while we talk? I'm starving." Not waiting for anything more communicative than Bryson's shrug, she reached for one of the rolls and dipped it into the thick gravy. The rich, savory stew, filled with chunks of lean meat, quelled the ache in her stomach. "What's Maggie like?" she asked between bites.

"Maggie? Independent. Strong-willed. Bright. Funny." Bryson smiled at some memory, but didn't offer details. "Protective of people she cares about. Just about fearless—she's had a couple of pretty close encounters with wolves and grizzlies and always kept her cool."

Wolves and grizzlies? The huge stuffed bear at the entrance to the Den was intimidating enough. She couldn't imagine coming face to face with one in the wild.

"Maggie can be kind of particular," Bryson continued, still staring out into the night. "Wants everything in its place." She grinned to herself. "But not so much, these days."

"Why? What's different 'these days'?"

"Don't think I should answer that. Maggie and Lars are like family to me, and I don't feel right volunteering a lot of private information

about them. Especially since I don't know why you're here, why you want to know all this in the first place."

Bryson probably wouldn't answer most of her other questions, either, but she had to try. "Okay, I can respect that. Can you at least tell me how to get to their place?"

"I'll tell you this much. This time of year, only two options. Boat and plane. By skiff, it's a good two or three hours or more. And that's not a trip you'd ever try to make alone, unless you really know the territory. Lars usually gets here and back hitching a ride with me. I live a few miles downstream of them, and he boats from there, which is an easy trip."

"In other words, I can't exactly just drop in on them and say hello."

"No. Not so much." Bryson tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn.

"I'll let you go get some sleep. I guess you can't really answer my questions, anyway. But I appreciate you staying."

Bryson got to her feet. "No problem. Can I offer you some advice?"

"Sure."

"Lars is stuck here until I get back from Fairbanks tomorrow, probably some time in the early afternoon. He should be easy to find, either downstairs or hanging out with Skeeter in the FAA hut at the edge of the airstrip. Be a good time to talk to him."

She followed Bryson to the door. "Thanks. I'll do that."

Bryson met her eyes. "Good luck. Hope you find whatever you came here for."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Karla woke to the faint sound of an engine, a steady but choppy cadence that took several seconds to recognize as Bryson's plane. The room was dark, but she could dimly make out the silhouette of the chairs and table. She threw back the covers and shivered; it was several degrees cooler in the room than the seventy degrees she set her thermostat at home. Her thin flannel pajamas were inadequate and she hadn't packed a robe, so she put on her down jacket and an extra pair of socks, and went to the window.

Dawn hadn't broken yet, but it wasn't far off. A thin line of faint gold light illuminated the eastern horizon, to her left. Far below were the runway lights, stretching nearly parallel to the horizon. A white aircraft, slightly bigger than Bryson's and with a painted tail logo that read *Bettles Air*, was parked on the first half of the airstrip beneath an overhead light.

Bryson's red Super Cub sat at the beginning of the strip, poised for takeoff, its propeller a faint gray blur. Its large tires began to turn, and the plane gained the sky seconds later, not yet sixty feet down the runway.

A life that entailed facing down the weather and deadly terrain of Alaska every day, year round, in such a fragile aircraft was unimaginable. Like a sparrow trying to navigate the perimeter of a hurricane. Bryson Faulkner was certainly a braver woman than she was. Or more foolhardy. She headed toward the door, desperate to pee, and was shocked to discover it was already nine forty-five. Back home it was already full light out by eight, when she left for work.

A male singing loudly off-key already occupied the bathroom at the end of the hall, so she retreated to her room cursing under her breath. The first time in ages she was able to sleep like a rock would be the morning she didn't have a private bathroom.

Her annoyance faded instantly when she opened her door. The scene outside the window stunned her. The rising sun cast a vivid pink light across the mountains that filled the glass, highlighting their sheer facades and snow-peaked tips, and painting the shadows at the base of each one an ethereal shade of blue, almost turquoise. The sunrise looked like a watercolor painting. She walked slowly forward until her face was inches from the pane. The mountain range, some ten or fifteen miles distant, defined the northern horizon, extending as far as she could see in either direction.

Karla held her breath briefly. The light had a magical quality, a photographer's dream. She rummaged through the dresser drawers for her pocket digital camera and took a few shots, knowing they would never capture this splendor.

Bryson's words came back to her. "Have to be able to breathe fresh air, see the stars, hear the wolves howl at night. Wake up to a view that always stuns me."

She was beginning to understand at least some of Bryson's reasons for choosing to live in Alaska. What were Maggie's?

It was time to tell the Rasmussens who she was and why she was here, but how to begin? After she learned that Maggie existed, she was able to keep her grief tolerable by preoccupying herself with planning, organizing, and researching. Tying up all the loose ends so she could travel halfway around the world, return date undetermined.

But she was *here* now, and the challenge ahead was suddenly all too *real*. Imminent. Ominous. Ordinarily, she planned life in detail to minimize surprises.

This time, though, she hadn't allowed herself time to consider exactly what she would do and say. Perhaps if she'd thought about it too carefully, she wouldn't have come. It was completely out of character for her to just drop in unannounced on anyone—even a good friend, let alone a long-lost sibling—armed with a bombshell.

But she couldn't stand to be rejected and abandoned again. If she'd told Maggie she was coming, she'd have had to say why. And if

Maggie didn't like the idea, she could simply cut her off, then and there, without explanation.

She had to do it in person.

As if answering her resolve, Lars came out of a small building at the edge of the runway, near where the planes parked. He was headed toward the Den.

Karla gathered a change of clothes and returned to the bathroom. If Mister Off-key wasn't out of there yet, maybe she could persuade him to hurry. She didn't want to waste this opportunity to talk to her brother-in-law.



Karla found Lars sipping coffee in a booth, alone. She'd showered and spent several minutes putting on makeup and styling her hair, as she usually did, at least on her working days, and she especially wanted to make the best impression possible today. However, the majority of the women in the Den, Bryson included, apparently didn't bother with cosmetics and curling irons.

Gathering her courage, she crossed to the booth and waited for Lars to look up. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Sure thing." He smiled and extended his arm toward the seat opposite. "Want some coffee?"

"Desperate for some."

"Oh! Desperate, eh? Calls for extreme measures, then." He winked and slid out of the booth, ran comically across the wood-planked floor, to the applause and laughter of the Den's half dozen other patrons, and back behind the bar, where he poured a mug full from a fresh pot. Snatching a couple of creams from a basket, he hustled back over to the booth, holding the mug well in front of him in case it spilled.

"What service. I'll have to leave a big tip." She brought it to her lips to take a long sip and realized her hands were trembling.

Lars noticed, too, and frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Nervous."

"Nervous?" His forehead creased in confusion. "About what?"

She glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. "Lars, I came here to see you and Maggie. My name is Karla Edwards."

"Karla? The Karla from the e-mail?"

She nodded.

He leaned back in his seat, his face registering confusion and curiosity. "Okay. What's this about?"

"I should've probably given you both some notice I was coming. I really didn't mean to blindside you, but..." Her heart was drumming so loud in her ears her voice sounded oddly muted.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" She could see in his expression that her evasiveness alarmed him.

"No. I mean, hopefully you'll both like my news, though there's part of it I know you won't want to hear. God, this is difficult." She wrapped her hands tight around her mug to keep them from shaking.

"Please." He leaned forward and met her eyes. "Just tell me."

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Maggie is my sister."

Lars let the news sink in. "I don't understand. Maggie's an only child. How is that possible?"

"Maggie was adopted. I gather she doesn't know that?"

"Adopted? Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Our mother had to give her up when she was a baby. The Van Rooy's were family friends. They moved here with Maggie right after the adoption."

"Maggie doesn't know anything about this. I think she always wanted a brother or sister, but to find out her parents lied to her, that's not gonna sit easy with her." He studied Karla's face as if to find some trace of his wife in her features. "How do you know all this?"

"My mother...*our* mother, died three weeks ago." Tears sprang to her eyes, and she wiped them away.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Lars said. "I know how awful it is to lose a parent. Both of mine are gone."

"Still kind of raw. It was sudden. A heart attack." She steeled herself to tell him the rest. "She'd been sick for a long time with Alzheimer's."

"Oh, that's gotta be the worst. Can't say I know much about it, but it sure has to be tough on the person who has it and their families."

"Tough doesn't begin to describe it." Karla remembered the many phases her mother had gone through. Denial. Anger. Frustration. "Those who have it are aware they'll lose their memories and their ability to function a little more every day and there's not a damn thing they can

do to stop it. The disease shatters their dreams for the future. And, most painful of all, they know their loved ones will have to watch them and most likely put their own plans on hold to deal with all of it.”

“I can’t imagine.” Lars seemed sympathetic. “But I don’t understand something, Karla. If your mother was bad off for a long time, like you said, how did she tell you all this stuff about my wife?”

“Mom never actually *told* me anything about Maggie. But she left a letter that she wrote many years ago, before she got sick, explaining everything. I found it among her things last week.”

“So that explains the e-mail.”

“Yes. The last Mom knew, you and Maggie were in Fairbanks. I did searches on the Internet to find you. You’re the only family I have left now.” Karla was so nervous about Lars’s reaction she had been ripping her napkin into little pieces beside her mug. She glanced at her unconscious evidence of her state of mind. “And once I *did* find you, I decided on impulse to come out here and tell you all this in person.”

Lars took both of her hands in his, smiling at her small pile of shredded paper. “I have a new sister-in-law, it seems. Let me be the first, then, to welcome you to the family.”

She wanted to relax under the sincere gesture, but she had to tell him everything. “Lars, how much do you know about Alzheimer’s?”

His smile faded. The look on her face must have told him that he’d missed something important, and she could almost see the wheels turning as he tried to figure out what it was. “I don’t...” Then he apparently realized what she meant. “Shit. Alzheimer’s. It’s hereditary, isn’t it?”

“They don’t know for sure about most cases. But a rare type, called Familial Alzheimer’s, or early-onset, is conclusively hereditary. The doctors weren’t sure, but they think that’s what my mother had.” Karla had accepted this news long ago, but was sensitive to the impact it would have on Lars. She couldn’t sugarcoat it. “If they’re right, Maggie and I both have a fifty-fifty chance of getting it too. My mother started showing symptoms when she was in her early forties.”

He exhaled loudly and ran his hand through his hair. “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry, Lars.” Working at the hospital she had to be able to deliver and discuss such news with clinical detachment, but in this case, she couldn’t help but grieve and be anxious about the prognosis.

Lars cradled his head in his hands and didn’t speak for several

moments. When he finally looked up at her, his eyes were wet with tears. “Do you know Maggie’s pregnant?”



Fairbanks

After Bryson secured the cargo door of the Cub, she stood in the doorway of the hangar staring toward the terminal. Should she go inside to track down Sue Spires and set up a time they could get together for a few hours of fun?

She wasn’t as tempted as she was last night, and not because she’d been sexually satisfied in the interim.

Geneva hadn’t tried very hard to coerce Bryson to rekindle their affair. She pouted a bit when Bryson repeated that she wanted to remain friends, and *only* friends, but soon curled up on her side of the queen-sized bed and went to sleep.

Bryson was the one who somehow managed to drift over the invisible line between them as they slept, for when she woke she was spooning Geneva from behind, their bodies tight together and her hand cupping Gen’s ample left breast.

She lay like that for a long minute, listening to Geneva’s deep breaths and imagining she was waking at home in the arms of a loving partner she was madly passionate about. Her series of transient liaisons satisfied her less every day, and as much as she tried to tell herself she was comfortable with her life, at moments like this she couldn’t keep her loneliness at bay.

She longed for a woman to wake up to every morning, to share coffee with as the sun rose over the mountains, to laze with drowsily in bed on stormy days. Someone who would worry if she was overdue from a flight and welcome her home with kisses and caresses. Lately the prospect of spending the rest of her life alone left her feeling incomplete and not as happy in this wilderness as she had once been.

We all have to make choices, and you’ve made yours. She couldn’t be happy somewhere else, and sharing her days with someone she wasn’t in love with wouldn’t fill her inner void. She gently withdrew from Geneva and dressed, ignoring her small groan of protest.

The whole experience with Geneva had dampened her desire to

spend an evening with Sue, and she needed to get back to Bettles to deliver the rest of her supplies. As she towed her plane back out of the hangar, she discovered one more reason she didn't want to linger long in Fairbanks. She was curious about Karla Edwards and why she'd come to see Maggie and Lars.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bettles

“Pregnant? Oh, God. I had no idea.” Karla knew Maggie would already have plenty to deal with—the revelations she was adopted, had a sister, and had just lost her biological mother without ever meeting her. And especially that she was at high risk for one of the most insidious and awful diseases imaginable. But to learn that the child she was carrying might suffer the same fate, and that she might lose her mind before that child even started school... “Lars, I’m so sorry. I knew all of this would be difficult enough. I shouldn’t have come.”

“Don’t say that.” Lars put one of his hands over hers again. “You did the right thing.” He took a deep breath and straightened, setting his jaw. “I need some time to think how best to tell Maggie. Oh, she’ll *seem* to take it well. She always puts on a brave face when the going gets rough. But she’ll be afraid, inside. She’s a worrier.” He gave a half-hearted smile. “At least that’s her normal reaction. But these days, her hormones are goin’ nuts. No telling sometimes what she’s gonna say or do next.”

“When is she due?” She was going to be an aunt. That is, if Maggie accepted her the way Lars seemed to have. But even if Maggie embraced the idea of suddenly having a sister, she certainly wouldn’t welcome all of Karla’s news. That worried her most.

“Less than three weeks left. November sixteenth. The baby’s a girl.” The softness in his eyes told Karla how devoted this man was to her sister and how very much he wanted this child. “We haven’t decided on a name yet. Maggie wants to see what suits her when she arrives.”

"I love the idea I have a niece on the way. When Mom died, I didn't think I had any family left at all."

"You're not married? No children?" Lars asked.

"No. I live alone." *And hate it.* She considered telling him about Abby. She'd *felt* married, even if their union hadn't been legal or even the mutually devoted commitment she'd thought it'd been. But the last thing she needed right now was to voluntarily unearth those memories in vivid detail. She thought about Abby too much as it was, and the recollections just depressed her and made her feel inadequate. Time, she hoped, would help her understand what had gone wrong, and why. Lars's question had given her an opening to tell him she was gay, however, and she didn't mind getting into that. From the way Lars acted around Bryson, she was pretty certain he wouldn't have a problem with it. "I'm not seeing anybody right now. But I have had one serious relationship...with a woman." She watched for his reaction.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise, but his expression showed no hint of disgust or disapproval, only curiosity. "You're a lesbian?"

She nodded.

"Bryson is, too. And Geneva, one of the waitresses at the Den."

"Yeah, I gathered that."

He laughed. "You got that gaydar Bryson talks about? I swear, how you can all recognize each other is beyond me. I'd never be able to tell with any of you."

"So I gather you and Maggie don't have any problem with it?"

"Oh, hell no. Bryson's family. And hey, we may live out in the sticks and all, but that doesn't make us narrow-minded. We live in Alaska partly because people here are generally more tolerant of each other's lifestyles. You get all kinds."

"Good to know. Lars, I'd like to tell Maggie myself about our connection. Unless you think it would be better coming from you?"

"I've been pondering that. How long are you in Bettles?"

Karla looked out at the runway. A plane was coming in, the Wright Air flight the gate attendant had offered to book for her. The Cessna was only marginally bigger than the Cub. And though the pilot looked capable in his starched white shirt, navy slacks, and bomber jacket, she was glad she'd flown with Bryson. The woman exuded calm self-confidence and had gone above and beyond in her efforts to help her

through a troubled night, even if she had been reluctant at first. “I’m not sure how long I’ll stay. I guess that’s up to you and Maggie. I’m on an open-ended leave of absence from my job.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a registered nurse. I work in the ER at a hospital in Atlanta.”

Lars’s eyebrows rose. “That’s great. Don’t mind telling you, it’s reassuring to think you might be around a while, with Maggie getting so big. The nearest doctor’s in Fairbanks.”

“Are you planning to stay there when she gets closer to her due date?” A lot of airlines hesitated to let a pregnant woman fly when she was more than eight months along, primarily because they were afraid she’d go into labor en route or have problems with deep-vein thrombosis—blood clotting in the legs. Bryson probably wouldn’t let that stop her where Maggie was concerned, but the flight to Fairbanks was long enough that it could be perilous to wait until she went into labor to leave.

“She wants to have the baby at home. A midwife in Evansville is willing to come out when the time comes. But of course, at her age, I worry about complications, or that she might go into labor during a snowstorm or something and I’d be alone with her.” Lars sat up straighter and rubbed sweaty palms along the top of his jeans. “I’m reading all the books I can get my hands on about what to do, but I’d sure appreciate any advice you can give me. We don’t have any of those birthing classes around here.”

“I’d be happy to. Has Maggie been seeing a doctor?”

He nodded. “Every month. She’s got an appointment next week.”

“Great. So, who tells her about me? What do you think?”

“Well, we shouldn’t just spring you on her without any warning. She’s been alone for a couple of days, so no telling what the cabin looks like and what kind of mood she’s in. She’s a stickler about having everything neat and tidy when people visit.” He glanced at his watch. “Bryson should be back soon. I say best thing is to let her fly me home, give me some time to make everything presentable. I’ll just say we’re going to have a guest for a while. You can tell her about everything, except the Alzheimer’s. We should leave that until after the baby’s born.”

“Probably wise. No need to stress her any more right now.”

“While I’m doing that, Bryson can come back for you, and I’ll pick you up at her place in the skiff.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Provided Maggie takes the news well, as I think she will, you’re welcome to stay with us as long as you like.”

“Thank you, Lars. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you both. And helping Maggie any way I can.” Her stomach churned at the thought she’d finally be meeting her sister in just a few hours. *Please, God. Let her want me in her life as much as I want her in mine.*



Bryson knew before she’d even shut down the Cub’s engine that Karla and Lars had talked. In all the years she’d known Lars, she’d rarely seen anything except calm complacency on his face. He was the kind of guy you’d want beside you when all hell was breaking loose, entirely unflappable in a crisis, and he’d been tested on more than one occasion.

Once a grizzly, fresh out of hibernation and desperate for food, stormed his camp during the night and clawed through the wall tent he was sharing with two fishermen. His clients had bolted screaming from the tent; it was only luck the bear hadn’t chased them. But Lars kept his head, rolling under his cot to retrieve the can of Mace and the Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan .454 Casull he carried. The noise of the gun stopped the bear, and the Mace ran him off, though the spray also made Lars profoundly uncomfortable the rest of the day.

But whatever news Karla Edwards had brought to Bettles had certainly rattled Lars. Though an icy mist had descended on the village during Bryson’s trip to Fairbanks, she’d barely touched down on the runway when he came trotting out of the Den without his coat, looking concerned and frowning.

Damn it, I knew that woman was trouble the minute I spotted her. If she’s here to stir up trouble for them...

She flipped open the window of the Cub and turned up the collar of her coat. “What’s up?” she hollered over the drone of the propeller as it began to die. “Everything okay?”

"Big news." He shook his head as though he was still having trouble absorbing it. "Big news."

She climbed down and faced him. "Bad?"

"Well, yes and no. I'll tell you all about it on the way home. Like to get you unloaded pronto, so we can get going. And I hope you don't have other plans for the day, 'cause I'd like you to come right back here and pick up Karla Edwards. She'll be staying with us for a while." The uncertainty on his face deepened. "Least I think she will. Like I said, I'll explain on the way."

"Sure, Lars." She forced herself not to press him for answers as they walked to the cargo hold and began to remove the supplies. She hated to see him so distressed, and the last thing she wanted was to have Karla as a passenger again, but the announcement that she would be staying with the Rasmussens piqued Bryson's curiosity. They rarely had overnight guests who weren't close friends, and with Maggie so volatile lately it was especially strange for them to extend such hospitality to a stranger.

When it was time for them to leave, it was even more peculiar that Lars embraced Karla and spoke to her in low tones, like she was an old friend who needed comfort. Karla had stood off to the side, watching them expectantly as she and Lars brought in their cargo and distributed it among the townspeople who'd congregated in the bar when they heard her plane come in.

Lars put his arm around Karla and led her over to Bryson when they finished their quiet tête-à-tête. "Karla's all checked out." He squeezed the woman's shoulder reassuringly. "She's planning to walk around a bit and see the town, but she'll be back here by the time you make the round trip."

"Fine. Shouldn't take more than an hour or so."

Karla was obviously impatient to leave. She chewed on the inside of her cheek and glanced around, shifting her weight from foot to foot, her hands jammed in her pockets. She didn't seem the type to subject herself to the chill weather voluntarily, but probably needed to work off her restlessness instead of sightsee.

"Don't worry," Lars whispered as he kissed Karla on the forehead. "It'll be fine."

"I sure hope you're right," Karla replied in a quiet voice.

As soon as they were airborne Lars's air of confidence faded, and he seemed troubled again. It took him a few minutes to share his news.

"Karla is Maggie's sister."

"*Sister?* Wait a minute...I thought Maggie's—"

He held up a hand. "Yeah. She doesn't know." The whole story spilled out, everything that Karla had said, including the revelation about the rare form of Alzheimer's that Maggie and their unborn child might be carrying.

Bryson's heart ached for him and the possibility that Maggie might suffer such a debilitating illness soon. Suddenly, all of Karla Edwards's frantic and bizarre behavior the night before made sense.

"We're not planning to tell her about the Alzheimer's until after the baby's born," Lars said. "And Karla wants to tell Maggie the rest herself. I'm going ahead to get everything ready for her to stay with us."

"How you gonna explain to Maggie you're putting up somebody you don't even know? I'm sorry, Lars, but she hasn't even been happy to have *you* underfoot sometimes these days."

The comment brought back his familiar smile. "Yeah. I better hide all sharp objects and breakable keepsakes as soon as I hit the door." His grin faded. "I don't know what to tell her. I don't want to lie to her, but I also want to respect Karla's wish to break the news. Any suggestions?"

"Hmm. That's tough. Well, you did say she's a nurse. Maybe you could just tell Maggie you thought it'd be a good idea to have her out to the house for a couple of days, to help you both know what to do when the baby comes."

"That's not bad." Lars appeared to mull over the suggestion. "Not the whole truth, but not a lie, either."

"She still won't be too happy about it."

"No lie."

As they neared her cabin, a thin layer of ice was beginning to accumulate on the plane. Visibility was still tolerable, and since the cargo hold was empty except for her own supplies, the added weight of any ice buildup wouldn't become an issue right away. But she'd better hustle right back to Bettles and check the plane over carefully before

they got back in the air. Maybe ask Skeeter if the weather was expected to deteriorate any further.

Karla was already wound up tight, and hadn't much liked flying in the Cub when conditions were good, let alone through narrow canyons in a pea soup of icy mist. Hopefully her preoccupation with meeting her sister would distract her.

"Good luck," she told Lars as the Cub rolled to a stop on the gravel bar in front of her home. Lars's skiff was anchored just upstream.

"I'll need every bit of that." He climbed down and automatically went to the back of the plane. Bryson had to make a tight turn to be able to take off again from the short strip of gravel, and the fastest and easiest way to accomplish that was for Lars to lift the rear fuselage and pivot the plane by hand.

She watched him hurry toward his boat in her rearview mirror as she released the brake. Two minutes later, they were headed in opposite directions, she through the narrow canyon to the south, and Lars north at full throttle in the skiff.



Karla bit her lip as she stared out the window of the Den, absently caressing the rim of the cold cup of coffee before her. She hadn't explored Bettles long because of the chill wind and icy mist, though she had wanted some time alone to think about what to say to Maggie and walk off the tension that coiled between her shoulders.

The lounge had emptied considerably after Bryson doled out her supplies, but Karla had barely settled into her booth when Grizz materialized, sliding uninvited into the bench opposite. He offered coffee and a sandwich in exchange for news from the lower forty-eight.

Too polite to brush him off after his kindness last night, she forced down the sandwich and answered his queries about urban life and crime, politics and grocery prices, must-see movies and current fads. He left only when his wife beckoned from the kitchen to help her prep for the evening rush.

When Karla returned her attention to the runway outside, looking for Bryson, she was alarmed at how much the weather had worsened.

The chilly mist had changed to a thick sleet that clung to the window and partially obscured her view of the mountains.

Maybe Bryson wouldn't be able to make it back. And even if she did, surely they wouldn't be able to take off again. She was both relieved and saddened that she'd most likely have to put off meeting Maggie yet another day. She was getting more anxious by the hour and waiting wouldn't help her break her news more easily.

She was about to find Grizz and reserve her room again when the familiar small plane emerged from the gloom at the end of the airstrip. Bryson hopped down and circled it for a couple of minutes, checking it over, then hurried toward the roadhouse. Karla met her at the door.

"Ready to go?" Bryson shook the sleet from her shoulders and ball cap. "Where's your bag?"

"In *this*? You can't be serious. Is it safe?"

"We'll be fine. Skeeter says the worst of it is still a good bit west and we don't have far to go, but we oughta hustle."

"If you're sure." Trying not to worry, she retrieved her bag from the back of the bar where Grizz had stashed it and followed Bryson to the plane.

CHAPTER NINE

What has Lars told you?" Karla asked as they strapped themselves into the Cub.

"Pretty much everything." Bryson got clearance for takeoff from Skeeter and quickly headed north. Thin ice now coated the plane, and the sleet was still coming down, but the prop was spinning smoothly and she couldn't detect any sluggishness in her controls yet. Certainly not optimum flying conditions, but she'd seen worse. "That you're Maggie's sister, and she was adopted. And about the Alzheimer's. Sorry about your mother."

"Thank you."

"Hope you don't mind that he told me, but I'm close to both of them, and Lars wanted some advice on what he should say to Maggie."

"No, it's okay. What's he going to tell her?"

"That you're a visiting nurse, and he thought it'd be a good idea to invite you out to stay for a few days so you could help them know what to do when the baby comes."

"That's good."

Bryson glanced into her mirror. Karla was staring out the window, looking anxious. Bryson wondered whether it was due to her imminent meeting with Maggie or the storm raging outside. Probably both. They were flying only a couple hundred feet off the ground because of the low cloud ceiling, and occasionally a wind gust shook the plane like an angry fist. In a few minutes, they'd be navigating through the narrow canyons of the river, which would do nothing to help calm Karla's distress. She felt sorry for the woman and a little ashamed at how quickly she'd jumped to conclusions about her during their first meeting. Karla was

dealing with a lot. No wonder she'd been so self-absorbed and agitated about getting to Bettles. "Nervous about meeting your sister?"

"Very. How do you think Maggie will react?"

"Hard to predict," she said honestly. "Under normal circumstances, Maggie's real even-keeled. She doesn't make snap judgments. She weighs things in her mind before she acts. And I know family is real important to her." A sudden downdraft dropped the plane ten feet. She heard Karla gasp, but continued in a calm voice, as if it'd been nothing. "I'm sure Lars told you she's kind of touchy these days. Sobbing like crazy one minute and throwing things the next. Guess that's something you're familiar with, huh?"

"Yeah. Very common with pregnant women," Karla said distractedly as another gust shook the plane. "Are we okay? I mean, is this normal?"

"Nothing to worry about. Just a little turbulence."

"I don't know how you can do this every day." Karla leaned forward and stared over Bryson's shoulder through the front windshield. They were coming up fast on the first narrow valley. "Holy shit! Watch out."

"Chill, huh? It's scary the first time, but we gotta fly through the canyons because of the clouds. I've done this route hundreds of times, and believe me, I could do it in my sleep." The Cub entered the deep gorge, the cliffs on either side no more than thirty feet from each wing tip. Bryson was too busy steering the plane to be able to look back at Karla. "Try to think of something else. We'll be through before you know it."

Bryson heard an obscenity from behind her, then another sound that disturbed her even more: a change in the whirr of the prop, a slight laboring in its normally smooth rhythm. The buildup of ice was getting worse.

"I hate this, hate this, *hate* this." Karla's voice betrayed the extent of her alarm. "This is what I get for jumping headfirst into something without thinking it through. I must be crazy."

"Maybe it's not something you ordinarily do." Bryson kept her voice matter-of-fact. "But if it works out, it'll be worth it in the long run. You won't find a better family than Lars and Maggie."

The irregular cadence of the propeller worsened, and Bryson

was sure that even Karla could detect the change, though she didn't comment on it. Probably was too afraid to.

Her wipers were barely able to keep up with the accumulation of sleet, and her GPS told her they still had ten miles to go to reach her cabin. Bryson took a deep breath and let it out. They wouldn't get there a minute too soon.



"Are you insane?" Maggie's face contorted in anger, and she'd turned such a deep shade of crimson Lars worried about her blood pressure. She lay propped up on pillows on their bed, which occupied the northeast corner of their large, one-room cabin.

"Maggie, sweetheart—"

"Don't you *sweetheart* me, Lars Rasmussen. If you think for a *second* I'm about to allow anyone in here. *Look* at this place!" She spread her arms as if in supplication, and Lars had to admit the chaos was even worse than he feared. Dirty dishes were stacked high in the sink and on every counter. The trash bin overflowed, as did the hamper of dirty clothes, and magazines littered the coffee table and rug beside the bed. The bin of firewood was empty, and the wood floor covered with mud tracks. Maggie had gotten so big and was so easily exhausted she simply couldn't handle anything when he was away beyond keeping herself fed and warm.

"I won't go get her until I have everything all spic-and-span, just the way you like it," he promised. He knew her throwing range so he remained by the door, the only interior spot outside that perimeter. The trio of heavy mugs on the nightstand could do some serious damage to his head.

"Do I *look* like I want to play hostess? I'm a beached whale who sleeps fifteen hours a day and farts uncontrollably. I'm not about to let even a stranger see me like this."

"But honey, she can help us get ready—" The first mug came flying at him, but he ducked in plenty of time and it shattered when it slammed into the heavy wooden door.

"You try to appease me with one more *honey, sweetheart, or darling*, and your ass is grass, Lars. You'll be sleeping in the shed, I

swear to God.” Maggie reached for another mug and glared at him, tight-lipped with fury.

Anything he said would only result in more broken crockery, and she’d already busted half of what they owned, so he kept his mouth shut and began to clean up, careful to stay well away from the bed.

Every chore completed seemed to lessen her rage. Once the dishes were done she put down the mug, and she relaxed back against the pillows when he returned the floor to its usual spotless perfection. By the time he finished the laundry, she was sound asleep and snoring lightly. The tasks took three hours, and Bryson and Karla would be wondering what had happened to him and whether he’d be coming back in the skiff. But he didn’t dare leave until Maggie gave him clearance. It wouldn’t do for her to fling the rest of their dishes at her sister before they were properly introduced.

He approached the bed on tiptoes, like a bomb-disposal expert venturing unprotected toward a case of unstable TNT.

She looked so serene in sleep that at least for the moment she resembled the woman he’d married, and he tenderly stroked her hair away from her face. The thought that within a few years she might lose her memories of their life together made his chest ache. It couldn’t be true. He’d always been optimistic, facing any challenge that came his way with hope, resolve, and a deep faith in the power of prayer. He sank to his knees beside the bed and bowed his head, asking God to spare his wife and child this awful future. Tears formed when he imagined looking at Maggie and finding no hint of recognition in her eyes, and a steady stream poured down his cheeks when he pictured himself raising their daughter alone.

When he lifted his head, Maggie was awake and watching him. His obvious distress was so rare that her anger vanished.

“Lars, please don’t let my mood swings upset you so. You know I love you. I can’t help flying off the handle like that, and you always take the brunt of it. I wouldn’t blame you if you’re getting fed up with me.” She began to cry, which was another frequent side effect of her body’s raging hormones. Normally he simply held her when it happened, murmuring reassurances that she’d be back to her old self in no time.

On this occasion, though, he moved into Maggie’s arms and rested his cheek against her swollen belly, letting the tears come. Time might

not be their friend after all. "I'm just worried about you, Mags." His voice broke.

Maggie's hand caressed his back. "Aw, honey, if it means that much to you, you can bring that nurse here to stay with us."



The groaning of the engine's battle to turn the icy prop worsened every minute, and the controls grew increasingly sluggish with the added weight on the fuselage. Bryson's biceps strained with her effort to keep the plane steady, as she mentally ticked off the familiar landmarks passing beneath the Cub. When they emerged from the canyons and into the final stretch of river leading to her cabin, she breathed only a little easier. Setting down on the short gravel bar with the plane responding so poorly would be a challenge.

Karla either hadn't uttered a word in the last several minutes, or the noisy engine had kept Bryson from hearing. And she'd been concentrating so intensely on getting them down in one piece that she hadn't made any further effort to talk.

"We're here," she hollered back over her shoulder as they descended the final fifty feet. "Fasten yourself in tight. Gonna be bumpy."

That turned out to be an understatement, for in the days she was away, the river had risen, depositing a variety of branches and a medium-sized spruce on a smaller-than-usual landing strip. Steering over the obstacles that the plane's turbo tires could handle, and around the ones they could not, was like trying to drive a cement truck full speed through a short and narrow, twisting hallway.

One of the bumps was so bone-jarring only their seatbelts kept their heads from hitting the roof. Karla cried out, and Bryson cursed. But they came to a stop finally, with the front tires inches from the water's edge.

Neither of them moved for several seconds. When Bryson cut the engine, she could hear Karla's loud, erratic breathing behind her. She loosened her belt and turned to face her. Karla's face was white and her eyes were glassy, as if she was in shock. "You okay?"

"You...you..." Karla licked her lips. "You can't tell me that was a normal landing."

“Well, no. But we’re fine. Sit tight for a minute and I’ll get you inside.”

She retrieved Karla’s duffel bag, towed her Cub away from the water’s edge, and secured its tie-downs with some hefty rocks. By the time she went to help Karla out, her color had returned to normal. But she still looked so unsteady on her feet that Bryson kept an arm around her waist as they waded the shallows and headed up the trail to the cabin.

As they neared the front door, Bandit appeared out of the mist and dive-bombed them with a loud *croak*. Karla screamed and buried her face against Bryson’s chest.

“Don’t mind him. He’s a pest, but not dangerous, just hungry.”

She settled Karla on the couch and went out to start up the generator and gather a load of wood. Once she got the lights on and a fire blazing in the woodstove, she helped Karla out of her coat and boots and wrapped her in a thick quilt. “Some tea?”

“Yes, thanks.” Karla rubbed her hands together beneath the quilt to warm them, grateful to be out of the Cub and on safe ground again. She’d never been more afraid, and her heartbeat had only just returned to normal.

She studied the cabin and its owner. While Bryson looked every bit a modern-day woman, albeit the outdoorsy type, her home resembled something out of *Little House on the Prairie*. The entire living space was not much larger than the living room of her Atlanta apartment, and most of the furniture and cabinetry was of the primitive, hand-hewn variety, though a skilled woodworker had crafted it. The couch on which she sat was rough pine, padded by a futon mattress. Simple pine end tables flanked it, and a matching low coffee table in front held a small stack of books and copies of *National Geographic* and *Alaska Magazine*. A pine chair with a smaller futon sat perpendicular to the couch, opposite a rocker.

A small square table and three chairs created an intimate eating area in one corner of the room, in front of an L-shaped counter with a sink and several cabinets. As she expected, there was no refrigerator, microwave, or conventional oven, only the woodstove at the end of one of the counters. But something else was missing in the tiny kitchen—a faucet above the sink. No running water, either? Unimaginable. How did Bryson do her dishes, wash her face, take a bath?

Bryson lifted a stout iron teakettle from the woodstove and filled it with a dipper from a large oak barrel by the door. When they arrived, Karla saw a massive galvanized tub leaning against the porch, which evidently explained the bathing aspect, and the laundry one too.

Bryson had told her she liked to read, which was certainly evident. In lieu of a television, the wall opposite the couch was filled with built-in bookshelves. Pine again, and jammed with several hundred books and a few animal figurines.

There were other primitive touches. Though an electric floor lamp behind the couch and a ceiling lamp in the center of the room provided the current light, Karla also spotted a trio of old-fashioned kerosene lamps, their blackened chimneys indicating they were well-used. The quilt Bryson had covered her with looked Amish-made, and the cookware hanging from pegs in the kitchen was cast-iron, like the stuff carried on covered wagons in old Westerns.

Bryson either slept on the futon or somewhere in the loft, which took up half the cabin and was accessed by a plain wooden ladder.

The home was unlike any she'd ever been in, but it was cozy. The fire in the woodstove was cheery and efficient, and colorful rugs adorned the wood floor. One wall featured a grouping of photographs, nearly all of them aerial views of the Alaskan landscape, and another held ornate masks presumably carved by local natives.

"What you expected?" Bryson sat beside her holding two steaming mugs of tea and a small jar of honey.

"Kind of. It's pretty much fits the lifestyle you described. But I didn't imagine it would feel so...I don't know...snug."

Bryson smiled. "Glad you think so. Have to say, you get a special satisfaction from living in a place you built yourself."

"You built this cabin?" She glanced about again, viewing the structure in a new light, critically assessing the tight construction of the walls and roof and the smooth perfection of the floor. Bryson must have done a lot of backbreaking work and have considerable skill in carpentry.

"Lars helped move some of the big logs. But, yeah, I did most everything alone. Took most of a year."

"I'm impressed. I can hardly drive a nail in straight."

"My pop taught me." Bryson sipped her tea. "He was a hell of a craftsman. Built the cabin I grew up in, which was a good bit bigger than

this one. And during breakup and in bad weather, he made furniture. Almost everything in here is his, 'cept the rocker. That's an heirloom handed down to my mother."

"You're lucky." Karla well understood what a comfort such treasures could be in dealing with the loss of a parent. She kept her mother's tigereye necklace with her always, in her pocket, and pulled it out often to caress its smooth surface. Doing so gave her strength and a sense of calm, as though her mother had somehow endowed the stone with her energy and love. "Must be nice to have all this to remember your father by."

Bryson ran her hand lovingly along the polished armrest of the couch. "Sure is. I can remember him making every single piece. One of my favorite things used to be watching him take a rough log and turn it into something."

"So you're a pilot and a carpenter. Any other hidden talents?"

Bryson's cheeks colored slightly. "If you mean what else occupies my time, mostly music. I play drums now and then with a little group at the Den and also dabble in photography, but I'm still learning."

"Did you take those?" She indicated the grouping of aerial photos. "They're quite good."

The blush deepened. "Well, it's hard not to get a few keepers when you have these awesome views. What do you do, besides your work as a nurse?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. My friend Stella and I play tennis and golf, though neither of us is very good at either. It's just an excuse to get outside and exercise."

"Lots of good places to hike around here. You should see some of the scenery."

"I may do that if I stick around a while. Which all depends on whether Maggie will want me to." The room had warmed enough for her to comfortably shed the quilt. She rose and walked to the front window. It was growing dark, but the storm was still intense. "Do you think Lars will make it back to get me?"

"Sleet won't stop him. The skiff has lights and a covered cockpit, and he's seen a lot worse, believe me."

"Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"Give him time. He's gotta smooth things with Maggie, and I bet

he has to pick up the place. She's kind of a neat freak, and it's been tough for her to keep up with everything the last month or so."

"The cleanliness bug must be hereditary." Karla chuckled. "Mom was, too, and I tend to be that way myself."

"I'm curious to see what else you two have in common."

"You and me both. You can't imagine how weird it is to suddenly find out you have a sister you never knew about."

"Couldn't have a better one than Maggie. She's one of the sweetest women I know." Bryson smiled. "At least when she's not pregnant."

Karla returned to the couch. "That bad, huh?"

"Let's just say Lars has learned to tread *very* lightly around her these days. She's become fond of throwing dishes and food at him."

"I hope she's okay with the idea of my coming to stay with them."

Bryson leaned her head against the back of the futon and stretched out her legs. "Lars'll make it all right."

Maybe Karla had judged Bryson a little too harshly. Her home and interests reflected an artistic, sensitive soul, one who cared deeply about animals and the environment. She was evidently very loyal to her friends, and now here she was, putting up a stranger and helping pave the way for her meeting Maggie, without asking anything in return. Looking back on her own behavior the night before, Karla realized she'd practically bullied Bryson into taking her along. *And what right did I have to discount the importance of her supplies? Maybe fresh orange juice and Oreos don't seem like much to me, but I bet I'd feel differently if I couldn't run down to the corner store and get them whenever I wanted.* She'd give her the benefit of the doubt and chalk it up to a bad first impression, heightened by fatigue and preoccupation.

Why, then, didn't such an attractive woman have a partner? Sure, she lived primitively, and out in the middle of nowhere, but the cabin was warm and welcoming. Why hadn't someone snapped her up long before now?

The waitress at the Den and the gate attendant in Fairbanks both had shown a definite interest in Bryson, but neither seemed to have captured her attention. Had she had an Abby in her life too, someone who'd broken her heart and left her unable to trust again?

CHAPTER TEN

Looks like he's been held up," Bryson said, when an hour had passed with no sign of Lars. "I'm starving. You?"

"No, thanks. I had a sandwich back at the Den, and my stomach is in knots from the thought of meeting Maggie."

"Understandable." Bryson went to the kitchen and pulled down a deep iron skillet hanging from a peg over the sink. She poured some oil into it and set it on the woodstove. "Think you'll change your mind, though, when you get a whiff of this. Nothing like moose stew to warm you up on a chilly night."

"Moose?"

Bryson knelt by a trapdoor in a corner of the cabin and pulled out a square plastic food container. Bits of hay were stuck to it. "Made a batch the other night that'll warm up quick. Moose tastes kinda like beef, only more tender, and it's better for you than any steak you'd buy. Not much fat. No additives."

"If you say so. But I still think I'll pass."

"Suit yourself. Don't know what you're missing." Bryson dumped the contents of the container into the skillet and stirred it with a big wooden spoon. "Up here we eat a lot of it, along with salmon and caribou. Regular groceries have to be trucked or flown in, so they're about double what you probably pay."

"Well, if you get a craving for something you can't find here, let me know. When I get home, I'll ship it to you. To say thanks for what you've done for me."

Bryson looked up from her cooking with a surprised smile. "Might

take you up on that. How long you staying, by the way? Any chance you'll be here until the baby's born?"

"Probably not that long. But my job would be okay with it. I'm on a leave of absence right now, and I've accrued a lot of vacation time. It all depends on whether Lars and Maggie want me to."

"Bet they will. Not much in the way of trained medical help around. Lars would feel better having a nurse close by right now."

The moose stew smelled better than it sounded. Karla's stomach rumbled when Bryson returned to the couch with a large bowl of the stuff.

"Hungrier than you thought, huh?" Bryson grinned. "Come on, live dangerously. Least take a taste and see how you like it." She held out the bowl.

"Just to satisfy my curiosity." Karla scooped out a small spoonful. Then a larger one, just to make certain it was as fabulous as her taste buds said it was. "Okay, I'm sold. Do you have enough for me?"

"Plenty. Keep that. I'll get another." Bryson ladled herself a portion and they sat side by side on the couch, eating in easy silence until both bowls were empty.

While Bryson did the dishes, Karla perused the titles in her bookshelves. The wide assortment of nonfiction included books on flying, Alaska, wildlife, and the environment, but most were novels, sorted according to type. Four shelves of mysteries, five of suspense and intrigue, five more that appeared to be romances, and...*what do we have here?* Eight shelves of lesbian literature. The representation was impressive, especially considering where she lived. Most of Karla's personal favorites were included.

Bryson's extensive library indicated she was a bright, inquisitive woman with a definite fondness for old-fashioned romanticism, and once again Karla wondered why she didn't have a partner. She turned to study Bryson, who was stowing their bowls back in a cabinet.

It'd been years since she'd really looked at another woman with *that* kind of assessment, but it didn't take long to judge Bryson as prime material. She was easy to talk to, had a good sense of humor, and she exuded an open honesty that was refreshing, especially after Abby's duplicity. And it certainly didn't hurt that Bryson looked as though she'd just stepped off a recruiting poster for sexy hot pilots who can take you places you've never been before.

Yes, Bryson was quite a catch. Karla could see that now. And though her current scrutiny had been born out of a general curiosity about why Bryson was single, it was igniting something very personal. With everything else she had to deal with, Karla would not have thought herself capable of sexual fantasies about anyone right now. But there was something raw and intensely alive about Bryson that jerked her from the numb fog of her grief. She felt guilty enjoying a long, lingering look at Bryson's exquisitely toned physique, but she also felt a ripple of happiness. Something had stirred inside her, if only briefly, reminding her that it was possible to heal. She wasn't broken, just bruised.

"You said Lars told you pretty much everything. Did he include the fact that you and I have something in common?"

Bryson paused and looked at her, forehead furrowed. "We do?"

A sharp rap on the door precluded any further discussion. Bryson went to admit Lars, who shook a heavy coating of sleet from his clothes before he stepped inside.

"Hey, ladies."

"Wondering if you'd make it back tonight." Bryson took his coat and hung it from a peg by the door as Lars walked to the woodstove to warm his hands.

"It took a while to get Maggie to agree to have a houseguest." He smiled encouragingly at Karla. "Place was a mess, and I had to clean it up first. Plus I think she was a little stir-crazy, cooped up a couple days without me."

"But she's all right with it?" Karla asked as she and Bryson both reclaimed their seats on the couch.

"Yeah. I convinced her having a nurse around for a few days would make me more comfortable about having the baby at home." He took the futon chair and stretched his legs out in front of him. "I was thinking on the way, how will you avoid telling her about the Alzheimer's? She'll want to know how your mom died. She can't have been very old."

"No, she wasn't. She died just a couple weeks before she would have turned fifty-seven." The memory of her mother in the coffin, dressed in her cream-colored birthday dress, flashed into her mind, and she prayed that one day it wouldn't be the first image she recalled at the mention of her name. That she could remember first the way she

laughed at Karla's adolescent knock-knock jokes, or the proud look on her face whenever she brought home a report card with straight A's.

"Even though it was the Alzheimer's that really killed her—it shuts down the functions of the brain, which impacts the rest of the body—the cause of death was listed as probable heart failure. I didn't want to have an autopsy done. It wasn't necessary. So that's all I'll tell Maggie for now. That she passed away in her sleep, very suddenly. If she asks me questions about the last few years, what Mom was like, or anything—well, I'll just have to deal with those as they come."

"Okay," Lars said. "I hate having to hide this from her. It tears me up, really, because we've always been completely honest with each other. But I don't want her worrying about this right now. It might hurt her or the baby. Could it?"

"Stress can profoundly impact the body. It can compromise your immune system, disrupt sleep, impact the digestive tract, cause all sorts of other issues. It's definitely best to wait to tell her."

"Anything I can do?" Bryson offered.

"Not for me," Karla said. "Thanks for the ride and the hospitality."

"I'll give you a ring if I can use some backup with Mags," Lars told Bryson as he got to his feet. "Karla, you ready to do this?"

"Guess I better be." Her heart began to pound. The time had finally come. She took her coat and bomber cap from the peg by the door and put them on, trying not to appear as nervous and unsteady on her feet as she felt.

"I'll walk you down." Bryson reached for her coat as Lars did the same.

They trooped down the trail in silence, Lars in the lead carrying Karla's duffel. The ground was white, and the sleet was still pelting down hard.

As Lars tossed her bag on deck and climbed up to start the engine, Karla felt a tug at her elbow and turned to face Bryson. It was too dark to make out her features clearly.

"Good luck," Bryson said. "I mean that. Sorry we kinda got off on the wrong foot."

"That was much more my fault than yours, Bryson." Karla was grateful for the darkness, because she could feel the burn of shame and embarrassment on her face and neck. She'd so misjudged Bryson. "I

can see why Lars and Maggie think so highly of you. Sorry I was such a bitch last night. Got a lot on my mind, not that that's any excuse."

Bryson's voice softened. "No problem. I know you've had a rough go lately, but keep your chin up. Maggie's the best. So's Lars. Things are looking up for you. I know it."

Karla let Lars help her into the skiff and waved good-bye to Bryson as they headed upriver, feeling a bit like she was letting go of a life preserver before she'd reached safe water. She hoped to God Bryson was right.



Bryson stood at the edge of the river long after the skiff had disappeared from view. *You're not so bad after all, Karla Edwards.* Except for Lars and Maggie, Karla had been the first person she'd had in her cabin in months, and though brief, the visit had reinforced her growing sense of isolation and loneliness.

She wasn't looking forward to freeze-up, the fast-approaching period when flying home would be impossible for days, perhaps weeks. She could stay in Bettles for the interim as she usually did—certainly the best option business-wise. Though all backcountry travel was suspended, she could continue to run flights to any improved airstrips. And staying in the Den gave her limitless opportunities to socialize with friends.

Or she could remain at home, where her only possibility for interaction with others would be a long hike to see Maggie and Lars. And Karla, if she stuck around. They might need me, she told herself. Not that she'd had any medical training beyond basic first aid, or any experience whatsoever with babies. But with Maggie virtually incapacitated, perhaps Lars could use a hand with cooking or cleaning. Or chopping wood and doing laundry.

The decision came more easily than she expected. Lars and Maggie had been there for her more times than she could count, and she would stay put and return the favor. As she trudged back up the trail to her cabin, she realized that sticking close to home would also likely entail spending more time with Karla, and that prospect wasn't quite as disagreeable as it had been. *Darn. Meant to ask her what it is we have in common.*



Karla huddled near the boat's tiny heater as they sped toward the Rasmussen cabin. Lars's boat was a well-equipped skiff more than twenty feet long. Fishing rod mounts ringed the open rear half of the vessel. The front half, containing two padded chairs and twin side benches, was protected by a hard top—a rigid metal-and-glass enclosure that shielded its occupants from inclement weather on all sides.

"How're the nerves?" Lars had to speak up to be heard over the sound of his outboard motor.

"I'm about to jump out of my skin. It seems like months, not days, that I've been thinking about meeting Maggie."

"Well, the time's come. Just around the next bend. You going to tell her right off the bat you're her sister?"

"I kind of want to get it over with. What do you think?"

"Play it by ear. See how she is. One thing to think about, it's getting kind of late, and she'll have a lot of questions. Don't want her up all night, she needs her sleep."

"Good point." They rounded a curve, and Karla saw a vast black stretch of open water ahead.

"Wild Lake," Lars announced. "We're almost there."

Karla spotted the welcoming beacon of lights from a cabin in the distance now, on the left bank of the massive lake, nestled among the trees a short hike from the shore. The valley was wider here than at Bryson's place, the tall mountains on either side more than a mile apart. The pitch-black of the forest that surrounded the lake seemed absolute and impenetrable.

"Home, sweet home." Lars cut the outboard and the skiff came to rest against a pair of log posts that had been set a few feet from the shoreline. Tires had been fixed to the posts to protect the boat, and large metal rings were set on top to secure rope lines fore and aft.

Lars got the skiff squared away, then helped Karla down onto a ramp of rough boards that led to shore. The sleet had turned to snow, fat heavy flakes that clung to her face, but she barely noticed. They stood staring up at the cabin, perched on higher ground a few hundred feet in the distance. Was Lars as nervous and apprehensive as she was? Karla's

heart had become such a runaway jackhammer in her chest she found it difficult to breathe.

She reached into her pocket and palmed the tigereye necklace. It gave her courage. “Let’s do it.”

Her first glimpse of her sister as she came through the door behind Lars was of Maggie in profile. She was sitting in an overstuffed chair, feet propped up on a padded stool and head slightly to the side because she’d obviously fallen asleep while waiting for them. Lars had said he’d left Maggie propped up in bed in a bathrobe, but she must have been determined to greet her new houseguest properly, for she’d dressed in green sweatpants and a sweatshirt, the latter embroidered with Michigan State Spartans. Both garments clearly belonged to Lars, because Maggie had rolled up the cuffs and sleeves, and they were still baggy on her except for the material stretched tight around her extended belly. On her feet, beneath badly swollen ankles, was a pair of thick, fuzzy, pink socks.

Karla registered several facts at once. Maggie’s hair, which cascaded below her shoulders, matched the curly red locks she’d found among her mother’s things. Her forehead was higher than her mother’s, but the nose was the same—long and straight, with a slight upturn at the end.

And she and their mother shared another trait—both were sound sleepers. The door squeaked loudly when Lars shut it, and he spoke in a normal tone of voice when he asked to take her coat and hat and told her to make herself at home. But Maggie didn’t stir until Lars knelt beside her and caressed her arm. “Honey? Mags?”

Karla crossed the room slowly toward them, her gaze fixed on Maggie’s face. She tried to will her hands to stop trembling, and when they refused, she thrust them into the pockets of her jeans. Her palms were slick with sweat but her mouth was dirt dry, and she was having trouble thinking clearly. The whole experience seemed surreal, like she’d stepped onto a movie set. Time seemed to freeze in those few seconds while Maggie came awake.

And then she was looking directly into a pair of eyes with that same unusual color—hazel with tiny gold flecks—that all the women in her family had been born with. *Grandmother, Mother, Maggie, and me. Sounds like a child’s nursery rhyme.* Maggie had the oval face, too.

Karla's breath caught in her throat when Maggie smiled and she saw her mother's dimpled left cheek. They were definitely sisters.

"Mags, this is Karla Edwards." Lars was still on his knees beside her. "Karla, I'd like you to meet Margaret June Rasmussen. My Maggie."

Maggie flashed him a look of annoyed bewilderment, which told Karla he rarely, if ever, introduced her by her full name. Then she turned her full attention back to Karla. "Hi, Karla. Welcome." She leaned forward and stuck out her hand, and Karla wiped the sweat off her palm as she withdrew hers from her pocket to shake hello. She wanted so much to prolong the contact, but forced herself to keep it brief and casual.

"It's great to meet you, Maggie." Her voice sounded several notes higher than normal. Not surprising, she thought, since her throat, like the rest of her, was as tense as a bowstring. "I really appreciate your letting me stay with you."

"We should be thanking you." Maggie smiled, showing that dimple again, and rubbed her swollen belly. "I'm getting so close now, it'll be nice to have someone around who can answer our questions. Oh, we've talked to the doctor and the midwife. But we're always thinking of something we forgot to ask."

"I'm glad to help in any way I can." Karla had to force herself not to stare at Maggie for more evidence of their family linkage. She didn't want her to suspect she was anything but a random visitor, yet. The fact that Maggie had been asleep when they'd arrived convinced her they should keep her news until morning. So she glanced around the cabin instead, taking it in, comparing it to Bryson's.

It was larger by several feet and similarly constructed, one large room with a kitchen in the corner, a woodstove, and a loft. And like Bryson's, a large portion of the space was dedicated to the "living room," with a couch, two chairs, and accompanying tables. But their bed was on the ground floor, tucked into a corner, and they had more modern amenities than Bryson: a stereo, small refrigerator, and stove. Far more electric lights—their pair of kerosene lamps was on a high shelf, as though rarely used. And there was a second door, at the rear of the cabin. It looked far less formidable than the front door and had louvers along the length of it, which indicated it didn't lead outside. *A bathroom?*

The warm, homey touches everywhere gave her some insights into the Rasmussens and their interests. Native Alaskan handcrafts dominated: the rugs, pottery, and masks hanging on two walls fine examples of unique totem art. Several carved ivory figurines stared up at her through a glass dome in the middle of the coffee table, all of them denizens of the north: otters, walrus, polar bear, snowy owl, moose, caribou. Several small framed photographs, mostly of the couple with various nature backgrounds, sat here and there on available surfaces.

Like Bryson, the Rasmussens were evidently avid readers, though they'd devoted about half as much shelf space in their cabin to books, the rest occupied by an extensive CD collection. "You have a lovely home. I didn't know it was possible to have so many modern conveniences, living so far away from everything."

"We have to burn a lot of fuel to keep the generator going all the time," Lars said. "But unlike Bryson, we want to make life up here as easy as we can. Especially now."

"Speaking of, Lars, can you brew me some chamomile tea?" Maggie asked. "Make yourself comfortable, Karla. What would you like? Tea? Coffee?"

"Chamomile tea sounds wonderful." Karla settled onto the end of the couch by Maggie's chair as Lars went to the kitchen.

"Is this your first visit to Alaska?"

Maggie's voice didn't betray that anything was amiss, but Karla was watching her so intently, she noticed her small wince of discomfort when she shifted her weight to turn in her direction.

"What's wrong, Maggie?"

"I've started getting cramps in my legs, especially at night." Maggie grimaced. "They wake me up sometimes."

"How bad are they? How often do you get them?" While such muscle spasms were not uncommon in the latter stages of pregnancy, they could indicate a blood clot somewhere deep in the body.

"Now and then, maybe one or two a week. They're not that bad, they go away pretty fast. But it always takes me a while to get back to sleep."

"I don't think they're anything to be concerned about unless they get worse or more frequent." Karla knelt down beside her. "Where is this one?"

"Left calf."

“Flex your toes toward your head,” she instructed, as she began to massage the area. “Sometimes an ice pack will help, or heat. And you should make sure you’re drinking plenty of fluids. I can show you some stretching exercises tomorrow you can do before bedtime that might help you sleep through the night.”

“That’s better already.” Maggie leaned back in the chair and sighed. “I think I’ll be really happy you’re staying with us.”

Karla hoped to hell Maggie felt the same when she found out who she really was. “Glad I could help.” She returned to the couch as Lars came over with two mugs of tea.

“Told you, Mags.” He leaned down to kiss her forehead as he handed Maggie her mug. “And it gives Karla a nice chance to see some of the real Alaska. I bet Bryson will take her out. Show her around.” He returned to the kitchen for his own mug and sat beside Karla.

The words *Bryson will take her out* conjured up a host of pictures in Karla’s mind, none of which involved hiking in Alaska. Instead, she envisioned them on a real date, laughing together over a nice meal, going to a movie, and ending up naked somewhere. She rubbed her eyes, trying to shake off the images and return her attention to the conversation at hand. She was just exhausted and confused, she told herself, that was all, and seeking some balm for the ego Abby had shattered.

“Oh, that’d be nice,” Maggie was saying. “No one knows the area better. So it *is* your first time here, then?”

“Yes, and it’s certainly been an eye-opening experience so far. So different from home—I live in Atlanta.”

“What made you decide to visit Bettles? And at this time of year. Most folks tend to come during the summer.”

Good question. How could she answer without giving away her real reason? She fumbled for an answer, realizing she was taking longer than she probably should have. “I needed to get away for a while and sort out some recent changes in my life.” She shrugged. “Choosing to come here was kind of an impulse.”

“A lot of people find the wilderness a good place to think things out.” Maggie fought back a yawn. “Lucky for us you picked where you did.”

“Honey, you look exhausted,” Lars said. “Why don’t you let me help you to bed, and I’ll get Karla settled upstairs.”

"I'm not being a very good hostess, I'm afraid." Maggie frowned apologetically.

"Nonsense." Karla smiled at her, once again struck by the similarity in their unique eye color. Maggie hadn't seemed to have noticed. "You've been splendid. I'm very grateful for your hospitality. And Lars is right, you should get your rest. We'll chat some more tomorrow."

"I look forward to it." Maggie allowed Lars to support her as she rose and walked unsteadily to their bed.

Karla slept fitfully. The twin bed Lars showed her to in the loft was comfortable enough, but her mind churned for hours, mulling over what she was going to tell Maggie. She had been so warm and welcoming, but would she remain so when she found out her parents had lied to her all her life? Karla certainly knew firsthand how upsetting that could be.

And she couldn't get over the physical similarities between Maggie and her mom. Finding so many had been bittersweet. Though it was wonderful to see traces of her mother in Maggie's face, the grief she felt was still so fresh they made her miss her all the more.

What disturbed her sleep the most, however, were the visions of Bryson that invaded her dreams. However briefly, they were able to dispel all the worry and sadness that crowded her waking hours, but they stirred up other feelings that were equally disquieting. How could she feel such longing for a woman she barely knew?

The howling of wolves near the cabin awakened her shortly before dawn, a cacophony of yowls and yipping sounds, like they were on a chase. Karla buried herself beneath the thick comforter. They sounded very close. As anxious as she was to see some of the local scenery, how safe could it be with grizzly bears and wolves and who knew what else lurking about? Perhaps Lars was right. Maybe it was best to have a guide like Bryson along. And maybe spending more time with Bryson would help her sort out why she couldn't get her out of her mind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The cabin was still dark when Karla heard the first sounds of movement from below. A light came on in the kitchen, and she was able to see the top of Lars's head from where she lay. She dressed in the clothes she'd worn the night before and climbed down the ladder to find him brewing a pot of coffee.

"Good morning." She kept her voice low, because Maggie's soft snores indicated she was still asleep. "What time is it?"

"Morning to you, too." Lars yawned and scratched his stubble of blond beard. "Almost nine, and you don't have to whisper. Maggie can sleep through a tornado. Coffee?"

"Love some. With milk or cream if you have it." She looked out the window, but it was still pitch-black. She couldn't tell whether the snow had stopped. "I can't believe how late the sun rises here."

"Dawn's not for another hour." Lars poured two cups and brought one over to her. "In a couple of months, it'll be dark until noon, and sunset's only a couple hours later. Those are our hardest months. Not a lot to do and too cold to be outside much. Real easy to get cabin fever."

"You'll have a lot to keep you occupied this winter with a new baby." Karla glanced over at the bed to reassure herself Maggie was still sleeping. "Did Maggie say anything about me last night after I went up to bed?"

He grinned. "Yeah. She said she liked you right off, and that she shouldn't have given me such a hard time about letting you come. Getting rid of her leg cramp was a nice way to break the ice."

"I hope she still likes me when she finds out we're sisters."

Lars laid a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think you have to worry. But just to make sure you have as much going for you as possible, I'd say wait until after breakfast. She wakes up like a starving bear coming out of hibernation."

"What can I do to help? I really want to pitch in while I'm here."

"If you know your way around a kitchen, you're hired, 'cause I can barely boil an egg. How're you at making pancakes?"



"If Lars had told me you could cook like this, I'd have begged him to bring you." Maggie sighed with contentment as she pushed her plate away, no trace remaining of the large stack of pancakes and reindeer sausage Karla had whipped up. "How long can you stay?"

Karla laughed. "I'm no Rachael Ray, but I'm glad you liked it."

"Who's Rachael Ray?" Lars and Maggie asked in chorus.

No television, idiot. "Not important."

"I'll take care of the cleanup, if you two want to adjourn to the comfy chairs and get acquainted," Lars said, smiling encouragingly at Karla.

"Sounds like a great idea to me." Maggie braced her hands on the table and pushed herself up. "And it's not looking like a good day for you to be out sightseeing, anyway."

Karla followed her gaze to the front window. The sun had come up but the sky was overcast, and it was snowing heavily. There seemed little chance she would be seeing Bryson soon, and she couldn't help feeling disappointed. "How long do you think it will last?"

"No telling." Maggie shuffled slowly toward her overstuffed chair, rubbing her stomach. "An hour, a day, a week. Weather forecasts here are virtually useless."

Karla went to the window to try to gauge how much snow had fallen. At least four or five inches, she guessed. She saw no trace of their tracks from the night before, and the branches of the spruce trees around the cabin were bending under the weight of the accumulation. With the surrounding mountains providing a majestic backdrop, the scene was serenely beautiful, a Christmas card come to life.

Though the weather might keep her from spending time with Bryson, even if Maggie wanted her to leave, travel was impossible.

Nature was allowing her time to convince her sister to accept what she'd come to tell her.

As she turned from the window and walked slowly toward Maggie, she was startled by how calm she felt. In the blink of an eye, her trepidation had melted away. Her palms were dry, her head was clear. She felt no trace of the trembling that had seized her every time she'd imagined this moment.

She sat on the edge of the couch facing Maggie, but looked behind her at Lars. He was keeping himself busy at the sink, watching them both. He met her eyes and gave a little nod and smile of encouragement.

Maggie half turned to look at him, then back to Karla. "What's going on?"

"I haven't been entirely honest with you," Karla said in a soft voice. She placed a hand on Maggie's knee. "And Lars agreed to keep my secret until I could tell you myself. I waited until this morning because I know you'll have lots of questions, and I didn't want you to lose sleep over it."

Fear came into Maggie's eyes. "Is this about the baby? Is something wrong?"

Lars hurriedly reassured her. "No, no. Nothing's wrong with the baby." He wiped his hands on a towel and came to stand behind Maggie, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Tell her, Karla."

She took a deep breath and let it out. Simple was best. "Maggie, I'm your sister." She sat back and let the news sink in.

Shock. Bewilderment. Maggie's face registered both in quick succession. "What are you talking about? Is this a joke?" She craned her head to look up at Lars. "This isn't funny, Lars. I don't know what you two are up to, but you know damn well I don't have much of a sense of humor right now."

He stooped until they were eye to eye. He wasn't smiling. "It's not a joke, Mags. Karla is your sister. If you just give her a chance to explain—"

"I don't have a sister," Maggie insisted, glaring at him. "You *know* that."

"You were adopted, Maggie." Karla kept her voice as soft as Lars's had been, the same tone she used when giving a patient news they wouldn't want to hear. Maggie's head whipped around and she started to open her mouth in protest, but Karla cut her off. "The Van

Rooy's adopted you when you were a baby. Our mother had to give you up. She was very young, just sixteen, and in those days—"

"Stop!" Maggie was red in the face. "Just stop. I don't know where you got this information, but it's not true. I wasn't adopted, and I don't have any brothers or sisters. I had a great relationship with my parents. We were very close, and they wouldn't have deceived me about something like that. Not something that important."

"Believe me, I know how hard all of this to absorb," Karla said. "Especially the idea that your parents lied to you. My mother—*our* mother—lied to me, too, and I would never have thought her capable of it. I didn't find out about you until a week or so ago."

"What's a lie is any claim by *your* mother that I'm not who I *know* I am." Maggie turned to look at Lars. "Get the satellite phone. Let's call her right now. We'll settle this, find out what her motive is."

"We can't do that, Mags." Lars started to stroke her arm, but she jerked away from his touch.

"Get the damn phone!" Maggie was shouting. "I won't listen to any more of this bullshit. I'll get her to tell me the truth."

"Maggie, she died three weeks ago." The image of her mother in the coffin rose again in Karla's mind, and tears sprang to her eyes. When they overflowed, she wiped them away absentmindedly.

Maggie went quiet, her rapid, loud breathing the only sound in the room. She slumped back in her chair and all the fight went out of her. Her eyes were fixed on Karla's. When she finally spoke, she sounded in pain. "I'm sorry for your loss. But I still don't believe this. How are you so sure it's true?"

"My mother left behind a letter explaining everything. It was pretty convincing on its own, but I was certain it was true as soon as I saw you last night. She kept a lock of your hair. It matches. And you have so many of her features. Nose. The shape of your face. That one-sided dimple when you smile. And the color of your eyes. It's the same as hers. As our grandmother's. The same as mine."

Maggie leaned forward, as best as she was able, to compare them for herself, and Karla shifted toward her, until they were only a foot or two apart. Maggie looked intently into her eyes for what seemed like an eternity. Then she leaned back again, her face expressionless. "Exactly what did this letter say?"

Karla had expected this question, so she'd made a photocopy of

her mother's note before she left Atlanta. She didn't want anything to happen to the original so she'd put it in her safety-deposit box. And when Lars and she'd decided to withhold the news of her mother's Alzheimer's, she'd tucked away the first of the three pages and torn the second in half. She pulled the remaining portion from her back pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Maggie, who began to read.

Karla had read the note so often, she'd committed it to memory.

*I hope you will seek to understand what I have to tell
you, and forgive me for not telling you until now.*

You have a sister.

*Five years before I met and married your father, I
became pregnant. I was only sixteen, still a child myself and
naïve about such things, but I fancied myself in love with a
boy at school named James O'Hara.*

*After talking with Jim's parents, mine sent me
immediately to a home for unwed mothers to have the child
and convinced me that it was best for both me and for the
baby to give it up for adoption as soon as it was born. It was
what girls did then, especially those from Catholic families.
I knew from my brief glimpse of her that I'd had a daughter,
born healthy and with curly red hair, like her father. Then the
nuns took her away.*

Maggie began to cry silent tears halfway through the letter and her hand began to shake. She was completely absorbed in the words, her face registering confusion and incredulity. Karla soon stopped mentally reciting the letter and lost herself in empathy for Maggie.

Neither Karla nor Lars spoke, but Lars, still stooping beside Maggie's chair, put his arm around her shoulders. It took her so long to finish that Karla was certain she'd read it through at least twice.

Finally she looked up at Karla. "My God. It's true."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Yes, Maggie.” She held her breath, studying her sister’s face. Maggie looked away, staring off into space, her gaze unfocused. Clearly, she was stunned by what she’d heard and read, and Karla certainly empathized with that reaction. The memory of how she’d felt when she opened the letter was still fresh. What now, she wondered. Did Maggie want her in her family? She couldn’t speak the words. It would probably take time for Maggie to come to terms with everything. “Look, why don’t I take a walk and give you two some time alone. I realize you have a lot to think about.”

Maggie didn’t reply or react. Lars put his mouth to her ear and whispered something, but she acted as though he wasn’t there.

Karla climbed up to the loft and dug the photo album out of her bag. Then she put on a set of long underwear and redressed, adding a new woolen sweater to her ensemble that she’d forgotten to take the price tag off of. By the time she descended the ladder, Maggie was back in bed and Lars was seated beside her, speaking in low tones.

She gingerly approached them. Maggie still wouldn’t look at her, so she offered the album to Lars. “Pictures of our mother.”

He took it with a half smile, but his eyes were dark with worry. He set the album down on the bed and turned his attention back to Maggie.

Karla retreated, donned her coat, hat, and boots, and stepped outside, feeling oddly more relaxed than she’d been in ages. Her part was over. The rest was up to Maggie.

She inhaled the crisp, clean air and stepped off the porch into ankle-deep snow. Thick flakes were still showering down and the sky

was gunmetal gray. It was eerily quiet, with no hint of movement in the sky or forest around her.

The Rasmussens had an outbuilding like Bryson's, though much larger, nearly half the size of their cabin. The roof on one side extended several feet beyond the building to cover an enormous pile of stacked firewood. And like Bryson, Lars and Maggie also had an outhouse and a small log structure built high off the ground on four long posts, with a narrow ladder leading up to it. A large round thermometer nailed to one of the posts told her it was a couple of degrees below freezing.

The ground had been cleared in a wide circle around the homestead, and the snow cover was nearly pristine, unmarked except for a single set of fresh tracks that ran along one side of the outbuilding and down the trail to the river. She walked over to examine them. Up close, they looked like cat tracks. Smudge, the gray tabby she'd had growing up, often left muddy prints on the kitchen floor and she'd had to clean them up. But these seemed quite a bit bigger than the ones she remembered, at least five inches long by five inches wide.

She followed the paw prints down the trail to the water, where she stood transfixed. Wild Lake was oblong, nearly a mile across and more than six miles long, framed by majestic peaks in all directions. It was snowing so hard the mountains were partially obscured, as though seen through a veil of lace. She detected no sign of any other human habitation.

The tracks led to the water's edge, as if whatever had made them had taken a drink and lingered a moment before heading off to the right, along the shoreline. It seemed as good a way as any to go off exploring a bit. At least she couldn't lose her way. The memory of the wolves howling only hours before made her hesitate briefly, but she felt relatively safe in the daylight. And it was so quiet she was sure she'd be able to hear anything moving toward her from a good distance away.

Though the trail from the cabin had been easy walking, once she got off it the going was more difficult. The snow cover hid an uneven terrain dotted with large rocks and spongy mounds of grassy tundra that hadn't completely frozen, so she had to walk gingerly to avoid twisting an ankle. Every couple dozen steps, she paused to look around because the view was so breathtaking. She'd gone about a half mile when she saw her first sign of movement—a bald eagle, startled from its nest in a high tree near the shoreline ahead. It spread its massive wings and

soared gracefully over her, giving her a clear view of its startling white head and tail feathers. She was beginning to understand why Bryson loved Alaska so much, and Lars, and Maggie, too. Why hadn't she remembered to bring her camera?

Karla glanced at her watch. She'd been gone forty minutes and should probably think about starting back. She hoped Maggie cared enough to be concerned about her welfare, even if she wasn't ready to embrace her as family.

The return trip was uneventful until she got within a quarter mile of the cabin. A high-pitched shriek, off in the trees to her left, shattered the quiet that had accompanied her entire journey. She'd never heard anything like it before, but was certain no human had made it. Suddenly uneasy, she hurried as fast as she could, her attention half on the uncertain ground in front of her and half on the woods, seeking any movement. By the time she reached the cabin she was winded.

Karla stepped onto the porch and leaned against the front rail to catch her breath, berating herself for panicking at the first unfamiliar sound. She was tempted not to say anything about it to Lars and Maggie, but she was too curious about what might have caused it not to.

The door opened behind her and Lars stepped out, his coat in his hand. He shrugged into it and joined her.

"How is she?" Karla asked.

"Doing okay, I guess, all things considered." He stared out at the view. The snowfall had diminished to just a few intermittent flakes. "Her emotions have been all over the place anyway, and this yanked the rug right out from under her. She's numb, confused, furious—at her parents, not you. That's the big focus right now. How they could have lied to her about this. She's in there reliving everything they ever told her, calling it all into question."

"I certainly understand how that feels."

"I bet. And that's a good thing. Once she's ready to talk to you about it, maybe your common ground will help her come to terms with it." He faced her. "It may take a while, though. She's got a lot to sort through."

"I spent a good two weeks locked up in my apartment after Mom died because I didn't want to talk to anybody, so I totally relate. And even after all this time, I'm still in kind of a fog, not knowing how to process everything that's happened. Part of my reason for coming here

was just to get as far away as I could from everything that constantly reminded me how much my life had suddenly changed. I was hoping distance could give me some perspective.”

“Has it?”

“Time will tell. I’ve been so preoccupied with meeting Maggie, I haven’t thought of much else.” That wasn’t entirely true. The last several hours, anyway, thoughts of Bryson had begun to compete for her attention, but they were largely out of her control. And if anything, they were only adding to her confusion. “I suppose it’s too early to ask what Maggie thinks of having me as a sister.”

He gave her an apologetic half smile.

The snow had stopped now, and the clouds were thinning enough to let some sunshine through. The thermometer had risen to thirty-three degrees. “Do you think I should make myself scarce? I was thinking about your suggestion to ask Bryson to show me around. Looks like it might turn out to be a nice day after all.”

“Maybe not a bad idea. I can call her and see what she’s got planned.” Lars’s gaze followed her tracks down to the river. “So your walk made you want to see some more of our little corner of paradise?”

“For sure.” And more of Bryson. “Oh...I was meaning to ask you a couple of things.” She pointed to the now-faint impressions that led from the corner of the outbuilding and paralleled her footprints. “I was following some tracks. They looked like cat paw prints, but were bigger than any I’ve ever seen. About like this.” She held up her hand and approximated the distance between her thumb and fingers.

“Probably lynx. We have one that comes through now and then, checking out our woodpile for mice, though we’ve never seen it. Their paws kind of spread out, to act almost like little snowshoes to keep them from sinking in the snow.”

“A lynx?” She vaguely knew what one looked like, but had no idea how big they could get. Cougar sized? “Are they dangerous?”

“Not to people. They’re very shy and solitary. Generally they go for things like snowshoe hares, birds, fish. Although now and then they can take a young Dall sheep or caribou, if smaller prey is scarce.”

“I heard this really weird noise coming from over there.” She pointed. “It was an animal, I think. Kind of a shriek, kind of a scream. Eerie.”

“Hmmm. Porcupine, maybe. It’s their mating season. Or could have been a raven. They make all sorts of oddball sounds.”

A bird or a porcupine, and she’d let it scare the shit out of her. She felt foolish. She had a lot to learn about Alaska and the wilderness, apparently. And a ready teacher was available. “Shall we call Bryson?”



The bath wasn’t the long, luxurious soak Karla was used to, but considering the locale, she was grateful for the opportunity to warm up from her walk in a real old-fashioned tub that allowed her to immerse herself completely. Although in terms of bathroom conveniences the Rasmussens had only the traditional outhouse and honeypot—an indoor bucket with seat used in extremely cold weather and emptied frequently—they had the luxury of running water and a bathtub, set up in a small room accessed through the door at the rear of the cabin. Of course the water from the tap was always frigid, since it was piped directly from the river bottom, but it didn’t take long to boil enough on the stove to make things comfortable.

Though Maggie wasn’t apparently ready to talk to her, Karla had been encouraged to see her going through the photo album. And Maggie had at least said “Good morning” as Lars and she came back inside. *Give her time.*

Spending the day with Bryson would be a welcome distraction from her apprehensions about Maggie’s reaction to her news. Her whole Alaskan experience so far had been surreal. To be expected, she supposed, with her emotions all over the place and her surroundings so alien. But most bizarre was the turnaround in her perception of Bryson Faulkner.

Bryson had taken the brunt of the frustration, fatigue, anger, sadness, and grief that had transformed her into some bitch cousin of herself. She replayed in her mind how she’d acted at the Bettles Air gate. No wonder Bryson had been reluctant to take her on as a passenger. She owed that blond gate attendant an apology, too.

She wanted to kick herself because she didn’t usually make snap judgments about people. Her appraisal of Bryson as an ass had been incredibly unfair and irrational. Fortunately, she seemed the forgiving

type. And the hours ahead would give Karla the opportunity to try to make amends and give Bryson a better impression of who she really was.

Like Bryson, Alaska was really growing on her, much to her surprise and despite the frigid weather, the white-knuckled flying, and the lack of some of the modern conveniences she'd always considered essential. She didn't miss her television or the Internet when there was such a feast for the eyes everywhere she looked. Now she had an idea how humbled the early explorers must have felt at seeing the vast, pristine wilderness of an unexplored and largely uninhabited land. She couldn't wait to see more of it, especially in Bryson's company.

Abby would have hated all of this. She didn't appreciate a beautiful sunset or a simple walk in the park. She'd bitched when the power went out for more than a few minutes or when the satellite reception pixilated because of storms moving through. They had chosen their apartment partially because Abby insisted there be several good restaurants in the area that delivered. And the one time Karla suggested they spend their vacation at a lodge in Yosemite, Abby thought she was kidding. *Are you crazy? What would we do all day? Fight off mosquitoes and stare at trees? I say Vegas or New York. San Francisco. Somewhere with some nightlife and great places to shop.*

Perhaps being here *was* helping her put some things into perspective. Why had she always acceded to Abby's desires, often at the expense of her own wishes and dreams? Abby had been so strong-willed she'd been afraid if she didn't give in, Abby would find someone who would. And Abby had left her anyway. She felt like a fool.

Karla lingered until the water turned lukewarm, then hurriedly towed off and dressed. The louvers in the door allowed some of the heat from the woodstove to penetrate the inner room, but it was several degrees colder here than in the main living space.

Maggie was still in bed leafing through the photo album when she emerged from her bath. Lars, in the kitchen brewing tea, turned Karla's way and beckoned her with a tilt of his head. "Finally reached Bryson. She's got no plans today and will be happy to take you out and show you around. I'll run you over in the skiff whenever you're ready."

"Great. I'll take a mug of that and then I'm good to go." She glanced over at Maggie as Lars poured her tea and whispered, "Has she said anything more?"

"She sees the resemblances you pointed out between her and your mother. I think it's made it all more real. Here, why don't you take hers over to her?" Lars handed her a second mug.

When she set the chamomile tea down on the nightstand beside the bed, Maggie looked up at her. Her eyes were swollen and red, but she'd dried her tears, and she was contemplating Karla intently in a way she hadn't before, curious and...hopeful? Karla's spirits lifted as she stood patiently waiting under the long scrutiny.

"Sit," Maggie finally said, patting the bed beside her. Karla settled carefully onto the edge within arm's reach and put her mug beside Maggie's.

They studied each other without speaking for several seconds.

"So...sisters, huh?" Maggie said finally, smiling tentatively.

She smiled back. "Yeah. Still sinking in?"

Maggie nodded. "I always wanted a sister."

"Me, too. So much I invented an imaginary one when I was little. Her name was Emily."

"Did you tell your parents about her?"

"Oh, yeah. They used to set a place for her at the table and pretend to tuck her in next to me at night."

Maggie let a long pause elapse as she seemed to mull that revelation over. "So it must have been especially tough on you to find out all these years later you've had one all along."

"I imagine it's pretty much the same as you're feeling. Both our parents lied to us. About things we had a right to know. And I get the impression you didn't think it possible of yours, any more than I did of mine."

"No."

"They've both passed away?"

"Yes. My father was a logger. He was killed in an accident on the job not long after Lars and I married. My mother..." Maggie looked away. Karla knew she'd never view that word again quite the same. "My mother had ovarian cancer. She died four years ago."

"I'm sorry."

When Maggie's eyes met hers again, they were moist with tears, but full of compassion. "Those first few weeks after the funeral were so tough to get through. I imagine you're still feeling like you're on an emotional roller coaster."

“Good way to describe it. The smallest things set me off. A piece of music or picture of someplace we went on vacation. The scent of patchouli. It all comes rushing up and just overwhelms me.”

“I know it’s a cliché, but time does help,” Maggie said. “God knows I still think of them both often and miss them terribly, but with not the same kind of raw ache and terrible emptiness I felt in the months right after.”

“I’m sorry you’ll never get the chance to meet Mom. Not that I’m excusing what she did. But she was a wonderful woman with a big heart. Smart, and with a wicked sense of humor.”

Maggie glanced down at the photo album, which was open to a snapshot of their mother taken when she was in her early forties, just before she’d started showing signs that something was wrong. She was holding a camera up near her face, evidently about to take a picture, but someone had snapped a photo of her instead. She was looking sideways at the photographer with an annoyed but endearing scowl, an expression that said *Oh, don’t take that!* “She apparently had her reasons for doing what she did.” Karla detected an unmistakable note of bitterness in her voice.

She didn’t know how to respond, so she reached for her tea and sipped it, and Maggie did the same.

“I’m so *angry* at all of them,” Maggie volunteered. “My parents, and yours.” She ran a hand protectively over her swollen belly. “A part of me realizes they were all acting in what they thought were my best interests, at least in terms of the adoption. But the *deception* afterward. The hypocrisy. That’ll take a while to accept.”

“I certainly understand, I think. If there’s anything I can do—”

Maggie put her hand over Karla’s. “You came all the way here to tell me this. To meet me and get to know me. That’s so much.”

“You make me sound unselfish. But I assure you I’m not. I have no family but you now, Maggie.”

Maggie smiled broadly for the first time that day, her smile so much like their mother’s that Karla’s heart ached. “That’s not true. Now you have Lars, too. And very soon, a niece.” She opened her arms, and Karla slipped into her embrace. They hugged each other tight. “We’ve lost too many years already,” Maggie whispered in her ear. “Let’s not waste any more, sis.”



Two hours passed in a flash. Karla climbed up onto the bed beside Maggie and went through the photos with her, telling her stories about when and where they were taken, interspersed with other memories of her childhood. They laughed as much as they cried, until finally Lars interrupted them.

“Want me to call Bryson and tell her you’d like to make it another day?” He smiled down approvingly at them.

“Oh, gosh. I completely forgot.” Much as she wanted to continue getting to know her sister, Karla was looking forward to seeing Bryson, too, and who knew when the weather would provide her another opportunity. Besides, she wasn’t about to be rude to Bryson again. She started to look at her watch but it wasn’t there. She’d left it next to the tub. “What time is it?”

“Nearly two,” he said. “You have about four hours of daylight left.”

Maggie yawned loudly beside her, and Karla remembered that Lars had mentioned she often needed an afternoon nap.

“Since she’s expecting me, and since you could probably use a little rest, Maggie, I’ll go over for a short visit. But I’ll be back in time to cook dinner.”

That got a *great* out of Maggie, and a *thank God* out of Lars. They all laughed.

She hugged Maggie, relishing the warmth of her return embrace, and hopped off the bed. By the time she and Lars were suited up in their outerwear and boots, Maggie was settled into the pillows and comforter on her side, her eyes closed and her expression serene.

“I’m happy you two seem to be hitting it off so well,” Lars said as he started the engine to the skiff and they started downriver to Bryson’s cabin.

“Better than I dared hope.” The clouds had fled, and the sun had already melted most of the recent snow. It felt warmer out by several degrees than when she’d returned from her walk. “She asked me how long I can stay.”

“And you said?”

“I told her I can probably be here until the baby’s born, maybe a little after, if that’s what you both want.”

He grinned broadly, the relief on his face unmistakable. “I wager she was as delighted to hear that as I am.”

On impulse, Karla hugged him. She felt better than she had in weeks. Not only were things going wonderfully with Maggie, she was about to get some quality time to get to know Bryson better. “No happier than I am, Lars. No happier than I am.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bryson was extraordinarily patient under most circumstances, as imperturbable as one of the hundred thousand glaciers that dotted the landscape of the state she loved. The ability to tolerate any lengthy delay with good humor was necessary if you wanted to thrive in Alaska. Every year, she had to endure weeks of breakup and months of minimal sunlight. And she had to wait for endless intervals for the weather to clear so she could take to the air.

But all her patience abandoned her today, and she was pacing back and forth in front of her cabin window. Why was she so anxious for Karla Edwards to arrive? Her initial impression of Karla had been as bad as possible. She'd assessed her as a self-involved, petulant annoyance. But she'd been so damn tired she'd been less than charming herself. And who wouldn't be edgy and preoccupied with herself after flying halfway across the world to meet a long-lost sister, unannounced, still grieving for her mother? She'd actually been quite pleasant during her visit at the cabin. And she was related to Maggie, which somehow made her all right.

It had been a long while since Bryson had looked forward to something so much, felt such a heightened excitement at the thought of spending a few hours in the company of another woman.

But she was being ridiculous. This wasn't a date. Karla hadn't indicated she was even gay, let alone that Bryson was on her radar. And their first meeting had certainly been less than auspicious. Regardless, she hadn't been able to get Karla out of her mind. Why had she remembered things about Karla in vivid detail so often lately? What she looked like, sounded like, even smelled like, for God's sake.

Bryson didn't wear perfume, so she'd immediately picked up Karla's clean citrus-floral scent in the enclosed cabin of the Super Cub.

Had something happened with Maggie? It had been nearly three hours since Lars telephoned, and she'd expected the skiff long before now. On her next pass by the satellite phone, she paused and stared at it, willing it to ring. When it didn't obey, she reached for it and started to punch in Lars's number, then thought better. Things were probably pretty intense over there, and the last thing they needed was an interruption. Karla and Lars would either show up or call. It wasn't like she had a lot else to do. She set the phone back in its cradle.

Too restless to confine her pacing indoors any longer, she grabbed her coat and headed down to the river.

The sun was shining bright against the mountains, but even at its height it rose only fifteen degrees above the horizon these days, so it cast deep shadows over the white-tipped peaks, outlining every jagged outcropping. In addition to the track of the sun, she measured the coming of winter in the amount of snow on her part of the Brooks Range. Each significant snowfall lengthened and stretched the blanket of white, until finally it covered everything above and below: first the mountains, then the forest and tundra, and finally, the rivers and lakes.

Interior Alaska was in that capricious phase of transition, the nights routinely below freezing, the days warm enough to melt any snow that had fallen. The ground had been mostly frozen that morning when she went outdoors to quiet Bandit's noisy tirade with a handful of seeds, but now it was spongy again beneath her feet.

She walked upstream a hundred yards to a large, smooth boulder that frequently served as her perch for casting a line into the water. The rock had a natural depression similar to the curve of a semi-reclined lounge chair, allowing her to relax comfortably for long hours without needing additional padding.

The granite had absorbed enough of the sun's rays to warm her through the thin layer of her jeans. She unzipped her jacket and leaned back against the rock, closing her eyes but attuned to the sound of the skiff's engine.

Where should she take Karla? If the choice were entirely hers, they'd be up in the Cub, flying low over glaciers, seeking a glimpse of caribou. This time of year, the massive Porcupine Caribou Herd, numbering a hundred thousand animals, was often split into two major

groups, the nearest one wintering some 180 miles northeast of Bettles near Arctic Village. Seeing the animals up close, whether on land or from the air, never failed to impress outstate visitors. But the round-trip flight would take four hours, which was about how much daylight was left and allowed them no time to find and admire the herd.

Besides, considering Karla's attitude toward bush flying, it was probably better to choose a location within easy walking distance. That still left several possibilities. They could scale Mathews Dome, a relatively easy climb with an amazing panoramic view, or follow the Flat River up to Icy Creek, where the canyon was so narrow the sheer cliffs on either side rose claustrophobically close to the hiker beneath. Another option would be to follow the Wild River south to Madison Creek. She'd often seen moose there in the swampy areas, but that was probably too far away to make it back before dusk.

She caught the subtle chop of the skiff's engine long before the boat came into view. By the time it motored around the bend, she was standing offshore near Lars's usual tie-off spot.

She recognized the royal blue of Karla's down jacket long before she could make out her face; she was standing in the open rear of the skiff. Just as Bryson raised her hand to wave, Karla did likewise, and it warmed her from within to imagine that Karla might be anticipating their visit as much as she was.

The broad smile on Karla's face when the skiff pulled up reinforced that hope and reassured her that things had probably gone well with Maggie.

"Hi," Karla hollered as Lars cut the engine.

"Hi yourself. You look like your visit's been a positive one."

"Couldn't be better." Karla appeared so relaxed and happy she might have been a different woman entirely.

"Maggie's still dealing with the whole adoption thing," Lars said as he secured the boat. "But the two of them were having such a good time getting acquainted, time kind of got away from them."

"Great to hear." Bryson waded across the shallows and offered a hand to help Karla out of the skiff. When Karla took it, she felt a moment of regret that both of them had gloves on. It was silly to be wanting to touch her, even like this. *Get a grip.*

Karla hopped off the skiff, splashing water onto Bryson's jeans, but Bryson didn't care. Karla's expression was so pleased and expectant

that it seemed she, too, was determined to push aside their initial friction and start fresh. Bryson was really looking forward to their afternoon together.



“It’s impossible to describe this with words.” Karla’s voice was full of awe as she surveyed the endless wilderness that stretched before them. “Certainly worth the hike getting up here.”

The view from the 4,600-foot peak of Mathews Dome was one of Bryson’s favorites, for it enabled her to see many miles in all directions: the vast valley of the Wild River as it stretched toward Bettles to the south, the Flat River gorge to the east, and Wild Lake, more than six miles to the northwest. She handed Karla her binoculars and pointed. “You can make out Maggie and Lars’s cabin, there—up from that little inlet. See the glint of reflection on the water? That’s the skiff.”

Karla put the binoculars to her eyes and adjusted the focus. “Oh, yeah, I see it.” She followed the shoreline north, surveying the entirety of the long body of water. “They have the whole lake to themselves?”

“A couple of primitive cabins are tucked up in the woods on this side. But only hunters use them, a few weekends a year. And a gold mine’s just north of the lake, but it operates only in summer.”

“The water is so smooth it looks like glass.” Karla handed back the binoculars and sighed with contentment. “I bet you come up here a lot, don’t you?”

“Great place to sit and think. You feel so small in such an enormous landscape. Yet still a very integral part of everything. That make sense?”

“Yes. Humbled, but embraced, like you’re part of time immemorial. Experiencing the world as it was hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago.”

“Exactly.”

“Not many places like that left.” She turned to Bryson. “With how much you obviously love all this, I bet you’re pretty passionate about environmental issues.”

“Oh, yeah. I don’t pay a lot of attention to politics in general, but I keep up with anything that might impact the land, the water, the air, the animals. Especially efforts to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife

Refuge. Unfortunately, most Alaskans favor it because we all get checks every year based on state oil revenues. But drilling would have such a negative impact on the caribou herd and a lot of other wildlife that a lot of people oppose it. Skeeter keeps up-to-date on what's going on through the Internet and clues in the rest of us."

"Wow. Did you say everyone gets checks from the state?"

"Most everybody. You have to have lived here at least a year and intend to stay indefinitely. The dividends come out of something called the Alaska Permanent Fund. Usually it's about a thousand dollars, but last year I got a check for more than thirty-two hundred."

"Well, that's definitely one benefit of living up here."

"We also don't pay any sales taxes or state income tax. Just federal." Bryson leaned back on her elbows, legs stretched out in front of her. "But it doesn't amount to that much once you figure in how much more expensive everything is."

"I know that you and Lars are both part of an outfitters' group, but I didn't see Maggie's name on the Web site. Does she stay at home all the time?"

"No, she's taking time off while she's pregnant. She's a biologist for the NPS in the Gates of the Arctic National Park." Bryson gestured east. "Park boundary is only seven miles that way." Then she pointed north. "And two upriver of the lake. Maggie takes that way in, in the skiff, or I fly her where she needs to go."

"That sounds like a cool job. I'll have to ask her about it."

"Get her to tell you about the time a big ol' bull moose wanted to get a little too friendly during mating season." Bryson chuckled. The moose had been so convinced that Maggie was the hottest thing around she'd had to spend half a day up a tree.

"I will. I bet you've had a few misadventures, too, spending so much time in the bush."

"Hard not to." She didn't want to volunteer her own, however, as most had been life-threatening situations, not laugh-about-it-later moose encounters. And since Karla's statement seemed an attempt to get her to do just that, she thought it was a good time to change the subject. "Really glad you and Maggie are hitting it off so well. Have you decided how long you're going to stay?" During their trek up the mountain, Karla had elaborated on her morning with Maggie, but she hadn't mentioned her plans.

“Yes. They asked me to stay until after the baby’s born, and I’m pretty sure I can arrange that with the hospital.”

“That’s great!” Bryson blurted, with the enthusiasm of someone who’d just won the lottery, and felt immediately self-conscious. She couldn’t be more transparent about her hope that Karla extend her visit.

But Karla responded with a pleased and bashful smile. “I’m glad you think so, in spite of the fact I was kind of obnoxious when we met.” She shrugged apologetically. “And I hope that means you’ll want to show me more places like this,” she added, “because I’ve had a wonderful day. I enjoy your company.” Once more, she gazed out over the landscape, looking toward the Rasmussen cabin. “I’ll never, ever forget this moment. For the first time in what seems like forever, I feel completely at peace.”



The expanded Rasmussen household soon settled into a comfortable routine that satisfied all of them. Karla took on all the cooking, Lars kept the place spotless, and Maggie got waited on hand and foot, so she had no reason to break pottery or throw food. Karla kept a close eye on her pregnancy, massaging her swollen feet and ankles twice a day and monitoring her blood pressure and the baby’s heartbeat. Every daylight hour that Karla wasn’t cooking and Maggie wasn’t sleeping, they sat side by side on the bed or on the couch, trading stories of their lives.

Bonding with Maggie and sharing memories of their mother helped Karla deal with the grief that had haunted her since the funeral and Abby’s betrayal. She cried on Maggie’s shoulder during the moments it still overwhelmed her, finding solace in her sister’s calming reassurance that time would mend her heart. And in her quiet moments alone she thought frequently of Bryson, reliving their time on the mountain, and that, too, helped erase some of her despondency.

On the sixth day of her stay, Karla’s spirits lifted further when Bryson phoned and invited herself over to grill the caribou steaks she’d stashed in her cooler. She told Lars not to bother picking her up because she’d borrowed Skeeter’s floatplane and would fly in. Maggie’s doctor’s

appointment was the next morning, and taking the four-passenger Cessna would save Maggie a boat ride and allow Lars to accompany her on the flight to Fairbanks.

“Bryson said you’re welcome to come along tomorrow,” Lars told Karla as they headed down to the lake to meet the plane. “She sounded like she wasn’t sure you’d want to.”

Karla had to laugh. “Probably because both times I’ve flown with her I haven’t been exactly the calmest passenger. I hate small planes.” She still didn’t care to repeat the experience, but with Maggie so close to her delivery date, it would be a good idea to force herself. “I’ll go. Not happily, mind you. But I should ride along.”

Lars pulled her up short and bear-hugged her. “Thanks. I know you’re doing it for us.”

Viewed head-on, Skeeter’s orange-and-gold floatplane looked from a distance like a flying pumpkin with a hat and metal shoes. More whimsical than terrifying. She vowed to try to keep that image in mind when she boarded it the next morning for the two-and-a-half-hour flight to the doctor’s.

Karla waved when the Cessna was still a long way off, though she doubted Bryson could make them out against the rocky bank of the lake. But the plane immediately tipped its wings to wave back and began to descend. The single silhouette at the controls became clearer as the plane touched down, spraying water in two wide streams on either side. Most of Bryson’s features were concealed beneath the brim of her ball cap and oversized sunglasses, but the smile that dominated the lower half of her face told her she was just as happy to see them as Karla was to see her.

Bryson cracked her door as the propeller began to die. “Hi there! How’s it going?”

“Great! Good to see you.”

“Maggie’s really missed you,” Lars said as he helped Bryson tie off the Cessna. “Fair warning, she’s gonna bend your ear a while.”

Bryson laughed. “No worries. I’ve missed her, too.” She reached into the Cessna and hauled out two grocery bags. “Brought her a bunch of new magazines. Imagine she’s getting restless being cooped up in bed so much.”

“It’s certainly helped that Karla’s been around to keep her occupied.

And,” he added, opening his jacket to display a pristine sweatshirt underneath, “she’s been feeding us so well Mag hasn’t thrown anything since she got here.”

Maggie was waiting in the open doorway. “Good God, woman, about damn time you hauled your ass our way for a visit.”

Bryson trotted up the steps and carefully embraced her, then bent to put her mouth near Maggie’s belly. “Your momma’s such a sweet-talker.”

Maggie swatted Bryson’s head away, laughing. “Get in here and start cooking. I’m starved.”

“Big surprise there, since she hasn’t eaten in at least two hours,” Lars mumbled under his breath to Karla as they followed them inside. “Hope Bryson brought a couple extra steaks.”



Once she’d caught up on all the Bettles gossip and her tummy was full to bursting, Maggie waddled off to bed.

“I’ll get the dishes,” Lars offered, “if you two want to have some coffee on the porch. I’ll join you in a while.”

“Shall we?” Karla asked Bryson. “It’s become my nightly ritual. I love to watch the sun set from there.”

“Sold. Lead on.”

Seated side by side in hand-hewn Adirondack chairs, they admired the lowering sun in silence as it turned the mountains golden-orange. When darkness fell, Karla lit a kerosene lantern that hung near the front door. “Did Lars tell you I’m riding along tomorrow?”

“No, he didn’t. And I gotta say, I’m surprised. Though happy about it, for sure. Long ways to Fairbanks, and Maggie’s awful close to time.” Bryson stretched out her legs. “Had a woman go into labor just after I got my license, and it wasn’t an experience I’d like to repeat.”

“What happened?”

“Once it got real clear the baby was coming whether we liked it or not, I set the plane down and helped her deliver. We were still a couple hours from anywhere. Thank God there weren’t any complications, and she’d been through it before and knew what to do. I took first aid but I wasn’t ready for that.”

“Everything turned out okay, though?”

"Oh, yeah. In fact, she named the baby after me. A boy." Bryson grinned. "Bet she was happy I wasn't a Rebecca or Mary Anne or something."

"Bryson suits you." Karla studied her face. "Unique, for a girl. Strong. Down-to-earth. Where did it come from?"

"Pop was Brice. And he wanted a son." Her face turned melancholic, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Ah. I see." Bryson did seem the quintessential tomboy, though a very feminine one. She'd learned to fly from her father, and her fondest memories included watching him make furniture. The two had clearly been extremely close. "I suspect it didn't take long for him to appreciate how lucky he was to have been blessed with a daughter instead."

Bryson looked down at her feet as a slow smile spread across her face. "Well, yeah. I expect he'd have said that was true enough."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Five years."

Yet it was obvious Bryson still missed him deeply. "They say it gets better in time. Maggie claims it does. But I can't imagine thinking of Mom without getting this unbelievably terrible ache in my chest and knot in the pit of my stomach."

"It doesn't really get better," Bryson said. "Just more tolerable. The rawness scars over. I know right now it's hard to get past thinking about the end. Finding out they're gone, the realization sinking in. The painful acceptance. But eventually that fades, and what remains are the great, joyful times that made the deepest impressions. That's when you can let go of the grieving and move on." Her gaze was inward, her mind obviously engaged entirely on images of her father.

"How did he die?"

Bryson didn't answer right away. "I probably shouldn't tell you, since you're already not the biggest fan of flying and we're going up tomorrow. But Pop was killed when his plane crashed into a mountain. Ran into a williwaw, kind of a freak downdraft that happens sometimes here, mostly along the coast. Can't see 'em, can't predict 'em. It's like running into a tornado."

"I'm sorry."

"It was quick. And fitting, I guess. The way he'd have wanted it. Just too soon."

"It doesn't seem to matter how old you are," she said, "when your parents go, that word *orphan* takes on a whole new meaning."

"Yeah." Bryson's face was half in shadow, so her expression was hard to read. "But hasn't finding Maggie made it easier?"

"Oh, for sure. For now."

"For now?"

"Easier now, tougher later. Having gotten close to her, it'll be hard to go back to living on the other side of the world. We won't even have the luxury of being able to webcam or chat on the phone whenever we like."

"Satellite phones aren't the most reliable. But maybe Skeeter can hook you up on his computer when Maggie's in town."

"Still won't be enough. Honestly, I don't know how I'll be able to afford coming out here except maybe once every couple of years." Karla had been in Alaska only a week, and already she was dreading the thought of leaving her new family and Bryson to go back to her empty apartment. The long howl of a wolf from far off to their left pierced the quiet. An answering cry followed from their right, much closer. Karla shrank back against her chair, peering out into the black forest for signs of movement. "Every morning and every evening. Like clockwork. But it always unnerves me. I don't know as I'd ever get used to it."

"I love it," Bryson said. "Has to be the loneliest sound in the world, but somehow reassuring at the same time. Another creature reaching out, trying to make a connection that transcends distance. Makes me feel like I'm not so alone, somehow."

"I still don't know how you can deal with living by yourself so far from everything, especially in winter. I'd go nuts."

"Not for everyone. I have my moments, too, when it gets hard." Bryson paused as another howl echoed across the lake. "Living here is like sailing alone around the world on a tiny boat. Your life is stripped down to bare essentials, and your priorities really become clear. Food, shelter, family. All the trivial and insignificant things that most people worry about don't matter. It's freeing in many ways, but it does drive home the fact that you're all by yourself."

"Doesn't have to be that way," Lars interrupted from the doorway. "You get opportunities, Bryson. You just don't follow up on 'em."

Bryson squirmed and glanced at Karla. "I should have warned you to watch out for this one. He loves to play matchmaker."

"There are worse things than being someone who looks out for their friends."

"Well put, Karla." Lars leaned against the front rail and grinned down at Bryson. "Sometimes you need to push people a little to get them to fulfill their potential."

"I'm ready for a push." Karla said, getting to her feet to stretch. "I feel kind of rudderless at the moment, to use your boat analogy."

"You've had a lot to deal with all at once. It's understandable." Lars put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. "But now you've got all of us to help steer you in the right direction. Right, Bryson?"

"Whatever we can do."

"Your first order of business will be to get me on that plane in the morning without hyperventilating." Karla fought back a yawn as she reached for her coffee mug. "I'll deal with everything else once we all get back, how's that?"

"Sounds like a plan. Looks like you're about ready to hit the sack," Lars observed.

"I am. It's these crazy short days. I know it's not that late, but I guess my body is programmed to fade when it gets dark."

"We do have an early start tomorrow. I'll join you. Coming, Bryson?"

"Be there in a while." As soon as they went inside, Bryson relaxed back against the chair and allowed herself to relive images from the evening. It had been wonderful seeing Maggie again, and she always had a relaxing, fun time with the Rasmussens. But she'd focused on their house guest tonight. Karla had almost caught her staring several times, but she couldn't stop herself. Whether she wanted to or not, her mind was determined to record every little detail about her: the almost imperceptible bump in her nose, the thin scar above her left eyebrow, the way she slightly pursed her lips a millisecond before she laughed and so gave herself away. It was foolish, she knew, pining after someone totally unavailable. She told herself it was just a crush that would pass in time. What else could she do?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

November 2

“Breathe, Maggie. Nice deep breaths. Try to relax.” Karla kept her voice calm as she adjusted the cuff to take another reading. Maggie’s blood pressure had been rising steadily since they’d been in the air, and they were still several miles from Fairbanks.

“Should we be worried?” Lars turned in his seat beside Bryson and glanced back anxiously at Maggie as Karla fitted the stethoscope in her ears and inflated the cuff.

“I’m a bit concerned because your blood pressure’s up,” she told Maggie. “And your headache isn’t good news. Has it gotten worse?”

“Yeah. Quite a lot, as a matter of fact.” Maggie closed her eyes and leaned back against the seat. “How much longer, Bryson?”

“Fifteen minutes or so,” she called back. “I’ve got the throttle wide open. Want me to have an ambulance waiting for us?”

“Oh, no, there’s no need for that,” Maggie said. “I’m sure I—”

“I think it’s a good idea. Better to be careful.”

“Do it, Bryson,” Lars said immediately.

“You got it.” Bryson relayed the request on her radio and asked the Fairbanks tower for priority clearance to land on one of the two water runways reserved for floatplanes.

Karla took Maggie’s blood pressure again as they began to descend. Everyone’s attention was on her, so she forced herself not to frown as she heard the *whoosh* that registered the systolic pressure. The number was too high. Too damn high.



"You know more than you're saying, don't you?" Bryson kept her voice low. She was standing just behind Karla, both of them watching doctors and nurses go in and out of the ER cubicle down the hall where Maggie had been taken.

"They'll know something soon. She's in good hands."

"What do you think it is?" Bryson could tell from the look on Karla's face that she understood precisely why Maggie was getting such a bustle of attention. She'd seen her intercept the first doctor as he was going in, to brief him. "Please tell me."

Karla half turned and met her eyes. "It might be preeclampsia. Do you know what that is?"

Her body tensed and she made fists. "Not really. I've heard the term. Is it bad?"

"It's a condition pregnant women sometimes get, a narrowing of the blood vessels. Maggie has several of the common risk factors for it. Her age, for one. The fact it's her first pregnancy. And her normal blood pressure is on the high side anyway, which is why her doctor told her to rest in bed as much as possible the last few weeks."

Movement made Karla turn toward Maggie's cubicle. The curtain was pulled back, and a nurse emerged with a tray and headed off toward the lab. "It spiked during the flight, and her headache is a symptom. Blood and urine tests should tell the doctors more."

"Is it bad?" Bryson asked again. Her chest felt constricted. *Don't let anything happen to her.*

"It could be dangerous to both Maggie and the baby. If that's what it is, the doctors may want to induce labor or deliver by C-section right away, since she's so close to her due date." Karla met her eyes again. "It might be something else, though she doesn't seem to have any other symptoms."

"If they go ahead and take the baby, will both of them be okay?" She hadn't realized how tense she was, until Karla gently released her fists and took her hands in hers.

"They'll be all right. Have faith." Karla's smile and grip of reassurance were so convincing she relaxed a little.



The doctors verified Karla's diagnosis and scheduled Maggie for a C-Section for later that day. She was moved to a prep room and put on a magnesium drip to keep her from developing eclampsia and having a seizure during the surgery. The drip made her sick and fuzzy-headed, and Bryson and Karla couldn't see her for a couple of hours.

Karla's trepidation grew when she entered the room. Maggie was visibly sweating and looked paler than she should.

"Where's Lars?" Bryson asked.

"I sent him to stretch his legs so I could talk to you." Maggie patted the bed on either side of her, and Karla and Bryson both edged carefully onto the mattress, facing her. Each took one of her hands. "I'm counting on you both," she said. "Now, I know everything's going to be fine. But I like to plan for every possibility. If something happens to me..." She'd been composed and calm until now, but Karla could see in her eyes that the doctors had explained all the risks and dangers. "Lars will need looking after."

She wanted to interrupt with reassurances, but neither she nor Bryson moved.

"He'll need both of you, as much as you're able, especially at first. Oh, he'll make a great dad, I know, but newborns are a handful." Maggie took a deep breath and looked from one to the other. "Promise?"

"Of course," Karla said.

"You know I will." Bryson nodded solemnly.

"Good. Now that's settled, let's talk about the way it's really going to be." Maggie glanced down at her stomach. "The doctors say I'll be here a while. At least several days. And the baby maybe longer." She looked up at Karla. "Lars plans to stay with me. They'll move a cot in for him."

"Great." Karla squeezed her hand. "I'll get a room at a hotel nearby."

"So will I," Bryson added.

Maggie shook her head. "Very nice of both of you to offer, but Lars will be here around the clock, watching me like a hawk." She looked up at Karla. "You can stay until I come home, right?"

"And for a while after. I'm sure it'll be no problem. I'll call and verify that while you're in surgery."

“Good. But I don’t want you hanging around a hospital for the next week. Go home with Bryson and have some fun. See some of the area while the weather holds. We’ll get freeze-up soon. If you’re comfortable at our place, of course you’re welcome there. Or I’m sure Grizz can put you up at the Den.”

“Or she can stay with me.” Bryson faced Karla. “We’ll work it out, whatever you want.” She returned her attention to Maggie. “I’ll watch after her, don’t you worry. Lars will call us when we can come, and I’ll have us down here and bedside before you know it.”

“I knew I could count on you both.” Maggie sighed and extracted her hand from Bryson’s to run it over her stomach. “Won’t be long, now. You’ll both have a little niece.”

“I get to be an aunt, too?” Bryson’s pleased expression told Karla this was unexpected news.

“Of course, idiot.” Maggie slapped her lightly across the arm. “Since when did you cease being a member of my family?”

“Duh,” Bryson teased. “No clues on a name yet, I suppose?”

“She’ll let me know,” Maggie said confidently.

“Believe me, Mag won’t drop any hints until she’s here,” Lars said from the doorway. “I’ve tried everything.” He was smiling, but his forehead was creased with worry. Karla knew they all felt the same. Putting on brave faces, but terrified inside.

The anesthesiologist appeared behind Lars. “It’s time for her epidural. Lars, you can stay, but you ladies need to wait outside.”

“Can’t wait to meet my niece.” Karla gave Maggie a quick kiss. “See you soon.”

“We’ll be in as soon as they’ll let us.” Bryson did the same.

Karla called her supervisor at Grady Hospital and confirmed her indefinite leave of absence. Not long after, they took Maggie to surgery, and she and Bryson accompanied Lars to the lounge to begin an agonizing wait.



“The doctor said she’d be in the operating room an hour or so.” Lars glanced up at the wall clock, though it had barely moved since the last time he’d looked. “Do you think we should be getting worried?”

Nearly ninety minutes had passed since they’d wheeled Maggie to

the OR, and Lars had spent nearly the entire time pacing. Bryson and Karla had been through every magazine in the room and had alternated trips to the cafeteria for coffee, most of which went cold before it was consumed.

“We should be hearing something soon.” But Karla was beginning to be concerned, too. The typical C-section only took a half hour or forty minutes, so she’d expected someone from the OR to update them by now. Almost unconsciously, she removed the tigereye necklace from her pocket and began to stroke the smooth stone with her thumb.

“What’s that?” Bryson asked. “If you don’t mind my asking. You were doing that earlier, in the ER.”

She opened her palm so Bryson could see the necklace. “It was my mother’s. She wore it all the time. I know it probably sounds silly, but it gives me strength. Makes me feel closer to her, somehow.”

“I don’t think that’s silly at all. I feel the same way when I sit in Pop’s chair.” Just as the words left Bryson’s mouth, a doctor in scrubs emerged from a door at the end of the hallway and headed toward them. He was smiling.

“Congratulation, Lars, you have a beautiful baby girl. Seven pounds, eight ounces. Because she was a little premature, she’s been taken to the NICU—neonatal intensive care—but all the early signs look very good.”

“Maggie?” Lars asked.

The surgeon put his hand on Lars’s shoulder. “There was some bleeding, so it took a little longer than usual to close her up. She’s running a fever, and her blood pressure’s still high, so we’re monitoring her closely. It’ll be another hour or two before you can see her, but you can visit your daughter. The NICU’s on the third floor.”

As soon as he left them, Karla put her arm around Lars’s waist. Concern was etched on his face. “Don’t worry, Lars. These kinds of complications are to be expected. I’m sure Maggie and the baby will be fine. If you like, I’ll talk to the charge nurse.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He hugged her back. “I need a translator to understand what’s going on.”

Ten minutes later, the three of them stood outside the NICU window, admiring the fair-haired newborn.

“She looks so small and vulnerable.” Lars’s face was only inches from the glass, his expression a combination of awe and uncertainty.

Baby Girl Rasmussen was in a small bed enclosed by hard plastic, and leads ran from her chest and fingertip to a monitor.

Karla studied the numbers on the monitor. "Her breathing and heart rate are good, and so is her blood pressure. Blood-oxygen level is within normal range. She's in the isolette to keep her warm, which is common with preemies."

"When will I be able to hold her?"

"She's not on a ventilator, so I bet they'll let you in right now. Let me go talk to the charge nurse." Karla found the shift supervisor and was relieved to hear that her niece had had no complications and was being monitored only as a precaution. She passed the good news to Lars, who was led away to wash up and don a hospital gown.

She and Bryson watched through the window as he held his daughter for the first time, mindful of the various lines attaching her to the monitor.

"Should have brought my camera," Bryson remarked. "Sure never expected all this when we left this morning."

"They're lucky this happened so late in Maggie's pregnancy, and that she was headed here," Karla said. "I hate to think about the outcome if she'd worsened during a blizzard or something, and we hadn't been able to get them to a hospital. We might have lost them both."

"Damn good thing you're here. Makes it seem as though there was a reason all of this happened as it did. You coming here, I mean."

"Well, apparently I'll be hanging around a while longer than I expected. Maggie probably won't be out of here for a week or so, and it'll be another five or six before she's able to do much because of the C-section. Looks like I'll be here for the holidays."

"It'll sure make them both happy to hear that." Bryson smiled. "And me, too. I don't mind saying, I look forward to the chance to spend some more time with you."

The words themselves didn't surprise Karla because Bryson had already acknowledged she enjoyed her company. But now she noticed an expression in Bryson's eyes she hadn't seen before, or had perhaps been too preoccupied to recognize.

It was a subtle but unmistakable sign of *interest*. Romantic interest. Sexual interest. Even in her daydreams of late, she hadn't imagined that Bryson could be harboring any such attraction, and the realization she *might* both excited and terrified her.



Bryson set the coffee cup on the table in front of the couch and eased quietly into the chair beside it. Karla was still out cold, though it was nearly eight a.m., but they'd been up late, visiting the NICU and getting updates from Lars on how Maggie was doing.

She adjusted Karla's jacket so it covered her, then hesitated as she withdrew her hand, the urge to caress Karla's hair away from her face so strong she could hardly repress it.

Something was different between them, though she couldn't put her finger on what or why. Ever since that moment outside the NICU the night before, Karla had been almost shy around her, rarely meeting her eyes. And when she did, she seemed curious in a way she hadn't before.

A nurse poked her head into the lounge. "Maggie's awake," she quietly informed Bryson. "You can go in to see her."

She rubbed Karla's shoulder and was rewarded with a low moan of protest. "Karla? You awake?"

"Half," Karla said groggily, rubbing her eyes as she sat up. "What's happened?"

"We can see Maggie."

"Oh, great." The news roused her from her semi-stupor, and she blinked several times. Her gaze focused on the full coffee cup in front of her. "Please tell me this hasn't been sitting here for hours."

"Still hot."

"You're an angel." Karla reached for the cup and downed half the contents in three quick sips. "Okay. Now I'm ready."

Karla fixed her attention on Maggie's monitor as they entered the room. Her blood pressure was still elevated—142 over 95—but that was an improvement over the night before, and it could take a few weeks for Maggie's BP to return to normal. Her color was good, and the empty food tray in front of her indicated she'd been able to start taking liquids on her own. "Hi, sis. How you feeling?"

"Weak. Sore." Maggie groaned when she reached for the bed control to raise her head a few inches. "And glad it's over. But it sure was worth it." She smiled. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Sure is. And lucky. She's got your eyes." Bryson looked over at Karla and grinned. "Hazel, with tiny gold flecks."

Karla's cheeks warmed. Of course it was natural that Bryson knew the color of her eyes. She noticed everything in her environment, paid attention to the details. And they actually had spent a lot of time together, at least it sure felt that way. But it was how Bryson looked at her when she said it that unnerved her. Maggie wouldn't have interpreted it as flirtatious, but it seemed so, to her. Bryson had sounded quietly joyful, as though hazel eyes with tiny gold flecks were her idea of perfection.

She had to be imagining Bryson's interest. *Had* to be. Bryson hadn't said or done anything overt. Had she? Karla was out of practice when it came to reading clues that said a woman was interested in her.

"Her eyes were the first things I noticed, too." Maggie reached for Karla's hand. "Another tie that binds us."

"Mom would've liked that. Where's Lars?"

"I sent him to get some breakfast. Poor thing hasn't eaten since yesterday morning, and I know he was up all night. He looked like he was ready to drop."

"So, the big question. Do you have a name yet?" Bryson asked.

"Yes." Maggie's lips drew back in an enigmatic smile. She was obviously enjoying making them wait to hear the long-anticipated decision. "We've named her after the two women who kept both of us safe. We're calling her Karson, with a K."

"Karson? Hey, how cool is that? I'm honored." Bryson looked over at Karla, who felt the same joy she saw on Bryson's face.

"So am I. Thanks, Maggie."

"Suits her," Maggie said. "She's a survivor, just like you two."

"I'm so glad you and little Karson are okay," Bryson said. "Has the doctor said anything about when you can both go home?"

Maggie shook her head. "He said five days at least, probably more. He wants to see how we do, and how fast I heal. And I'll have to stay in bed a lot when I first get there."

"Then lucky for you, you have a live-in nanny, cook, and health-care professional. I'm here as long as you need me," Karla said. "I talked to the hospital and told them I probably won't be back until after the first of the year."

"You're spending the holidays with us?" Maggie sat up so abruptly that she winced. "Damn."

"Hey, there. Watch it." Karla helped her lie back. "Be careful with that incision. Slow movements. And yes, you have me for Christmas."

Please tell me you're the deck-the-halls, singing-carols-nonstop types."

"Hell, we live in Santa's backyard. What do you think?" Maggie laughed. "You won't find a house up here without mistletoe, spiked eggnog, the works. Hey, Bryson, you should get Chaz to loan you a team to take her up to Arrigetch Peaks."

"Already thought of that. Just wasn't sure Karla would be around long enough to get the snow for it."

"What are you two talking about?"

"The Arrigetch Peaks are at the entrance to the Gates of the Arctic," Maggie explained. "Unbelievably beautiful. Best way to get there is by dogsled."

"Dogsled?" Much as she hated being cold, that did sound exciting, mushing up into the wilderness with Bryson. "I take it you've done that before?"

Bryson grinned. "Many, many times. I'm an alternate guide, if someone gets sick at the last minute."

"No one better to take you into the backcountry," Lars added from behind her. "You know, you two look worse than I do. Why don't you head on home and get some rest? I'll call with updates, and you can come back if there's a need. Otherwise we'll see you when Mags can go home."

"Lars is right." Maggie glared at them with playful sternness. "Go get some rest and have some fun. I don't have the energy to deal with three hovering mother hens."

"You're sure?" Bryson asked.

"No arguments. Don't make me mad." Maggie was grinning when she said it, and she reached out for farewell hugs from them.

"Think you'll be going back to the cabin?" Lars dug into the pocket of his jeans and extracted a key ring.

"I don't know. I hadn't really given it much thought," Karla admitted.

"Take this in case you do." Lars held out the keys. "The cabin isn't locked, but the shed is, and there are keys for the skiff, ATV, and snowmachine. You know where everything else is."

"Okay." Karla zipped the keys into the pocket of her coat. "Hopefully it'll only be for a few days."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Better view sitting up here, don't you think?" Bryson said as they strapped themselves into Skeeter's Cessna, Karla beside her in the copilot's seat. "Is it getting any easier for you?"

"I wouldn't say that." Karla was careful to keep her hands clear of the dual steering wheel and control panel, afraid she might accidentally hit something that would create problems for them in the air.

"Wish I could do or say something to help you enjoy this as much as I do."

"It would take an awful lot for that to happen." Karla fell silent as Bryson got on the radio and readied for takeoff. A few minutes later, the floatplane was skimming along the water runway. She was grateful for the Cessna's powerful cabin heater because the weather had turned noticeably colder during their day in the hospital. The sun was out, but the temperature was still well below freezing.

"I meant it when I said you could stay with me. I'd be more than happy to have your company until Maggie gets home."

Karla glanced over at Bryson. She probably would have readily accepted her offer just twenty-four hours ago. But realizing that Bryson might be interested in her had thrown her off-kilter, and she wanted some time alone to think. Had she imagined it? Was she so adrift because of recent events—especially Abby's leaving—that she was merely longing for some kind of meaningful connection with another woman?

"I think I'll go back to Lars and Maggie's. At least for now." She gazed out over the landscape below, struck yet again by the desolate

endlessness of the Alaskan wilderness. She could see why so many who came here found themselves re-evaluating the choices they'd made. "I've spent so much time lately grieving or grasping for anything to keep me from thinking too hard about the future. I'm finally ready to face things. Try to figure out what I'm going to do next with my life." The prospect scared the hell out of her, but the birth of her niece had inspired her to begin looking forward, not back.

"Sounds like quite a challenge. If you need someone to listen, you have my number. Hope you won't hesitate to use it."

"I appreciate the offer, Bryson."

"Well, I promised Maggie and Lars I'd look after you. And I know what it feels like to lose a parent and find yourself at a crossroad."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

The rest of the trip they talked about more innocuous matters. The baby, Christmas in Alaska, the sorts of mundane things that Karla should remember since she was staying alone at the cabin. Karla knew that Bryson was being unusually chatty to keep her mind off the flight, and she was grateful. Before she realized it, they were descending toward Wild Lake.

"Should take right off again pretty quick, so I can get Skeeter's plane back and still make it home before dark," Bryson said as they splashed down. "Need anything before I go?"

"I'll be fine."

The plane drifted to a stop and Bryson cut the engine, then came around to help Karla out. They faced each other for a few seconds, the sudden tension between them so palpable Karla could feel herself beginning to blush. "Sure you don't mind if I call you to come get me if being alone turns out to be a bad idea?"

Bryson grinned with that same sweet look of joy that gave her butterflies in Maggie's room, and her voice was velvet soft when she replied. "I'd like nothing better. I very much hope you will."



The next three days gave Karla a powerful demonstration of how quickly the weather in Alaska could change, and a glimpse of how the isolation of a long winter in the bush could do quite a number on

someone's psyche. The weather had kept her indoors and forced her to keep her promise to use the time to sort out things. Her life. Past, present, and future. What she'd done with it so far, and what dreams she had yet to fulfill.

Bryson had barely left when the snow began to fall, and it had been coming down steadily ever since. The thermometer now dipped into the single digits at night and rose to just below freezing during the short days, so the ground was frozen solid. Ice had begun to form at the shore of the lake, and every bit of snow that fell clung tenaciously to every surface, painting the world around the cabin a solid landscape of white.

The warm embrace she'd received into the Rasmussen household and sharing the best of her childhood memories with her sister had tempered her grief over her mother's death. Other, happier recollections had begun to replace the haunting image of her mom in the coffin. And though the loss still overwhelmed her often, such moments were less frequent now and briefer.

And she'd begun to be able to think of Abby with a greater degree of detachment. Hours of picking their life apart, seeking answers to how she could have been so blindsided, had given her some insights on why their relationship had not been the unbreakable connection she'd considered it to be.

She accepted that they needed to share the responsibility for the breakup. It might have been Abby's decision, but Karla had failed to see the warning signs, had become too complacent about the way they were living. Their life together had become so predictable that she assumed Abby would have no problem with the uncommon demands of her nursing job: her long hours, her frequent exhaustion, her preoccupation when she lost a patient.

Not that Abby had been blameless. She should have spoken up if she'd considered their communication lacking and their love life less than satisfying. Karla couldn't read her mind. And from her viewpoint, it was unconscionable to begin an affair when they were living together and partnered in what they'd both agreed was a monogamous, long-term commitment. She was aware that couples sometimes drifted apart. She might have accepted that fact if Abby had been honest with her when she'd first felt the distance and inclination to stray.

But finding out that Abby kept pretending to love her even while she was sharing someone else's bed was the part she couldn't understand or bring herself to forgive.

Often when she'd been thinking about Abby, images of Bryson intruded, inviting comparisons between the two, and Abby always fell short. Bryson was generous and caring, while Abby was not only a liar but a manipulator. From the beginning, she'd used tears, charm, or anger to maneuver Karla into getting what she wanted, whether it was which movie they watched, their next vacation spot, or the type of dishes they would buy for their kitchen. And like a sheep, she had always demurred to Abby's desires.

Abby had been all about herself and her own needs. She'd have hated Alaska with its lack of conveniences and isolation. And she cared nothing at all about wildlife or the out-of-doors, while it was clear that preserving and appreciating the environment was at Bryson's core.

As the days passed, Bryson dominated her introspections more, but Karla couldn't decide what she might do if Bryson was indeed as interested in her as she was in Bryson. What then? It was one thing to engage in some harmless fantasizing, and another thing altogether to contemplate acting on those desires. Could she trust someone enough again to open her heart? Especially someone she knew she'd be thousands of miles away from in just another few weeks?

The only way to find out was to take a leap of faith. Not something she would ordinarily do, but the one she'd made coming to Alaska had certainly been worth it.

A raging blizzard that morning, with high winds and snow so dense she could see only a few feet outside the window, had tapered off to flurries by early afternoon. Deciding to take advantage of the slight break in the weather, she went to the satellite phone to dial Bryson's number. To her relief, the connection went through.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bryson. It's Karla."

"Hey there! I was just about to call you. Everything okay?"

"Yes, everything's fine." Except perhaps the fact that she couldn't stop thinking about Bryson. "Why were you going to call me?"

"I just heard from Lars. The baby's been moved into their room. But Maggie's blood pressure is still high, and she's had some problems

keeping down food, so they're not releasing her for at least another few days."

"That's not uncommon."

"Yeah, that's what they told her and Lars. So what were you calling me about?"

"I...uh..." She gripped the phone tighter. Her mouth had suddenly gone dry. "I wondered whether the offer's still open to come spend some time at your place. I'm getting a little tired of my own company." And she wanted to find out what the hell was going on between them, if anything, but she wasn't ready to admit that part.

"Sure." The enthusiasm in Bryson's voice reassured her. "Do you want me to try to borrow Skeeter's plane again to come get you, or can you manage in the skiff?"

"I think I can get there fine. I've handled small boats before, and I watched Lars pretty closely."

"If you're sure. When do you think you'll be heading out?"

"Oh, a half hour or so. I just need to do the dishes and throw a few things into a bag."

"I'll expect you here in an hour or so, then. Be sure to wear a life vest, and take it slow and easy. Visibility isn't great, watch out for logs and rocks."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine. See you soon."



Karla began to have second thoughts not long after the skiff was under way. The flurries had thickened by the minute to another blowing blanket of thick, heavy snow, and in the dark of the overcast sky she couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction. The lake was a breeze, but once she got to the river, danger was everywhere—logs, rocks, gravel bars, and fallen trees to avoid.

"It's not that far," she said aloud to reassure herself. *Just keep calm and go slow.*

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the boat slammed against a rock, mostly submerged in the river. A loud crunch of metal sounded as she lost her footing and hit the deck, hard. The engine died, and the boat began to slip sideways to the current.

“Damn it.” She grabbed the nearest bench and hauled herself up. The boat was spinning out of control, just a few feet from the shore. She dove for the controls, but before she could restart the engine, the skiff bounced off another rock and tossed her back onto the deck. She tried to catch herself but took the brunt of the impact in her right wrist. Momentarily stunned by the pain, she gritted her teeth and clutched her wrist as the boat whirled around, caught in the current, and grounded itself on the next gravel bar.

“Great. Just great.” As the pain began to subside, she wiggled her fingers, relieved to discover it was a bad sprain and not a break. Her circumstances, however, were less than ideal. The boat wouldn’t start, and the gravel bar she was stranded on was in the middle of the river, the temperature below freezing. She’d have to get wet to hike out, and she was probably about midway between the two cabins.

She climbed out and inspected the boat. Though the bow was dented, it seemed watertight. She secured the vessel to a large rock so it wouldn’t drift away if the water rose, then slung her duffel bag over her shoulder and peered through the snow at the distance between her and the nearest shore. It seemed only fifteen feet or so, but she couldn’t judge the water’s depth. As tempted as she was to cross as quickly as possible, she had to keep her footing, so she resigned herself to take it slow and easy.

The icy water flooded her boots on her second step, piercing her wool socks like a thousand tiny needles. She continued, cautiously, the water soon up to her calves, numbing her. Turning slightly upstream against the current, she fought every inch to keep from being swept away. Halfway there, the water was up to mid-thigh, the current exerting its full force and Karla more powerless by the moment. She almost succumbed to the rapidly rising panic that had sucked all the air out of her lungs and started her heart hammering.

By the time she reached the shore, she was gasping from the cold and had lost nearly all feeling in her legs. With trembling hands and chattering teeth, she stripped off her boots and her clothing from the waist down and pulled on long underwear, dry jeans, and fresh wool socks from her bag. She rubbed her feet vigorously to try to warm them, wincing at the pain in her wrist when she did, but her boots were the only footwear she’d packed, so when she put them on again, her new socks were almost immediately saturated as well.

She had at least three or four miles to go to get anywhere, but she was determined to tough it out. Rising to survey the shoreline in either direction, she decided to head to Bryson's rather than return to the Rasmussen cabin. She'd doused the fire in the woodstove before she'd left, and Bryson's home would provide the immediate warmth her feet desperately needed.

She stayed near the river for the first several hundred yards, but the snow completely covered the rocky bank, which made for treacherously slow going. Her feet felt half frozen and she had difficulty maintaining her balance. A twisted ankle was something she couldn't afford.

Hoping for smoother footing, she entered the woods and paralleled the river, threading through the dense spruce trees. The wind began to pick up, and the snow showed no sign of diminishing. Now and then, a whiteout would temporarily obscure her view of the water, but she wasn't afraid of getting lost. The river was on one side of her, and the mountains on the other, some half mile or more distant. As long as she kept moving downstream along the shoreline, she should find Bryson's cabin.



Bryson peered north, listening for the skiff's engine, cursing the fact that the thick snow muffled all sound. It was a little after three. Only an hour of daylight left, and Karla was so overdue she was edgy with worry. She debated whether to strike out on foot or take to the air. Hiking would be slower, but conditions were awful for flying. Even keeping the Cub low, she might miss seeing the skiff in the blizzard.

Frustrated, she hurried back to the cabin and threw a few essentials into a backpack, pulled on an extra layer of clothes, and set off to find Karla, working her way slowly upstream along the rocky bank of the river. She'd brought along a rescue whistle, which carried farther than her voice, and every quarter mile or so she would pause and blow it, then strain for an answer, but none came.

Something had happened. Something bad. She could feel it in her gut. It had been a mistake to let Karla set out by herself, after promising Lars and Maggie she'd take care of her. She'd covered less than two miles when dusk fell. She clicked on her flashlight and kept moving forward, sweeping the terrain ahead and the river to her right. The only

answer to her repeated whistle blows was a lone wolf howl, far off in the woods to her left.



She was lost. Karla had been trying to deceive herself, but she accepted now that she had no idea where she was in relation to Bryson's cabin. Not that it mattered, because it was pitch-black, and her feet were almost incapable of supporting her.

She felt like she had walked a great distance, but only because each step was so difficult. From the start, her feet were so numb from the river she had difficulty maintaining her balance. She'd fallen several times, twice on her sprained wrist. And the heavily laden trees around her had dumped their cargo of snow directly onto her head, sending icy pellets deep into the collar of her jacket. She was miserably cold. The biting wind had penetrated every available orifice and frozen the top of her wet socks into ice.

At some point, she realized she hadn't spotted the river through the trees for quite some time. She headed in the direction she thought was right, but the shoreline wasn't where she thought it was, and the forest and blowing snow were too thick for her to see the mountains to get her bearings.

She panicked and wanted to run. But she decided she better try to warm her feet. She sat on a downed tree and stripped off her boots, then her ice-crusting socks, with difficulty. She had two dry wool pairs left in her duffel and put them both on, then wrapped her feet in two thick sweaters and prayed for a letup in the blizzard so she could see.

She couldn't have passed the cabin, she tried to reassure herself. It had to be just a short distance ahead. But her sense of direction was too unreliable to give her any confidence. The river valley was very wide at Bryson's cabin. If she'd been traveling close to the mountains instead of the river, she might have passed by without seeing it.

And if she had, thirty miles of wilderness stretched between her and Bettles.

Indecisive, she froze, and soon it was getting dark. No flashlight. No matches. No weapon. Nothing but a few extra clothes, which didn't seem to be doing much to warm her feet.

She tried not to be afraid, but she'd heard the wolves howl too

often. Most of the time, they came from the right of the Rasmussen cabin and were a long way off. *A few miles downriver*, Lars often estimated. In other words, right about where she was sitting.

She pulled out the tigereye necklace and shoved it into her right glove, comforted by the smooth stone against her palm. She didn't have many options. Try to keep walking, risking further injury and possibly getting even more lost. Or she could sit tight and hope someone found her before she froze or some predator got too interested. She was long overdue, so Bryson would already be out looking for her. She was that kind of woman.

But if Karla had already passed Bryson's cabin in the storm before she started searching...or if they had been too far apart to see each other when they passed...then Bryson was heading away from her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Karla couldn't erase the image from her mind. A homeless man who refused to give his name had been admitted to the ER one bitterly cold February night, suffering from hypothermia and severe frostbite. Thousands of homeless lived in the city, many in the downtown area, and Grady Memorial got the bulk of them when they required care. So she had seen her share of cases like this, but they'd never been bad enough to warrant amputation.

When the man regained consciousness after the surgery and saw that both his feet and several of his fingers were gone, shock and horror, then tears, then anger crossed his face. "Why did you do this? Why not just let me die? I can't survive like this!"

Karla had lost all feeling in her feet and couldn't stand. And though she'd pulled her hands inside her sleeves to warm them beneath her armpits, she only felt colder. Worse, she yearned to close her eyes and sleep. But if she did, she would probably never wake up again.



Bryson gave herself another hour to find Karla. If she didn't succeed by then, she would go home and call in reinforcements from Bettles to expand the search. The conditions couldn't have been worse: full dark and sub-freezing temperatures. The strong winds and heavy snowfall were muting her whistles, and it would be even more difficult to hear shouts. Unless she was relatively close to Karla, they might miss each other.

She swept the flashlight back and forth, from the woods to the

river, hoping Karla might spot the beacon. And she paused frequently to listen, but so far all she'd heard were wolves and the howl of the wind in the trees. She prayed that Karla was all right.

Of all the search-and-rescue operations she'd participated in, none but the search for her father had ever affected her so personally. And it wasn't because of her sense of responsibility to Lars and Maggie. She'd come to care about Karla, too, more than she'd allowed herself to admit.

She blew her whistle long and loud, turned ninety degrees and did it again, then froze to listen.

Her heart raced when she thought she heard an answering call, too indistinct to be sure. Had it been just the wind? She blew the whistle again and followed up with a shout. "Kaaaaarlaaaaaaa!"

She listened again and caught that same distant hint of reply. More certain now that she was not imagining it, she hurried in the direction she thought the sound had originated from as fast as possible, skirting trees and sweeping the ground in front of her with her flashlight to avoid logs and rocks. It seemed to come from deep in the woods. "I'm coming, Karla! Hang on," she hollered as she crashed through a thicket of willows.

When she'd gone a few hundred yards, she paused to shout again and this time clearly heard the reply. "Bryson! Over here. To your left."

She followed the voice and found Karla sitting on a downed tree, her expression in the glare of her flashlight a mixture of worry and relief.

"I've never been happier to see anyone in my life," Karla said as Bryson hunched down in front of her.

"Are you all right?"

"Freezing." Her teeth chattered. "I crashed the boat and got my boots wet getting to shore. I think my feet are frostbitten, which means I can't and shouldn't walk."

"Shit." Bryson's mind raced, trying to think of the best way to move Karla. There might be enough snow on the ground to use the snowmobile, but she'd waste a lot of time getting back home to retrieve it, and it would be difficult to negotiate the machine over the uneven, densely forested terrain.

"How far is it to your place?" Karla asked.

"Three or four miles." Bryson took off her backpack and set her flashlight beside Karla so she could see what she was doing. "I have some disposable hand warmers with me, and a survival blanket. Let's see if we can get you warmed up some." She opened four of the packets, which began to heat up as soon as they were exposed to air.

She could see that Karla had her hands inside her clothing. "Gonna open your coat for a second to give these to you." Bryson unzipped the jacket halfway. Karla wore a crew-neck navy sweater beneath it.

Karla reached one hand up shakily through the neck of the sweater to retrieve the packets. "Thanks."

She zipped her jacket back up and shone the flashlight down Karla's legs. Her feet were encased in the duffel bag. Beside the bag, covered with snow, were her boots and gloves.

"I guess you don't want me to put any warmers on your feet? You want to wait for warm water?"

"Right. I might be bad enough that those would damage the tissue." Karla wasn't surprised Bryson knew a lot about frostbite. What Alaskan wouldn't? Especially one with search-and-rescue experience. "Any idea how you might get me out of here? And how quickly?"

Bryson unfolded the thin reflective survival blanket and wrapped it around Karla like a cocoon. "Working on that. Is the skiff out of commission?"

"Not structurally, but I couldn't get the engine to start, and it's grounded on a gravel bar. It's quite a way upstream. Hit a rock I didn't see."

"Easy to do, especially in these conditions. I shouldn't have let you try it alone."

"Don't blame yourself. This is totally my doing," Karla said. "These packs are really helping. My hands are tingling and burning like crazy. A good sign."

"Okay, here's the plan." Bryson shook off Karla's boots and put them in her backpack. "I'll take you as far as I can, moving along the river." She was strong, but four miles, especially in the dark in this terrain, was quite a distance. "A fireman's carry is the best way to keep from jostling your feet. Ground's too uneven and rocky to try to drag you out. If I can't carry you any farther, I have a plan B ready." She

hoped it wouldn't come to that, but she could always hoof it back and retrieve her fishing raft. Built for one, it could hold them both and get them the rest of the way fairly quickly.

But she hated the time she'd eat up making the round trip on foot and the fifteen minutes wasted inflating the raft. And she didn't want to leave Karla alone. In addition to the worry about being lost and getting frostbite, Karla had looked tremendously relieved when she found her. She must have been terribly afraid. Lost in the wilderness, all alone in the dark, unable to move, and freezing to death.

"You sure you can carry me?"

"You're talking to a woman who chops enough firewood to keep her cabin nice and toasty all winter." She used her most reassuring smile as she took off her belt. She threaded it through the top loop of her backpack and then put it back on, so the pack would hang from her left hip. "I'll need one of your arms out in your sleeve, preferably your right. You warm enough for that yet?"

Karla nodded and slid her right arm into position. Bryson shook the snow from Karla's gloves and inserted another warming pack inside the right one before she pulled it over her hand. She stuck the other glove in her pocket.

Then she crouched in front of Karla, facing away from her. She glanced back as she reached for Karla's right arm to put it over her left shoulder. "I take it you know the fireman's carry?"

"I do."

"Good." She bent sideways and inserted her right hand between Karla's parted thighs. Karla helped position herself by raising her right thigh as high as she could so Bryson could wrap her arm around it. She draped Karla's body over her upper back and shoulders, took the flashlight in her left hand, and slowly stood, taking the weight. "That'll work. You don't weigh a thing." Bryson had guessed her weight at 115 or 120, at most; Karla was at least two or three inches shorter than she was, and slender. And she felt even lighter, probably because of all the adrenaline pumping through her system. "Hang on. Here we go."

Sweeping the flashlight in front of her, Bryson angled north toward the river as fast as she could safely travel, keeping well away from trees on either side. She made good time, considering her burden and the uneven ground, and her back and legs and lungs didn't begin to protest until after she covered the first mile.

"How're you doing?" Karla asked, when Bryson paused a moment to catch her breath.

"About to ask you the same," she managed, between big gulps for air.

"Why don't you set me down for a minute and rest, huh?"

"Will when I need to." She set off again at a slightly slower pace, trying to push away the pain and find a second wind.

Karla kept quiet during their traverse back to her cabin. Bryson hoped it was out of consideration, not pain.

She struggled another mile. Her lungs were burning and her shoulders, back, and knees were in agony. "Rest," she wheezed, as she eased Karla down into a sitting position on a fallen tree.

"You can't go farther. You're killing yourself. I don't know how you're doing this."

She held up a hand to forestall further protest while she eased onto the log beside Karla and took in deep lungfuls of air. Moving slowly, she raised her arms above her head and stretched. Her muscles screamed in relief, but she knew she wouldn't be able to move tomorrow. "Not much more," she said, once her breathing had returned to normal. "Only another mile or so."

"Think you can make it?"

"Might have to stop again. We'll get there." In truth, she wasn't certain her body could endure much more of this punishment. But she wanted to keep Karla as calm and reassured as possible. She already had plenty to worry about.

After a few more minutes of rest they pushed on, Bryson's body screaming in agony with every step. She made it only another quarter mile before her back and shoulders and legs gave way. Her arms were shaking and her calves were cramping painfully as she struggled to set Karla down on a large boulder. Even with rest, she couldn't carry her any farther.

"Can't." She gasped as she collapsed beside the rock. Her heart was booming in her chest, and sweat soaked the inner layer of her clothing.

"Jesus, Bryson. I'm surprised you made it this far. I'm afraid you'll give yourself a heart attack."

"Gotta..." A maddeningly short distance remained, less than a mile. "Gotta leave you here for a while," she wheezed. "Sorry."

“Leave me?”

“Not long.” She spoke in short bursts as she tried to catch her breath. “Back soon. Soon as I can.” Gripping the edge of the boulder, she hoisted herself to her feet. “Don’t fall asleep.”

“I won’t.”

Bryson took off her whistle and put it around Karla’s neck. “Wish I could leave this, too,” she said as she picked up the flashlight. “But I’ll need it to move fast.”

“I understand. I’ll be fine.”

Bryson tucked the survival blanket tight around Karla, then leaned over so their faces were close together. The flashlight cast deep shadows around their features. “You’ll be warm soon, I promise. Hang in there, and trust me.”

“I do, Bryson. Be careful.”

She ached at the worry and fear in Karla’s eyes, though she was putting on a brave front. Leaving her alone in the dark was one of the most difficult things she’d ever had to do.

“See you soon.” She forced herself forward on rubbery legs, surveying the ground with a critical eye as she headed toward the cabin. Snowmobile or raft? They were her only options, and neither was ideal. The raft would take more time, and they risked getting wet, something neither of them could afford. Her sweat-soaked clothing was making her miserably cold, and Karla’s feet could be further damaged. But the snowmachine was an iffy bet as well. The snow wasn’t deep enough for it to glide smoothly over the rocky, log-littered shoreline. It could easily get hung up on something and founder.

When the path to her cabin appeared, her spirits lifted slightly. She turned on the generator and went inside to flick on lights, grab her keys and a pair of down booties, and throw a couple of logs into the woodstove to get the heat cranked up.

“Be nice,” she urged the snowmobile as she checked the kill switch and turned the key to *on*. The Polaris was an older model, and it usually balked at the first effort every season to get it going. Last year, she’d had to replace the spark plugs and oil to start it. The year before, it needed new valves. She’d always managed to get it running, but often only after hours of labor and a trip to Bettles or beyond for parts.

She pulled the start cord and heard a muffled *pop*, but the engine failed to turn over. She tried twice more, with the same result. “Start,

damn you,” she said through gritted teeth as she pulled the choke out halfway and tried again. This time, the engine fired, but quickly died again. A bit more choke, then another pull on the cord, and the Polaris roared to life.

Breathing a little better, she gradually reduced the choke until the engine was warming smoothly. A glance at the gas tank and a brief diversion to stuff her raft into a large backpack—just in case—and she was ready to go. She checked her watch. Forty minutes had passed since they’d parted. The time had flown for her, but every second probably seemed an eternity for Karla.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Karla scarcely felt the bitter chill except when the wind gusted, blasting icy pellets of snow against her face and down her collar. She moved the heat packets around on her body, and they did a good job warming her torso. Unfortunately her feet weren't bothering her because they were completely numb from the ankles down, like wood blocks attached to her legs. She was careful not to move around too much.

As the minutes ticked by, she tried not to think about how her headlong foray into an arctic wilderness she didn't understand and was unprepared for might change her life forever. If she'd only taken matches, she could have built a fire. Or a second pair of boots, and she'd have made it to Bryson's without assistance. How stupid she'd been.

She might forgive herself more readily if this had happened during her first night in Alaska, before Bryson and Lars and even Maggie had all found ways to tell or show her how important it was to be prepared for any eventuality. To never underestimate the awesome and unpredictable power of the weather here.

Instead, she was desperately fighting fear and despair. When the darkness had swallowed Bryson's flashlight beam, she'd had to force herself not to call out for her to come back.

She wished she had even a fraction of Bryson's courage. To live by herself out here, facing down every challenge. To take to the skies every day, knowing a storm or freak wind could arise out of nowhere and slap her to the ground. Bryson hadn't hesitated to risk her own

safety to search for her, a virtual stranger. Yet another example of her selflessness and strong character. Would Karla do the same?

When she heard the distant roar of the snowmobile and glimpsed its lights through the trees, the sense of calm that seemed to settle on her whenever Bryson was around returned.

The machine slowed to a stop a few feet away, and Bryson dismounted but kept the engine running. She crouched down in front of her so they were face-to-face, but she still had to speak loudly to be heard. "You all right?"

"Ready to get out of here."

Bryson pulled two down booties from the pocket of her coat. "Better for the trip back." She carefully lifted Karla's feet from the duffel, unwrapped the sweaters that surrounded them, and eased on the booties. Then she put one arm beneath Karla's legs, the other around her back, and lifted her, cradling her against her chest. "Careful of your feet," she warned as she carried her to the snowmobile and slowly lowered her onto the seat. "And I need your arms out. You'll have to hold on to me, it's kind of rough going." She helped Karla with her gloves, then slipped into the seat in front of her. She'd put her large backpack on her chest so Karla could snuggle up against her back.

Karla wrapped her arms around Bryson's waist and bent her legs to keep her feet up.

"All set?" Bryson yelled over her shoulder.

"Yes," she shouted back.

It was very slow going. The blowing snow reduced visibility to only a few feet, so Bryson frequently rose out of the seat to peer over the windscreen for a better look at the trail they were backtracking. Now and then, the machine would slow to a crawl as she negotiated around a fallen log or stump. Finally, in the distance, Karla could see the lights of the cabin through the blowing streaks of snow.

Bryson pulled the snowmachine into her outbuilding and cut the engine, then tossed her backpack beside the sled. "Let's get those feet warmed up." Gently lifting her as she did before, Bryson carried Karla inside and lowered her onto the couch. The logs she'd tossed into the woodstove had done a fine job of heating up the cabin.

"I'll get some water on and warm up my big tub," she said as she helped Karla out of her gloves and coat.

"Great. I'd like to take some ibuprofen when you get done with

that. My feet will hurt like a bitch when I start to get some feeling back.”

“You got it.” Bryson set water to boiling in several large pots and tipped her galvanized tub next to the woodstove. “You need something hot to drink. Coffee? Tea? Cocoa?”

“Cocoa, please.”

When the water was ready, Karla downed four ibuprofen from the bottle Bryson gave her and warmed her hands on the mug while Bryson filled the tub.

“The weather’s too bad to fly out right now,” Bryson said. “But I can try to raise the hospital in Fairbanks for you on the sat phone, if you want to talk to a doctor.”

“I’ll keep that option open.” Karla lifted her legs and glanced at the down booties on her feet. She couldn’t see them when Bryson had put them on, and she hadn’t noticed them until now. She couldn’t help smiling. The booties were brown, covered in short faux fur, and shaped like grizzly-bear feet. They reminded her of the whimsical orange tabby-paw slippers she’d bought Abby for Christmas one year. Abby had called them ridiculous and returned them the next day. What had she been thinking? Abby had no sense of humor. Karla wondered how it was possible to be with someone for years and never really see her clearly until they had some distance between them.

Had someone given the bear-feet slippers to Bryson? For some reason, she hoped Bryson had picked them out herself.

“I think we’re ready.” Bryson swirled her hand through the water to test the temperature. “Lukewarm.”

“Okay. Want to do the honors? Let’s see what we’ve got.”

Bryson’s hands were sure, but tender. She eased off the booties, then, very slowly and carefully, cut away the socks.

Karla assessed her feet with a practiced clinical eye. They were a very pale white, with a bluish-purple tinge, but she’d seen much worse. “Easy,” she told herself as she lowered them into the tub, scooting forward just enough so they were completely immersed but did not touch the bottom.

Bryson sat crossed-legged on the floor on the other side of the tub and began to swirl one hand in the water.

“Something tells me you’ve done this before.”

“Unfortunately, a few times too often. But most of the time, things

come out fine when someone's been out only a few hours. You kept them wrapped up well."

"We'll know pretty soon." Karla sipped her cocoa and told herself to be patient. Not being able to feel anything immediately told her nothing. She reached into her pocket for the tigereye necklace and, when she came up empty, only then remembered that she'd shoved it into her glove the night before. "Shit!"

"What's wrong?"

"I put my Mom's necklace into my right glove last night." She glanced frantically around. "Do you know where it is?"

Bryson hurried to retrieve the gloves from the pile of hats and mittens by the door. She frowned as she returned them to Karla. "Nothing in there but a warming pack. My fault. I remember shaking the snow off them when I found you."

Tears sprang to Karla's eyes. "It's gone, then." She exhaled a long breath as the loss fully registered. Only a piece of jewelry, she tried to tell herself. But she felt almost like she'd lost her mother all over again.

"I'm sorry." Bryson put a hand on Karla's shoulder. "I know how much that meant to you."

"Not your fault, Bryson. My own carelessness."

"No. It was foolish of me to suggest you try to get here on your own in this weather." Bryson sat back beside the tub to slowly agitate the warming water, adding a little from the teakettle now and then to keep the temperature consistent.

"Stop blaming yourself. I mean it. It was my decision." Bryson's expression, however, showed that she was determined to accept responsibility for what had happened. "You saved me. Yet again, I might add. You're turning out to be my guardian angel."

Bryson gave a reluctant but genuine smile. "Glad I seem to have developed a habit of being in the right place at the right time with you."

That was certainly the truth. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"No. Shoot."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but...what's *wrong* with you?"

Bryson looked at her curiously. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean...you're gorgeous, and incredibly sweet. Brave. Selfless.

Loyal to your friends. Why the hell hasn't someone snapped you up long ago? Do you have an aversion to commitment or something?"

Scarlet rose in Bryson's cheeks as she looked away, and a sudden shyness softened her features. "Thanks for the compliments, but I'm sure not perfect." She poured more hot water into the tub. "It's not a matter of fear of commitment. Just haven't met the right person."

"I thought you might have something going with the waitress at the Den. And it looked as though that pretty gate attendant in Fairbanks was interested, too."

The blush deepened. "I've dated them," she said, without meeting Karla's eyes. "And they're both great women. Just not long-term material, for me."

"Why not? If you don't mind my asking."

Bryson shrugged. "Don't know if I can really explain. Maybe it sounds naïve, but I just feel in my gut that I'll *know* when it's really *right*."

"I used to think that way." And look where it had gotten her.

"You don't anymore?" Bryson's voice had an edge to it that almost sounded like disappointment.

"Let's just say I don't think *my* gut is very reliable. I was sure I'd found *the one*, but now I think I was just too anxious to settle down."

Bryson was watching her intently, waiting for her to continue.

"I dreamed all my life of falling in love, so when I experienced that real first flush of...oh, I don't know. Physical chemistry, joy of companionship, feeling like I was needed and appreciated, I mistook it all for more than it was. I see now we didn't have the foundation to make it work long-term—the same goals, the same dreams. The same level of mutual support and commitment to staying together and working through problems, no matter what. You want to talk naïve, I was the definition of the term."

"Sounds like it didn't end well," Bryson said sympathetically. "Were you married?"

"Not technically, no. But I felt like I was." A sigh escaped her. "Apparently I was the only one who felt that way."

"I'm sorry. It sounds like you really got hurt."

"Well, I didn't see it coming. That's what hurt the most. And it happened just two weeks before my mom died."

"That recently?" Bryson said. "You've really had a hell of a lot to

deal with, then. No wonder you seemed so...well, kind of preoccupied and troubled when you came here."

"Basket case is more like it. The trifecta of startling surprises—divorce, death, and finding out I had a long-lost sister, all within the space of a month."

Bryson's voice got quiet. "Tonight aside, has it helped? Being here?"

"Yes, it has. Much more than I even dared hope for, as a matter of fact. The distance, all the hours of thinking time..." She waited for Bryson to look at her before she continued. "And especially the new friends and family who've helped me see things with a fresh outlook. I'm very glad I came."

"I am, too." Bryson smiled, but her eyes clouded with regret. "Won't be easy to see you leave. I hope you'll keep in touch once you get home."

"For sure, I—" Her feet tingled slightly. She bent over at the waist to get a better look at them, and as she did, Bryson stopped agitating the water.

"What is it?"

"Getting some feeling back." Her feet were pinkening up again, a good sign.

"That's great!"

"Yeah." But even as she acknowledged the positive development, the slight tingling escalated into excruciating pain as circulation returned. It felt like someone was carving her feet up like a Thanksgiving turkey. She slumped back against the couch, wincing. "Christ, that hurts."

"The ibuprofen isn't helping?"

"Not much," she said through tightly clenched teeth. "Oh, what I wouldn't give for a morphine drip right now."

She spent the next hour in agony, her body so rigidly tensed against the pain that the muscles in her shoulders and back began to spasm. Bryson continued her warming duties, keeping the water agitated and boiling more as needed so the temperature would be consistent. For a while, she tried to make small talk to keep Karla's mind off her feet, but no amount of distraction helped.

Finally the suffering ebbed to a dull throb. Her feet were red and swollen, but she could feel them again, all too well, and detected no immediate sign of tissue damage. She'd have to keep her weight off

them and monitor the skin closely during the next few days for signs of blistering and other complications, but she'd evidently escaped permanent damage. "I think that's done the trick. Need to bandage them though," she told Bryson as she lifted her feet from the water. "How are you set for gauze and tape?"

"Plenty. Let me." Bryson got her first-aid supplies out and did a more-than-credible job of carefully drying and bandaging her feet. "You've got to be exhausted," she said when she'd finished. "Think you can get some shut-eye?"

Karla stretched, trying to work out the huge knot of tension that had taken up residence between her shoulder blades. "Feel like I've been run over by a convoy of tanks. But, yeah, worth a shot."

"Wish I could give you my bed, it's more comfortable than the futon," Bryson said as she got to her feet. "But I don't think it's wise to try to haul you up that ladder."

"Hey, this will be fine. Just toss me a pillow and blanket and I'm golden."

"I can do a little better than that." Bryson came over and stood before her. "But I'm gonna have to move you a minute," she said as she reached down to hoist Karla into her arms. She started to set her down on the futon chair, but changed her mind halfway there and straightened again.

Their faces were close together, and Karla was acutely aware of every place where their bodies touched. Her arm was draped across the top of Bryson's back, palm resting on the exquisitely rounded deltoid muscle of her right shoulder. Bryson's arms securely cradled her lower thighs and back. Most disquieting of all, her breast was only a few inches from Bryson's full, moist lips.

"You obviously won't be able to walk for at least a few days. I just wanted to say don't hesitate to ask me to help you." Bryson appeared to be not at all as affected as she was by their rather intimate position. "I just realized, you probably need a pit stop before I get you settled in for the night."

"A good idea. That cocoa's beginning to catch up with me."

Bryson carried her over to the corner and set her down on the portable honeypot toilet set up behind a small screen. "I'll bring more wood in and shut off the generator," she said, withdrawing to give her some privacy.

Karla wrestled off her jeans, careful not to put weight on her feet. Pulling the snug denim up again was so tough she vowed to live in sweatpants until she could walk again. Her exertions amplified the throbbing in her feet. The healing process wouldn't be fun, though having to be reliant on Bryson for a while certainly wasn't *all* bad.

The lights in the cabin went out as the loud hum of the outside generator halted abruptly. Bryson came back in, stomped the snow from her boots, and called, "Be just a minute."

A welcoming sight awaited her when she emerged from behind the screen, once again nestled in Bryson's arms. Bryson had converted the couch into a bed and covered it with flannel bedding, a thick down comforter, and three fluffy pillows. On the table beside it, a pair of thick round candles cast a soft amber light.

"Nice." Though she didn't know which was nicer, the fuss Bryson had made or how it felt to be wrapped in her secure embrace. Karla had an urge to run her hand through Bryson's hair to see what it felt like. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble."

Bryson's arms tightened around her, ever so slightly. "No trouble." As she eased Karla onto the futon, she added, "Anything else I can do for you tonight?"

Her mind leapt to all sorts of answers, none of which she could volunteer and all of which surprised her. *You can stay with me until I fall asleep. You can lie here with me and hold me in your arms. You can kiss me senseless and make me feel alive again.* "I'm fine. Thanks for everything."

"Good night, then. Sleep tight."

"You too, Bryson."

As Karla wrestled out of her clothes, Bryson lit a small kerosene lamp and took it with her up the ladder to the loft. Not long after, the light was extinguished.

Karla blew out her candles but lay awake for a long time, staring at the flames dancing in the woodstove. Her life was chaotic enough already. She shouldn't even be *thinking* about getting involved with anyone right now, let alone someone who lived on the other side of the world.

She had become involved with Abby because she let her hormones and heart blind her to reality, and she was determined not to make the same mistake twice. There didn't seem any way to make this work.

But every moment she spent with Bryson made it harder for her to keep her distance. No amount of rationalization or will power could stop her heart from pounding when Bryson got near, or calm the raging butterflies that invaded her stomach every time she caught Bryson watching her. It already seemed unthinkable to return to Atlanta without ever knowing what Bryson's soft lips tasted like. How would she feel after a lot more time alone together?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bryson's body was screaming for rest because of her grueling ordeal, but her mind would not allow it.

You sure had to be careful what you wished for. She was about to have exactly what she'd been fantasizing about—time alone with Karla so she could get to know her better. In fact, because of her temporary disability, they wouldn't have much to do *but* get better acquainted.

But she hadn't imagined this at all. They would be spending several *days* alone together, for one thing, not just a few hours. And though she'd be holding Karla in her arms frequently, she didn't really want it to be like this.

Touching her this way, being close enough to kiss her without being able to, would definitely drive her crazy. Every time she picked her up, she became hyperaware of their proximity. Every nerve ending bolted to alert, her heart raced, and her sense of smell became acutely attuned to the subtle fragrance of Karla's shampoo. She ached to study, close up, the soft skin of Karla's cheek, the extraordinary length of her gold-blond eyelashes, and the full, lush lips that invited her own. But if she did, Karla would be able to see how much she wanted her, so she forced herself to look away.

Sooner or later, however, no matter how hard she worked to appear nonchalant, Karla would realize the effect she was having on her. And then what? If that happened she hoped Karla would feel flattered and laugh it off. It'd make for an uncomfortable arrangement if she reacted poorly to the news.

She held her breath when a sound from below broke the quiet. Karla was shifting in bed, trying to get comfortable; a soft groan of

discomfort followed the creak of the futon. *What would you say if you knew how much I want to crawl in next to you right now? Wrap my body around yours and hold you until you fall asleep?* The cabin went silent again, and she relaxed back against her pillow.

It was ludicrous to even consider getting involved with Karla. They didn't have a future, even if Karla *was* interested in being more than just a friend. And she wouldn't be able to detach from a brief affair with her as readily as she disengaged from all the other women she'd been with. Why was that? What made her so different?

She lay awake for another hour trying to find the answer and finally concluded that something about Karla *spoke* to her, connected with a part of her that had been dormant all her life. Chemistry, that's what it was. It just felt right to be around her.



The cabin was still dark and quiet when Karla roused, though she sensed it wasn't too early because she felt well rested. Her feet throbbed dully, but mostly her bladder was extremely full. As much as she hated to disturb Bryson, she didn't have an alternative. "Bryson? Hey, you awake? Bryson?"

"Yeah," came the sleepy reply from the loft. "Yeah, I'm here. You okay?"

"Sorry to get you up, but I need your help. I have to pee like there's no tomorrow."

"Oh, sure. Be right down."

Bryson's feet hit the floorboards of the loft, followed by a muffled groan. Karla craned her neck and saw a soft light flickering from above. Bryson appeared with the kerosene lamp and slowly descended the ladder.

"I bet you're sore as hell, aren't you?" she asked as Bryson came over to her with the light.

"I'll live." She smiled down at her. "Can you wait long enough for me to turn on some lights and throw a couple of logs on the fire?"

"If you're Speedy Gonzalez about it, yes."

Bryson hurried outside to crank on the generator, then hustled about turning on lights and stoking up the woodstove. She was wearing a pair of old navy sweatpants and a thick fleece turtleneck the same

color, and her dark hair was so full of static from the dry crisp air it was sticking up in all directions.

“Do you have another pair of sweats I could borrow?” Karla asked. “I didn’t pack any, and they’d be a lot easier to get on and off than my jeans.”

“Sure.” Bryson headed back up the ladder and returned with a thick pair of emerald-green sweatpants. While Karla pulled them gingerly over her swollen feet, Bryson put water on to boil.

“Ready.” She turned to dangle her feet over the side of the bed. The sweatpants were a pretty good fit at the waist, but the excess length pooled around her ankles and over the bandages.

Bryson came over and smiled at the fit before picking her up. Karla put her arms around Bryson’s neck, and as she did, Bryson stiffened.

“You all right? Your back okay to do this?” She tried to see if Bryson was in pain, but she averted her gaze.

“No, I’m fine.” Bryson strode off in the direction of the screen, carrying her as though nothing was wrong. But her voice was strained and she responded almost too quickly. Something was going on. She set Karla down on the honeypot and withdrew. The pottery mugs clinked as she set about making coffee.

“Ready for a ride back,” she called, and Bryson materialized almost at once.

“What would you like for breakfast?” Bryson asked as she set her back on the futon bed. “I’ve got cereal, pancakes, or eggs with some reindeer sausage and toast.”

“A full-service establishment, I see.” Bryson smiled. “Cereal is fine, don’t go to any bother. And I’m good to wait a while until my stomach wakes up, but coffee sounds heavenly.”

“Coming right up.” Bryson poured two mugs and handed one to Karla, then took hers to the futon chair beside the bed so they could chat.

“Tell me the truth,” Karla insisted.

Bryson nearly choked on her coffee, and a look of surprised panic crossed her features. “Say what?” she asked, wiping at her chin.

“Tell me the truth. You’re so sore you can barely move, though you’re doing your best to hide it. Am I right?”

The corners of Bryson’s mouth twitched upward in a smile. “Maybe a little.” The look of relief that crossed her face was unmistakable, and

Karla wondered what Bryson wasn't saying. What did she think she was referring to?

"Looks like we both need to just relax and heal. You know, you can stretch out here with me. You'd be more comfortable, I'm sure." She patted the pillow beside her invitingly. Maybe she couldn't snuggle up to Bryson the way she wanted to, but having the object of her fascination within reach would sure distract her. "We can read, play a game, whatever you like." Bryson's expression was unreadable, but the fierce reddening of her face and cheeks was obvious. She'd struck a nerve. Her heart began to beat wildly. Was Bryson thinking, hoping for, the same thing she was? Maybe she wasn't misreading her interest at all.

"I'm okay," Bryson finally replied, and got to her feet to fetch them more coffee. "But thanks. You just stretch out and be comfy. Can I get you something to read? What type of book do you like?"

What a perfect opening, she thought. "As a matter of fact, I had a good look at your library the last time I was here and noticed we like a lot of the same authors."

"Oh?" Bryson set down their mugs and walked over to her bookshelves.

"That's what I was referring to that day when I said we had a lot in common."

"I remember. Lars came in just then. I kept meaning to ask you about that. Yeah, I'm a pretty voracious reader. So, what'll it be? Mystery? Sci-fi?"

Karla couldn't keep from smiling, but she was nervous, too, about how Bryson would react. "Anything on one of those eight shelves to your far right is fine. Though I've already read most of Radclyffe's books, and Ann Bannon's."

Bryson froze. The quick succession of emotions that crossed her face in that unguarded moment was almost comical. Surprise and disbelief, then pleased realization hit home. "Oh?" It came out as a squeak, confirming Karla's suspicions.

"That surprise you?"

"Uh, yeah, have to admit it does. I had no idea." Bryson started to jam her hands in her pockets and seemed chagrined to discover her sweatpants didn't have any. Instead, she folded her arms over her chest in a transparent effort to appear unaffected.

Karla laughed. This awkward and shy Bryson, with her wayward hair and disheveled sweats, was adorable. “I kind of gathered that, from your reaction.”

“Reaction?” Bryson repeated, as a new flush of scarlet rose to her cheeks.

“Come over here, will you?”

Bryson looked uncertain, as though she’d just been asked to walk through a room full of snakes. But she shook off her inertia and slowly crossed to stand beside the futon bed, biting her lip.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What do you want to know?” Her voice was soft and husky, like she knew exactly what was coming next.

“Are you...*interested* in me? And don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m asking.”

Bryson stared deeply into her eyes for a long moment before she answered, as though wanting to know if Karla would welcome a *yes*.

“And if I am?”

Excitement fluttered low in Karla’s abdomen. “If you are, then I suspect we’ll get a lot closer in the next few days.”

Bryson’s face lit up with a huge smile and she visibly relaxed. She stepped closer and placed her hand against Karla’s cheek, then slowly bent to kiss her. It wasn’t a *real* kiss, not the long, lingering heat she’d been imagining their first kiss might be. Bryson’s lips touched hers firmly but briefly, a kiss that said *oh, yeah, I’m most definitely interested*. A tease of things to come.

Then she withdrew a step, but her face lost none of the joy and longing that had flared when Karla confirmed their mutual attraction. “I better break out the ibuprofen and a good hot breakfast, then,” Bryson said playfully. “And hope for some fast healing. Because neither of us is in any shape right now to...” She let her gaze travel the length of Karla’s body, outlined beneath the comforter, with open admiration. “Let’s just say I don’t want to be too hampered by frostbitten feet, aching backs, and growling stomachs.”

They grinned at each other for several more seconds before Bryson retreated to the kitchen to cook breakfast, humming to herself.

The prospect of living out some of her recent daydreams about Bryson was thrilling, but daunting. It had been more than four years since she’d slept with anyone besides Abby, and until this moment being

intimate with Bryson had been abstract. A twitch of doubt threatened to deflate her euphoria. Bryson had apparently been with a lot of women. She didn't want to disappoint her.

But as quickly as the thoughts arose, she pushed them aside. Seize the moment and enjoy it while you can, she told herself. No more looking into the future, and no more living in the past.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bryson wanted to give Karla the most romantic day of her life, one she would look back on often with longing and joy. When she was seeing a woman, she usually took flowers on a first date and planned a nice evening. And she especially wanted to favorably impress Karla.

Amazing how a few words made her walk on air. Her body hadn't ached this badly since she'd wrenched it building her cabin. It hurt just to straighten completely. But she felt absolutely *fabulous*, knowing Karla was as interested as she was in *them*.

She'd gone a little overboard with breakfast, using her most precious stores with abandon and cooking enough for three or four people. Fresh scrambled eggs accompanied reindeer sausage, homemade sourdough toast, and blueberry preserves. An elderly client who flew often from her Fairbanks retirement center to Bettles to visit her grandchildren had given her the bread and jam.

"Not ideal conditions for a first date," Bryson said as she carried the plates to the futon. "I'd like to take you to a nice restaurant, maybe go dancing."

Karla smiled and patted the space next to her on the bed. "Aside from our disabilities, I can't imagine a more perfect way to spend some time with you. No distractions. No interruptions. Beautiful setting."

Bryson sat beside her on the bed, her back cushioned with pillows. "I'm so glad you're here. How are the feet?"

"Ibuprofen and giddy delight make for a potent pain-killing combination."

“Giddy delight?” The description warmed her from within, because it was exactly the way she felt, too.

“I’ve had so much on my mind it took me a while to realize what was going on,” Karla said. “How attracted I am to you, and how much I want to get to know you better.”

“I have to admit I didn’t get the best first impression of you, not that I was so charming myself,” Bryson admitted with a smile, and they both laughed at the memory. “But once I got to know you, that changed pretty fast. And boy, especially these last few days since our walk up the mountain, I’ve been thinking about you a *lot*. But I don’t think I’d have ever volunteered that info.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t suspect you’re gay. And you were dealing with so much else in your life.” She didn’t mention the other reason. Karla was a woman she could fall head-over-heels for and have a hard time forgetting. But as much as she feared a broken heart, she dreaded more that they might never know where their feelings might take them.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about you since our hike, too. Bryson, you’ve been more help to me with everything than I could ever begin to tell you. Getting away and meeting you and Maggie have been exactly what I needed to sort things out.” Karla finished her toast and set her plate aside with a contented sigh. “Great breakfast. You know, I could get used to being spoiled like this.”

“You deserve to be, especially after all you’ve done for Maggie and Lars.” Bryson carried their plates to the kitchen and returned with a carafe of coffee.

Karla frowned. “I hope I’m ambulatory before Maggie’s released. She’ll need a few weeks to heal completely from the C-section.”

“Well, if you’re still not fully recovered by the time she brings the baby home, I’ll just have to move in, too, and take care of both of you, since Lars is worthless in the kitchen.”

“Hmm. That offer is almost enough to make me *not* want to get back on my feet.” Karla lay gingerly down on her side facing Bryson, propped up on one elbow.

Bryson moved just as slowly in mirroring her actions. As she shifted her weight, a muscle spasm in her back made her wince.

“Quite a pair, the two of us.” Karla laughed. “Gimpy and Gimpier.”

She laughed, too. “I know, right? Right now I’m completely incapable of doing just about everything I’ve imagined doing with you. The spirit is sooo willing, as they say, but the flesh has definitely seen better days.”

“Oh?” Karla’s tone turned flirty. “I want to hear all about these things you’ve imagined. Let me know what I’m in for.”

“Much rather play that by ear.” She trailed her fingers over Karla’s shoulder and down her arm. “Although I can tell you that stripping off your clothes—very slowly—and exploring every inch of your body is definitely at the top of my list.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.”

“And you’ll notice I said *just* about everything is impossible.” She inched closer until their bodies were nearly touching, slipped her fingertips into Karla’s palm, and Karla’s fingers closed around them. “If I don’t kiss you right now,” Bryson said, “I won’t be able to think straight.”

“Thinking is the last thing I want you to do.” Karla moistened her lips in invitation.

They met halfway in a soft brush of lips, a glancing, tentative joining. Then again, they pressed their mouths against each other just as sweetly. Karla was as patient as Bryson, and apparently equally determined to make every moment of this kiss last.

The tip of Karla’s tongue emerged to stroke Bryson’s lower lip, then she playfully nipped the same spot. The slow seduction was stoking a fire of arousal within her, and each pass of Karla’s tongue fanned the flames higher.

She returned the provocative caresses, skimming her tongue along the curve of Karla’s mouth and sucking lightly, until Karla’s lips parted wider to welcome her into a deep-tongue kiss. They stroked hotly, wetly, and desire poured through her, sending her higher still, until the need for more became almost unbearable.

“Jesus, Bryson,” Karla rasped when they pulled away from each other a few inches to catch their breath. Her lips were rosy red and slightly swollen. “I...I can’t begin to describe how you make me feel when you kiss me like that.”

“Definitely mutual.” The open, unbridled yearning in Karla’s eyes captivated Bryson. She’d seen it before in women, certainly, but it had

never touched her this way. “But dangerous right now, since we can’t carry this further. I’m kind of wound up, if you know what I mean.”

Karla squeezed her hand. “You’d barely have to touch me right now and I’d come.”

The words resonated through her body and settled like a hot fist in the pit of her stomach. “Oh, God, don’t say that. That’s definitely not helping.”

“No?” Karla teased. “How about if I tell you where I’d most like to put my tongue?”

“Cruel. That’s just plain cruel.” Bryson sat up abruptly, grimacing at another spasm in her back, and put her fingers in her ears. “La la la. I can’t hear you. La la la.”

Karla sat up, too, and grabbed for the nearer hand to pull it away. She was laughing. “Okay, okay. I’ll stop. Not doing me any good either, to have those pictures in my head.”

“Maybe we’d better, um, better...” That haze of lust was still radiating from Karla’s eyes, and she was drawn to it like a moth to light. “Will you stop looking at me like that? It turns my brain to mush.”

“Can’t help it,” Karla replied, all innocence.

“In that case, I’ll have to be the strong one.” Bryson forced herself painfully off the bed and stood beside it. “Maybe we should turn this back into a couch for a while?”

“Spoilsport.” Karla poked out her lower lip in a pretend pout.

No matter how much Bryson’s body was hurting, it was still impossibly difficult not to ravage Karla when she looked so damn irresistible. “I should take a look at your feet. Put some more wood on the fire. See about the skiff.” Something, anything to get her mind off how turned on she was. She’d take a cold shower, if she had one.

Karla frowned. “The first two I can agree with. But surely you don’t mean to go back out there, as sore as you are, to look for the boat. It’s a long way, Bryson. I’d hiked a while before you found me.”

Bryson glanced toward the front window. The sun was up, and for the moment, anyway, it wasn’t snowing. “Grant you, I’m not looking forward to it, either. But freeze-up is a tenuous time. The water level can rise a lot from ice jams, and all kinds of debris comes floating downriver. Even if the skiff was grounded and you anchored it, it might come loose. It’d be a big loss for Lars and Maggie.”

“It wouldn’t start,” Karla reminded her.

"I'm pretty mechanically inclined and Lars has tools on board. I can probably get it running again."

Karla didn't look happy. "You sound determined. I can't talk you out of it?"

Bryson sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Karla's cheek. "I'll be fine. I'll take it slow and easy, and won't overexert myself. I promise."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Two or three hours, at least. I should probably go while the weather holds." She threw a trio of thick logs into the woodstove. "Think we can wait until I get back to look at your feet?"

"Yes, they'll be fine. But I'd like to get rid of some of this coffee before you go."

"Oh, right." As Bryson returned to the bed, Karla put her arms out in anticipation. She had a glint of mischief in her eyes. "No funny stuff, now," Bryson warned as she bent to pick her up.

Karla's arms circled her neck again, and this time she twined her fingers playfully in the hair at the back of her neck. Halfway to the screen, she traced her tongue wetly along Bryson's ear before whispering, "I want you so much."

Bryson went weak in the knees. "I won't be held responsible for dropping you if you keep that up." She struggled the rest of the way and set Karla down, suppressing a moan as another shooting pain ripped up her spine.

Karla sensed her stiffening and grew serious. "You really shouldn't go out again, Bryson."

"Have to. And stop worrying, I'll be home before you know it. I'm gonna throw on some warm clothes. Be right back." She took a couple more ibuprofen and returned the futon to a couch before she headed into the loft to layer up for her trek. To her pack of survival gear she added neoprene wetsuit pants, neoprene socks, and a spare pair of boots, since the crossing to the boat was evidently a deep one.

"All set?" she called from outside the screen.

"Come and *get me*," Karla replied breathily, in her most provocative tone.

Bryson rounded the barrier and shook her finger at Karla. "Cruel. That is definitely the word for you. Do you plan to taunt me the entire time you're here?"

Karla grinned. “That’s the plan. Can I help it if I like to make you squirm?”

Steeling herself, Bryson picked up Karla without further comment and headed back to the futon, trying hard not to succumb to the caresses along the back of her neck. She didn’t look at Karla until she got in position to set her down. “Play with fire, and you’ll get burned,” she warned, before kissing Karla again. She tortured them both, putting everything into the kiss, all the pent-up desire that had been building for days.

The frustrated arousal on Karla’s face when she left was priceless.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Bandit dive-bombed Bryson as soon as she emerged from the cabin, and because she didn't offer him breakfast, the raven accompanied her down the trail to the water, squawking as he darted from spruce to spruce just ahead of her.

"Yeah, yeah. Such a rough life. Look at you. If I feed you any more you won't be able to fly."

As though he understood, Bandit buzzed her with a flutter of wings and a loud croak, then vanished into the woods, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

She stopped when she reached the river. The water level was up several inches, and the freeze-up along the bank had advanced another foot since the night before, not surprising since the temperature was in the teens now. Her Super Cub would soon be grounded until everything froze solid; she hoped the lake stayed open until Maggie was discharged so she could get them home in Skeeter's floatplane. On the other hand, she wouldn't mind if they were delayed and Karla was forced to stay longer with her, though their inevitable parting would be all the more difficult.

The snow must have tapered off just after they'd arrived at her cabin, because Bryson could still make out the slight indentation of her snowmobile track from the night before. As she followed it upstream along the bank, she considered the impossible. What if Karla didn't leave? She'd lived a solitary existence for so long it was difficult to imagine things any other way, unless she pictured Karla sharing her bed and her life. Then it was remarkably easy. She could see them in

the morning, Karla snuggled deep in the covers after they'd made love, refusing to emerge until she'd made coffee and stoked up the woodstove. The two of them curled up on the couch together reading, stealing kisses between chapters. Hiking into the backcountry in the spring, when all the baby animals were out exploring with their mothers. Sitting on the porch, sipping wine and watching the sun paint the mountains gold-orange as it dipped toward the horizon. All the things she most enjoyed would be twice as special shared with Karla.

It was folly. Sure, Karla seemed to like it here. She'd raved about their hike up Mathews Dome, and she clearly appreciated the wilderness. But Karla had a well-established life elsewhere. A job, an apartment, and probably lots of friends. And she'd grown up with the modern amenities all outsiders had and were always reluctant to give up.

Also, Karla had been in a long-term relationship until only a month or two ago. She hadn't seen the end coming and had been deeply hurt. Karla probably wouldn't be able to fully trust anyone again enough to commit to them for a long time. She knew as well as Bryson did that what was happening between them would end in a few weeks. Maybe that was one reason she found it appealing. Maybe Bryson was just a way for her to move on and feel better about herself and her situation.

The thought depressed her. She wanted to mean more to Karla than that. But she would happily take what she could get, regardless of Karla's motivations. For many years, she had followed her pop's advice to live life in the moment and seize happiness wherever possible. She'd continue to do so.

The vague snowmobile track she'd been following ended at the large boulder where she'd left Karla. The remnants of her footprints beyond were much less distinct, disappearing entirely in the open places and visible only as faint impressions where she'd passed beneath thick clusters of trees. But she had a keen sense of direction and well-developed tracking skills, and was able to follow the footprints along the riverbank to the entrance into the deeper woods, where she'd found Karla.

It was a long shot, but she had to try to find the necklace. Carefully and patiently she picked her way along, circling when she lost the tracks until she found them again, until at last she came upon the downed tree

where she'd first discovered Karla. She said a prayer as she got on her hands and knees to sweep the snow aside, and soon the sight of a gold chain peeking out of the white powder rewarded her.

Elated, she angled back toward the river and continued upstream, barely noticing the ache in her legs and back from carrying Karla the night before. But her brief euphoria dissipated when she spotted the skiff and realized what she was up against.

The rise in the water level would help her get the skiff off the gravel bar and back down the river. But crossing to it would be a bitch, even with neoprene on. She'd be punching through ice for the first and last few steps, and she'd have to go slow over the rocky bottom when she reached the fast, deep current in the middle or it would sweep her away.

Karla had been damn lucky. Just thinking of what could have happened chilled her, but she admired Karla even more. It had taken a lot of courage to face that crossing and make it as far as she had.

Bryson quickly shed her jeans and pulled her neoprene kayak pants on over her lightweight long underwear, then her neoprene socks and waterproof boots, laced as tight as they would go. Shortening her backpack so it rode high on her shoulders, she took a few deep breaths and stomped through the thick ice at the edge. She moved as quickly as she dared, but had to slow when she got in over her knees and began to feel the impact of the current. The middle was wicked deep, up to the top of her thighs, and she struggled to keep her footing.

The thought that Karla was depending on her to get back in one piece kept her from making stupid mistakes out of haste. She reached the other side and darted into the cabin of the skiff, out of the wind, and quickly changed back into her jeans and warm, dry footwear.

The clouds above her were thickening, and the wind began to pick up as she checked the exterior of the skiff for damage. The dent in the bow that Karla warned her about wasn't too bad; the boat was still watertight. The engine was balky but she managed to get it going on the fourth try. Things had probably happened so fast that Karla had flooded it.

Her final obstacle was getting the boat back in the water and to her place without further problems. The water already lapped against the bow and was only a few inches from the starboard side, so she didn't

have to move the skiff much to get it afloat. Fortunately, Lars had a winch on board that should do the job nicely. She hooked it up and was headed downriver a half hour later.



“Miss me?”

The nearly four hours Bryson was gone had seemed an eternity. “Talk about understatement,” Karla replied. “Any problems? Did you get the skiff? How do you feel?” Everything rushed out.

Bryson laughed as she hung her coat and backpack on the pegs by the door and shed her boots. “No, yes, and don’t take it personally if I suddenly fall asleep on you mid-sentence. Kinda beat.”

“I’m amazed you’re still standing. I was getting worried. I expected you a lot sooner.”

“Took a little detour.” Bryson’s eyes twinkled as she approached the couch. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

Puzzled, Karla complied. Her heart filled with joy as she closed her palm over the familiar cold metal and smooth stone. But she still couldn’t quite believe it until she opened her eyes and saw it was true. “Oh, my God! You found it! How in the world—”

“I knew how much it meant to you. I was lucky.”

“Oh, Bryson!” She clutched the necklace to her heart. “I’d given up hope of ever seeing it again. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Not necessary.” Bryson looked down at her with a very pleased expression, but had dark circles under her eyes. “Seeing your face right now is ample reward.”

“Come sit and relax. You look like you’re ready to collapse.”

Bryson nodded wearily but headed toward the kitchen. “Soon as I get some cocoa poured, you’re on. Join me?”

“Please.”

“How’re you doing? Feet hurting much?”

“Just took a couple more ibuprofen. They’re doing okay.”

“Don’t think there’s much Lars will need to do to the boat,” Bryson informed her. “Seems to run fine. The engine was probably flooded.”

“That’s good news. I want to pay for the repairs.”

“Lars may fight you on that. And he’s got a friend who’ll probably do the work in exchange for a favor. Bartering is really popular up

here.” Bryson carried their cocoa over and sank onto the futon next to her. “Oh, yeah. Feels good to sit.” She laid her head back and closed her eyes with a sigh. “In a minute, we’ll see to those feet.”

When she didn’t move or speak for another couple of minutes, Karla reached over and gently urged Bryson’s head into her lap. Bryson never opened her eyes and was quickly sound asleep.

Karla lightly stroked Bryson’s hair and listened to her soft, steady breathing. *It’s so easy to be with you.*



“You sure about this?” Bryson sounded skeptical. She’d had urged her not to rush things, but after four days of depending on Bryson for absolutely everything, Karla was more than ready to get back on her feet. Not that she minded being carried around, nestled against Bryson’s chest, but her swelling had disappeared long ago, and she had only a few blisters around her toes that were responding well to antibiotic ointment. It was time. The sooner she convinced Bryson she was back to normal, the sooner they might take their budding relationship to the next level. Bryson’s soreness had faded, but she’d refused to consider being intimate with Karla until she was healed, too.

They’d spent their days and evenings getting to know each other, sharing stories of their lives and exchanging likes and dislikes. Bryson made her laugh until her sides hurt, and they had ample opportunities for long, lingering kisses that left her anxious for more.

“Stop being so protective. I’m a nurse, remember?” She eased off the futon and gingerly put her weight on her feet. “Feels okay.” Bryson was standing beside her uncertainly, ready to support her if needed. “Just a little sore.”

“Guess you know best. But I’m happy to keep toting you around.”

Karla put her arms around Bryson’s neck. “I know. But I hate being an invalid. I love how you’ve pampered me, but I don’t need you to be my nursemaid any more.” She pulled Bryson’s head down and kissed her passionately. “I have other plans for your seemingly endless energy.”

Bryson’s arms encircled her waist. “That so?” she asked with a smile.

“Yup. And if you insist on sleeping in the loft again, I’m going to crawl up there with you. I’m tired of sleeping alone.”

“Told you, I toss and turn a lot. I thought you’d be more comfortable—”

“That’s not the real reason. You didn’t want to succumb to temptation, that’s all. You’re not fooling me.” She poked Bryson playfully in the chest. “No more delays, huh? If I don’t get my hands on you soon, I’ll spontaneously combust.”

“Hmm. Well, we can’t have that.” Bryson initiated the next kiss, another heated exchange that left them both breathless. “I want you too, Karla. So much. So damn much.”

“Hold that thought.” If Bryson kept looking at her like that she wouldn’t be able to keep to her plan. “First things first. Can you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Mind drawing me a bath?”

Bryson grinned wickedly. “Definitely my pleasure. Damn shame the tub isn’t big enough for two.”

“I had the same thought. But we can take turns soaping each other.”

“Mmm. Sounds like a very nice alternative.” Bryson kissed her on the forehead and moved out of their embrace. “I’ll put some water on and get things set up.”

Karla sat back on the futon and removed the bandages from her feet while Bryson set the oval galvanized tub in front of the woodstove. It took a while to heat the water and fill it, and all the while, Bryson kept glancing her way with a goofy grin on her face. As a finishing touch, Bryson poured fragrant bath salts into the tub and stirred the water, then hung a couple of large towels and a terry-cloth robe from a chair near the stove.

“Ready for me?”

Bryson chuckled. “That’s a loaded question. But, yes.”

As Karla walked slowly toward the tub, she reached with trembling hands to undo the buttons on her emerald cardigan. Nervous excitement jangled her nerves and sent her pulse racing.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Bryson quickly closed the distance and took Karla’s hands in hers. “I’ve been undressing you in my mind too long to miss out on the real thing.” She led Karla the rest of the way and

stood facing her. "I'd like to take all day doing this," she added as she slowly unbuttoned Karla's sweater, "but I don't want you to get cold." She kissed the hollow at the base of Karla's throat while she slipped the cardigan off her shoulders.

"The way you get my blood boiling, that seems like a long shot."

Bryson's hands slipped beneath her turtleneck and paused there, cool fingertips grazing the warm flesh of Karla's rib cage. Her skin was so hypersensitive the light caress was electrifying, the unvarnished desire in Bryson's eyes amplifying the sensation.

"Trying to drive me crazy, aren't you?" she asked, when Bryson's hands skimmed over her sides to her back, then dipped beneath the waistband of her sweats.

"Can't help myself." Bryson's voice was husky as she squeezed Karla's ass.

"You know, the sooner you get me into this water, the sooner I can get out of it and into a bed."

"There is that," Bryson readily agreed. She pulled the turtleneck over Karla's head, then slowly removed the sweatpants, her fingernails etching light trails down her thighs and calves as she stooped to slip them down and off. Beneath, Karla wore only a sheer beige bra and panties, so transparent they left nothing to the imagination.

As Bryson's gaze drifted over her body, Karla heard her soft gasp of appreciation and noted the swift rise and fall of her chest. "Beautiful," Bryson murmured, as she reached behind Karla to unhook the clasp of her bra. The panties soon followed, and Bryson's pupils dilated as she withdrew a step to admire Karla's naked body. "You take my breath away."

"I'm awfully glad you approve." She shuddered, uncertain whether the cool air or the almost predatory look in Bryson's eyes caused her reaction. Bryson started to reach for her, but she tapped the outstretched hand and stepped into the tub. It was so small she had to bend her knees to fit, and the water barely covered her breasts, but it was gloriously warm, and the enticing aroma of the bath salts made the experience almost luxurious.

Bryson knelt beside the tub and rolled up her sleeves. "Where would you like me to start?" she asked mischievously as she dipped a washcloth into the water and lathered it with scented gel.

"Here." Karla stretched out her legs and rested them on the edge

of the tub. Bryson ran the washcloth over them in circles, but kept her gaze fixed hungrily on Karla's breasts. Karla looked down, not surprised to find her nipples erect. "Guess I don't have to tell you what your touch is doing to me."

"Very hot." Bryson directed the washcloth up Karla's thigh, over her stomach, and then into the valley between her breasts. She leaned forward to kiss Karla, and as her tongue pushed insistently into her mouth, she played the washcloth over Karla's breasts, then descended between her legs.

When it skimmed over her clit, Karla's pelvis rose involuntarily to meet it. A moan escaped into their enjoined mouths, and Bryson answered it with another teasing pass across her sex. Karla broke the kiss and wrestled the cloth from Bryson's hand. "Dangerous," she gasped. "Maybe I better finish this. Will you do my hair?"

A flicker of disappointment crossed Bryson's face, but she smiled knowingly and nodded. "Of course." While she wet Karla's hair from a pitcher of warm water and rubbed shampoo into her scalp, Karla shakily ran the washcloth over the rest of her body, avoiding further stimulation to her already oversensitized breasts and groin.

"Is this torturing you as much as it is me?" Bryson asked as she rinsed Karla's hair with more warm water.

"Torture is sure the word for it. And now it's your turn, I believe." As she boosted herself from the tub, Bryson enveloped her in a warm towel, drying her thoroughly before wrapping the towel around her head like a turban. Then she helped her into the robe, kissing her lightly on the forehead as she tied the sash.

"Drawing a fresh bath for me will take a few minutes," Bryson said, looking down at her. "You may get chilled. Sure you don't want to warm up the bed while I bathe? I'll be very fast."

Much as she'd looked forward to giving Bryson a little payback, her bare legs were already raising gooseflesh, and the idea of watching Bryson bathe from beneath the thick down comforter held even greater appeal at the moment. They would have ample time for touching soon. "Maybe you're right."

While she converted the couch back into a bed, Bryson emptied the tub with a large bucket, ferrying the tepid water outdoors in several trips. By the time she had the tub refilled, Karla was ensconced

comfortably between the sheets, pillows propped up so she could get an unobstructed view of Bryson stripping for her bath.

Bryson ran a hand through the water to test the temperature. Satisfied, she hurriedly pulled off her socks and her sweatshirt, then reached for the fly on her jeans. She'd been so busy with her preparations that she hadn't looked directly at Karla until that instant. From the way Bryson suddenly froze, it was clear she could see in Karla's eyes how stirred up she was.

Bryson returned the intense stare as she resumed undressing, sliding the jeans down her legs and shedding her long-sleeved T-shirt to reveal black panties and a matching bra. Bryson also quickly tossed these aside, but hesitated before she stepped into the tub, her wide grin acknowledging how much she was enjoying the way she'd mesmerized her audience.

Karla realized her mouth was hanging open and quickly closed it as a blush warmed her cheeks. She was awestruck at the perfection of Bryson's naked body. Though well aware that Bryson was in superior shape—no other woman she knew could have carried her like that—she was still not fully prepared for the exquisitely toned lean physique. Not an ounce of fat anywhere. Her thighs looked hard as rocks, the muscles of her shoulders and upper arms were finely sculpted, and the flat plain of her stomach provided the perfect contrast to the curves of her high, round breasts. The neatly trimmed triangle of dark hair at the apex of her thighs made Karla's mouth water. "Hurry," she urged, when she regained her wits enough to speak.

Bryson chuckled as she lowered herself into the water, but Karla could tell she was just as eager as she was. She washed up and dried herself in record time, then jogged toward the bed.

Karla pulled the comforter back in anticipation, but before Bryson could dive in next to her, the shrill ring of Bryson's satellite phone broke the quiet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*N*ow?" Bryson glared at the phone as it continued to ring. She snatched up her robe and shrugged it on, glancing at Karla, whose face registered the same frustration at the interruption that she felt. "This can't be happening," she muttered as she picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Hey, Bryson. Please tell me Karla is staying with you." The connection wasn't very good; Lars's voice kept cutting in and out. She'd actually heard only the first syllable of her name, and she'd had to fill in the *with*. If he'd said anything after that, she'd missed it.

She turned toward Karla. "Yes, Lars. Karla is with me. We're fine." She spoke slowly and distinctly, figuring Lars would likely have the same problematic reception on his end.

Karla smiled playfully. She was lying on her side, propped up on one elbow. The comforter barely covered her breasts. Bryson's stomach fluttered.

"Great, I—" Static cut off Lars's voice, then she caught the words "days, so got a little worried when she didn't answer."

"Bad reception. Karla's been here several days." Bryson put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Do you want me to tell him about your frostbite?"

"Not now. I'm over the worst of it. They'd just worry."

After several more seconds of static, so long she wondered if they'd been disconnected, Lars's voice cut through, "for two days."

"I lost you," she said. "Repeat that."

"The baby's doing great, and we just got word they're ready to discharge Maggie too because her BP's been good for two days."

“Great news. When?” She hoped she sounded more enthusiastic than she felt. Though relieved and happy that Maggie and Karson were well enough to leave the hospital, their homecoming also meant her time with Karla was about to end. She was heartsick and didn’t try to hide her feelings. Karla read in her face that the news was a mixed blessing, for her own expression darkened.

The answer she most did not want to hear came through absurdly clear. “They’re filling out the paperwork now. Can you come right away? We can meet you at the airport.”

“Hang on, Lars.” She glanced at her watch and calculated the amount of daylight remaining. If she left right away, and the floatplane was available, they’d get back to Bettles around sunset. “If Skeeter’s plane is good to go, I can be there in three and a half, four hours. If it’ll be much longer, I’ll leave a message at the Bettles Air desk.”

She hated the disappointment that clouded Karla’s face as the news registered.

“Terrific, Bryson,” Lars said. “See you soon.”

“They’re coming home, right? That’s wonderful.” Karla’s effort to smile was only half-hearted.

“But I have to leave now,” Bryson said as she approached the bed. “That part really sucks.”

“I second that.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and took Karla’s hand. “Do you want to come along? Are you well enough to?”

Karla looked down at her feet. “I shouldn’t be doing a lot of walking, and I’d be in real trouble if my feet refroze, but I should go.”

“We can insulate them well, and you don’t have to walk any more than you want to. But isn’t it better to stay here and rest?”

“With Maggie’s BP problems and the baby only days old, I should go along.” Karla squeezed her hand. “Besides, I’m not ready to let you out of my sight.” This time her smile was full and genuine.

“Sounds like you’ve made up your mind.” Bryson gave Karla a quick kiss. “And for the record, I’m not anxious to say good-bye, either.”

They changed into warm clothes, and Bryson handed Karla a pair of Moon boots to wear. The lightweight Italian footwear was the most comfortable choice possible because it was designed to fit several sizes, and was also rated to thirty-five degrees below zero.

"We better take your things," Bryson hefted Karla's duffel and threw the strap over her shoulder so it would hang off her back, "since you'll be staying with Lars and Maggie from now on."

Karla frowned. "I know they need me, and I'm anxious to spend time with my new niece—"

"But the timing really sucks."

"Yeah."

As soon as they hit the porch, Bryson scooped Karla into her arms in their now-familiar way, insisting that she be carried to the Cub.

"This really isn't necessary," Karla protested as she automatically wrapped her arms around Bryson's neck. "I can certainly walk that far."

"Indulge me." Bryson gave her a mock-stern look, then kissed her soundly, silencing further arguments. By the time they started down the trail to the plane, she'd once again turned Karla's insides to mush.

She leaned her head against Bryson's shoulder. "I've never been so spoiled in my life."

"Long overdue, then, I'd say."

When they reached the river, Bryson paused at the water's edge, worry and concern on her face.

"What's the matter?" Karla followed her gaze to the Cub, which was covered with snow and ice.

"Looks like this will be my last flight out of here for a while," Bryson said, as she carried Karla across the ice-encrusted shallows to the gravel bar. "My little runway's getting too iffy for wheels. I'll have to wait until the river freezes solid and I can use my skis."

The amount of ice along the bank and around the gravel bar had increased significantly while Karla had been staying with Bryson, and huge chunks of ice floated downstream with the current. "What're you saying?"

"I won't be able to get back here." Bryson deposited Karla into the passenger seat and belted her in. "I can get all of you home in Skeeter's plane, but then I'll have to stay in Bettles for a while. Happens every year at this time."

"For how long?"

"Hard to say. Might be a couple days, might be weeks. All depends on Mother Nature." Bryson didn't look any happier about it than she was.

"That's certainly not welcome news," she said, dejected.

"I know. Sit tight for a while, I've got to clean off the plane."

It took Bryson forty minutes to clear away the snow and ice, warm the engine, and go through her preflight checklist. All the while, Karla tried to fight off the growing knot of apprehension in her stomach. The skies were clear, but she'd been in Alaska long enough to know that could change in an instant.

"All set?" Bryson knocked the snow from her boots and climbed into the seat in front of her.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Bryson glanced at her in the rearview mirror as she belted herself in and donned her headset. "We'll be fine. Think about something else. Think about tonight."

"Tonight? You mean sleeping alone at Maggie and Lars's and missing you like crazy? Gee, thanks."

Bryson didn't respond right away, she was too busy preparing for liftoff. She slowly taxied the Cub to the far edge of the gravel bar and turned around. The distance to the other icy end of the makeshift runway seemed impossibly short to Karla, but Bryson somehow got the plane airborne with only inches to spare.

"I guess I forgot to mention that it'll be dark by the time we get back to Bettles," Bryson said once they were at cruising altitude above the mountain peaks. "We'll all have to overnight at the Den and continue to the lake in the morning."

"Which means?"

Instead of answering her, Bryson clicked on her microphone. "A2024B Piper to BTT. Skeeter, you there?" She listened for a moment, then continued. "Headed your way and will be there in twenty. Maggie's been discharged. Can I use the Cessna to pick them up?" After another pause, she said, "Great. And can you do me another favor? Ask Grizz to hold two rooms for us for tonight?" She listened again. "Thanks, Skeeter. See you shortly."

"Two rooms?"

Bryson grinned at her in the rearview mirror. "Was it presumptuous to think you wouldn't mind staying with me tonight?"

"Let's just say you sure know how to keep my mind on something other than where I am right now."



Skeeter's plane was fueled and ready by the time they reached Bettles, so they were quickly underway to Fairbanks, and for this leg Karla occupied the copilot's seat again. It was eminently preferable to the setup in the Cub, because she could focus her attention entirely on Bryson instead of the expanse of desolate wilderness outside her window.

"Think Maggie and Lars will mind if I insist on having you all to myself tonight?" Bryson asked. "I'm thinking maybe dinner in our room, a nice bubble bath for two—"

"And then hours and hours of nonstop wild sex," Karla added with a grin, enjoying the way her words brought a flush of pink to Bryson's cheeks. "Sounds perfect."

"I'm trying to fly, here," Bryson warned. "And you're definitely hindering my ability to concentrate."

"I'll be good," Karla promised. When Bryson turned to her with skeptical raised eyebrows, she added, in a much more seductive tone, "I'll be very, *very* good."

The cabin was warm enough that Bryson had her gloves off, and her knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering column. "Not helping," she said, shifting her weight uncomfortably in her seat. "Like I said, you definitely have a heck of a cruel streak inside that luscious exterior."

"Luscious, eh?"

Bryson glanced her way and let her gaze drift lazily down Karla's body, though most of it was hidden beneath her thick down coat. "Mmm hmm," she said, licking her lips. "I can't wait to see if you taste as yummy as you look."

The words warmed her much more efficiently than the heater in the floatplane. "Now who's being cruel?"

"Truce, then." Bryson laughed and returned her attention to flying. "For now. Once I get you alone tonight, all bets are off."

"We'll see who tortures whom. Just wait." Their flirting had left them both with excited grins that were impossible to erase. Karla couldn't remember feeling this profoundly giddy sense of anticipation before, not even with Abby. "Can't this plane go any faster?"



"I can't believe how much she's grown in just a few days." Karla reached over the seat back to offer an outstretched finger to her niece, and Karson wrapped her tiny hand around it. The baby was well bundled up against the cold in fleecy pink pajamas, stocking cap, and a thick quilted infant blanket. Lars had been forced to leave Maggie's side for the first time the day before to buy the items, along with the newborn safety seat, because they'd left all their baby things at home.

"I think she wanted to leave the hospital as much as I did." Maggie held up a bright red rattle shaped like a key and dangled it in front of the baby's face. Karson stared up at it, her distinctive hazel and gold-flecked eyes round. "Can't wait to get you home and in that new crib your father made for you, little one."

The plane dropped a couple of feet when it hit a small pocket of turbulence, and Karla clutched at the seatback until it subsided, then turned to quickly refasten her seat belt.

"After I drop you all off tomorrow, I'll hike home to get the skiff," Bryson offered as she gained some altitude to smooth out their ride. They'd already relayed the story of Karla's frostbite adventure, and Bryson had updated Lars on the advanced state of the freeze-up in their area. "I have to pack a bag anyway, since I don't know how long I may be stuck in Bettles." She glanced at Karla as she said this, and her eyes were sad.

"Sure you don't mind?" Lars asked. "I can go with you. Mags will be okay with Karla for a few hours."

"Not necessary," Bryson insisted. "No reason for both of us to go. Let's just hope the weather holds so we can lift off at first light and get the skiff home and out of the water before I have to leave."

"Appreciate the help," Lars replied. "Be a bitch to get the boat out by myself, even with the winch. And by the time Maggie'd be able to help, it'd be icebound for sure."

"Couldn't be worse timing for our homecoming." Maggie frowned. "I'd hoped you could spend some time with us, Bryson."

Karla and Bryson looked at each other with the same isn't-that-the-truth expression.

"Keep me posted on when the ice is safe, and don't worry. I'll fly

in first chance I get and stay as long as I can.” She gave Karla a wink the others couldn’t see.

Never in her wildest imagination did Karla think she would wish for a long solid stretch of bitter-cold temperatures. But if that’s what it took to get Bryson back to the bush and in her arms, it was certainly fine with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Den was noisy with patrons, and most of the gathered locals jumped up when they came in, anxious to see the Rasmussens' new arrival. Several people also immediately pled for an impromptu performance of the Bettles Band, since all its members were stranded there for the evening, anyway, and everyone was desperate for any form of entertainment.

"I'm game," Lars said. "It's still early, and who knows when we'll get back here."

"We're in," Grizz agreed. "Ellie's been putting in a lot of hours learning 'Someone to Watch Over Me' and 'April in Paris,' and is anxious to try them out. Bryson?"

Bryson wanted only to slip upstairs with Karla, to pick up where they'd left off and enjoy every moment of their limited time together. But it was hard to say no to the eager faces of her friends. She looked over at Karla, who seemed to sense her inner struggle, because she gave Bryson a shrug and resigned grin that said *Go ahead. I understand.*

"Okay by me," she reluctantly agreed. "But it's been a long day and we need to get an early start tomorrow, so let's make it just a set or two, huh?"

"That's the business," Grizz said. "I'll get things set up."

Bryson was about to pull Karla aside for a few words of apology when she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find Geneva looking up at her with her familiar come-on smile.

"Hey, there, stranger. Nice surprise." She wrapped her arms around Bryson's waist before Bryson could react. "Need a place to sleep tonight?"

The stark contrast between her feelings for Geneva and the woman who'd captured her every waking thought in recent weeks made Bryson suddenly aware of how deeply Karla had gotten under her skin. She was falling in love with her.

Karla was watching the two of them intently from the nearby table she and Maggie had claimed to watch the band perform. It didn't matter that Karla would be leaving Bettles in a matter of weeks, perhaps forever. Bryson used this opportunity to set the record straight on where her heart resided.

She extricated herself from Geneva's embrace and faced her with a serious expression. "Gen, you know I think the world of you, right?"

"Uh-oh." Geneva's pleased demeanor faded. "Something tells me I won't like what's coming next."

"You're a good friend, and I hope that'll never change. But you need to understand—now more than ever—that there's no chance of anything romantic between us, ever again." She let her focus drift from Geneva to Karla, knowing that Gen would follow her gaze. As she'd hoped, Karla was still riveted to their exchange.

"Oh. I see." Geneva's subdued tone made it clear she grasped that something was different. "Sounds serious."

"Doesn't seem to matter that she won't be here long," Bryson admitted. "She's become very important to me."

Geneva exhaled a soft sigh. "In that case..." She kissed Bryson on the cheek. "I wish you both all the best, Bry. I mean that. She's a lucky woman." And with that, she squeezed past Bryson to return to work without looking back.

Bryson started toward Karla and Maggie's table, but Lars intercepted her halfway. "We're ready. Ellie wants to start with 'Someone to Watch Over Me,' if that's okay with you."

"Be right there," she answered, continuing toward Karla. A handful of townspeople was gathered around their table, congratulating Maggie and oohing and aahing over the baby, so Bryson stooped beside Karla's chair. "Sorry about this," she said in a low voice. "Guess dinner in our room is out. Why don't you order, and I'll grab something when we take a break."

"I'll do that. Just don't wear yourself out," Karla whispered close to Bryson's ear. "I have plans for you later."

Bryson headed toward the stage with a smile so firmly planted on her lips she couldn't possibly erase it.

They played a set of jazz standards to wild applause from the audience, none more enthusiastic than the clapping at Karla and Maggie's table. Bryson wolfed down a quick bowl of stew at their break, but declined Grizz's offer of a cold brew to go with it. She noticed Karla was sticking to cola as well and wondered if she, too, didn't want any alcohol to dull their enjoyment of the hours to come.

"Short set this time, guys, okay?" she told the other band members when they returned to the stage. If she didn't get to touch Karla soon, she'd go out of her mind.

When they announced they were done for the night, the crowd roared for an encore, but by then they were all ready to quit. Grizz and Ellie had orders backed up, and Lars was anxious to join Maggie, who'd taken a crying Karson to their room to put her down for the night.

"You have quite a talented ensemble," Karla said as Bryson sank into the chair Maggie had vacated.

"We have fun, and fortunately there's not a lot of competition to judge us by. But it was tough for me to concentrate tonight."

"Oh? And why's that?" Karla feigned ignorance, but the impish twitch at the corners of her mouth told Bryson she knew very well where her mind had been all evening.

"Come on, tease," Bryson said, taking her by the hand to lead her upstairs. "I got Grizz to give us the best room in the house."

"Something special about it, is there?"

"You'll see."

The room was larger than the one Karla had stayed in before and was evidently designed for couples seeking a romantic getaway. Scented candles adorned the headboard of the king-sized bed, and the private bathroom came equipped with a pair of plush fleecy robes and a deep Jacuzzi built for two.

Karla took it all in, noting the special touches she suspected Bryson had arranged: the bubble bath beside the tub and the basket of goodies on the table by the window containing fruit, cheese and crackers, and imported chocolates. Beside it was a bucket of ice containing a bottle of white wine and a half-dozen sodas.

"You approve?" Bryson said from behind her.

Karla turned to thank her for her thoughtfulness, but before she could speak, she was enveloped in Bryson's embrace, her mouth captured in a searing kiss. Bryson's hands clutched her ass, drawing their bodies firmly together, and within seconds she didn't even pretend to speak.

Just as her knees began to buckle, Bryson scooped her up and carried her to the bed.

"Now, where were we when we were so rudely interrupted?" Bryson released her onto the edge of the mattress. Despite Bryson's light tone, her eyes were undeniably intense as she stood over Karla, her gaze fixed on the soft swell of breasts beneath her sweater.

"I believe we were both naked, for starters."

"Ah. Indeed we were. It's all coming back to me now." Bryson bent to remove Karla's boots and her own. Then she slowly began to undress, just out of arm's reach, obviously enjoying the effect of her prolonged striptease on her audience.

Karla found it difficult to draw a deep breath. With each garment removed, her heartbeat accelerated, the drumming in her ears obliterating all other sounds, until finally Bryson stood before her, fully exposed. "You have such an amazing body."

"Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying the show, because it's absolutely killing me not to pin you to that bed right now until you beg for mercy."

"Keep talking like that, and we may have a competition to see who pins whom."

Bryson laughed and pulled Karla to her feet. "Your turn." Karla started to reach for her, but Bryson dodged her with a grin and hopped onto the bed. "The sooner you get undressed," she said, climbing between the sheets, "the sooner I can...uh..." She gaped when she saw how fast Karla was peeling off her clothes.

By the time she stripped, Bryson's expression had turned from mirthful to smoldering. "Come here," she beckoned, pulling aside the coverlet.

Karla moved into Bryson's outstretched arms, and Bryson's mouth claimed hers in a slow, sensual kiss as their bodies came together along their full length. As the kiss built in heat and intensity, Bryson rolled on top of her and thrust a firmly muscled thigh between her legs.

Arousal burned in Karla as they clung to each other, tongues

stroking deep, their full passion flaring. A bonfire of need and yearning and surrender engulfed her. When she raked her nails down Bryson's back, Bryson broke the kiss and threw her head back in ecstasy as a sound—half groan and half growl—reverberated from the back of her throat. Karla clenched Bryson's lean, muscled ass, and her hips rose to maximize the pressure of their pelvis-to-pelvis contact. Bryson looked down at her, brown eyes darkened by desire and lips rosy and swollen from their kisses. The hunger in her expression sent a thrill through Karla, ratcheting her excitement even higher.

"How you make me feel..." she gasped, heaving for air. It wasn't the kisses alone that left her breathless. The rush of adrenaline was dizzying, too. "...never like this. Never."

Bryson slowly nodded, and a combination of joy and relief came over her face. She bore down upon Karla again, kissing her soundly and shifting her weight to the side so she could caress her with one hand. Despite the ferocity of their kiss, Bryson's touch was maddeningly light as her fingers trailed down Karla's shoulder to her upper arm, then down her hip and thigh, and back up to her chest. When they reached the outer curve of her breast, she moaned. Bryson gently bit her lower lip as she claimed the breast with the full contact of her palm, producing a sudden rush of sensation. Her nipple was instantly erect, and moisture surged between her legs.

Bryson must have felt it, too, because she thrust her thigh more firmly against Karla's center, rocking against her, creating a delicious friction that brought her dangerously close to climax. Another minute or two and she would have come, but Bryson stopped to move down her body, trailing wet kisses from her neck to her collarbone, then down her cleavage. Bryson's tongue traced the curve of one breast, and then her mouth closed over the nipple and sucked, hard. Karla's hips bucked upward as she raked circles into Bryson's back with her nails.

Another surge of wetness poured out of her as Bryson lavished her other breast with her mouth. The maelstrom of sensations brought her once again to the precipice; she bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

Her enormous need for release was intolerable. She wanted to make this incredible buildup of excitement last, but she was incapable of self-control. She grabbed Bryson's hair and pushed her head lower as she opened her legs. "Please, Bryson. I'm so close."

When Bryson delivered her with measured and well-placed strokes

of her tongue, she cried out and clenched at the sheets, then collapsed in a fog of overload. As she calmed and caught her breath, Bryson sweetly kissed her thighs and abdomen, working her way back up Karla's body to lie on her side beside her.

Karla rolled into her embrace and buried her face in the soft warm skin at the base of Bryson's throat. Her body thrummed with aftershocks. "Oh my," she whispered, gripping Bryson tight.

"You're amazing." Bryson kissed her forehead. "Sooo hot."

"What you do to me, Bryson. What you do to me." She couldn't begin to convey how utterly and completely she *felt* when Bryson touched her. Her body, head to toe, her senses, her mind, her imagination. All of her roared to life like she had been dozing too long. Full speed ahead, all the bits and pieces of her working in harmony to achieve the perfect orgasm.

"I can say the same." Bryson clenched her jaw. The effect of Karla's touch was unbelievably powerful. Though she held Karla with infinite tenderness, her body still shrieked with arousal. She was so far gone, falling hard and fast, first enamored by Karla's loveliness and vulnerability, then enchanted by her humor, open honesty, and strength. It had taken such courage for her to deal with all she'd been slammed with. No matter what the challenge, Karla faced it with quiet resolve.

Bryson so wanted to freeze this moment. Everything she'd dreamed she should feel—that spark, that special chemistry, that gut instinct that this was the one—she was finally experiencing. Why now? Why Karla? It seemed so unfair. Bryson memorized every detail. The softness of Karla's hair and skin, the aroma of her perfume, mixed with the scent of their arousal, the sound Karla made when she climaxed, and the heightened sensations of her own body.

Karla stirred from her lassitude, disengaging slightly from their embrace to place a long, wet kiss at the hollow of Bryson's neck, then another just below her ear. "My turn." Her voice was husky and full of promise.

She shifted to lie on top of Bryson and resumed her kisses, down her neck, chest, and stomach. As she did, she cupped Bryson's breasts, teasing the nipples to erection with strokes of her thumbs. Bryson's pulse quickened and her breathing accelerated, loud in her ears. The pressure building at the juncture of her thighs was incredible. When

Karla's mouth closed over one sensitive nipple and sucked, she ground her pelvis upward and tightened her grip in Karla's hair. "More."

Karla sucked harder and tweaked the sensitive nipple lightly between her teeth. Bryson groaned once, then again when Karla gave the other breast equal treatment.

"I can tell how close you are," Karla murmured as she moved lower. Bryson writhed beneath her, desperate for relief.

"Yes," she choked. "Ready beyond words."

She felt Karla's smile against her lower abdomen and heard her sharp intake of breath. "I love how you smell," Karla said, just before her mouth closed over Bryson's sex.

As Bryson went rigid in the first throes of orgasm, she clutched at the headboard to anchor herself. Teeth clenched, she rode the rush of release like a wave, building and building until the crest shattered her, sapping her strength.

They lay for another long while wrapped in each other's arms, exchanging sweet kisses and confiding specifics about their sexual fantasies and preferences. The provocative sharing led to several more hours of lovemaking: playful and flirty, then heated and raw, as they indulged each other in every way possible.

For once, Bryson was grateful for the long nights of winter. First light would mark the end of their blissful privacy and the beginning of what she feared would be an unbearable separation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

December 14

“Feels like some sort of cosmic conspiracy is trying to keep us apart.” Bryson absently picked at the label of her bottle, her second Black Fang that evening. She’d barely touched her plate of smoked-salmon tacos.

“We haven’t had a warm spell like this one since ’88,” Grizz said as he poured two drafts. “Got to forty in Fairbanks in the middle of December. Same reason then, too. Some weird high-pressure system over Seattle.”

“Global warming, that’s what it is.” Skeeter scowled from the barstool beside her.

Bryson continued as though she hadn’t heard. “Hated missing Thanksgiving with them.”

November had been the mildest in two decades in Alaska, and December was shaping up the same. They got a few frigid days here and there, but just about the time the ice on the lakes and rivers was getting thick enough to support a plane, temps would rise above freezing and everything would soften up again.

For the last month, she’d been stuck in Bettles and confined to airport runs, only able to contact the Rasmussen cabin through their satellite phone. Karla’s time in Alaska was ticking away, and Mother Nature seemed to be cheating Bryson out of a rare chance at happiness.

“Keep your chin up.” Grizz laid a massive callused hand on top of

Bryson's across the bar. "Forecast this morning says we've got a long spell of cold comin' in."

"Karla know how bad you're pining away for her?" Skeeter teased with a grin.

Bryson shrugged. "Pretty clear we're crazy about each other. But not like I've really said anything much. What's there to say? We both know this is only a brief thing. Talking about it'll just make it tougher to say good-bye when she goes."

"Or talking about it might give her good reason to come back often," Grizz said.

"She's already got that, with Maggie and Lars and the baby. I don't think it's a question of her not *wanting* to come back." Bryson took a sip of her lukewarm beer. "She's a nurse, so what does she get—two, three weeks vacation a year, tops? And it's not cheap to get here from Atlanta, I'm sure. Realistically, I'll probably be lucky if I get to see her a few days every couple of years."

"That's a damn shame."

"Tell me about it."

"What about you going down there to see her?" Grizz asked.

"Been thinking about that. Hell of a long way by Cub, and can't say as I'd relish trying to get anywhere near the air traffic at Hartsfield. But maybe I could do a trip or two a year. If she'd want me to, that is."

Geneva materialized beside her elbow with an empty tray. "White wine, a Lookout Stout, and a Jack Daniel's, neat," she relayed to Grizz before turning to Bryson. "Why wouldn't Karla want you to visit? From the look on her face the morning you all left, it's clear she likes you as much as you like her." There was no malice or jealousy in the remark. In fact, Geneva had surprised Bryson by supporting her during the weeks since she'd taken the Rasmussens home.

"She'll meet someone else before long. As she should. She's beautiful, bright, fun to be with. I'm sure she'll have a lot of opportunities to hook up in Atlanta." The seeming inevitability that Karla would move on depressed her. She conjured up a vision of Karla at a club, dancing close to some attractive stranger, and felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. No way would she be able to feign happiness at seeing her with someone else, as Geneva apparently could.

"I think you're underestimating yourself, Bry. All I'm sayin'." Geneva set the drinks on her tray and returned to her customers.

The phone rang behind the bar and Grizz wiped his hands on a towel to answer it. "The Den." As he listened, a big smile spread across his face. "Same back atcha. Yeah, she's right here." He handed the phone to Bryson. "Her ears must've been burnin'."

"Karla?"

"Hi, Bryson. I'm missing you something fierce."

Her glum mood lifted significantly. "Lot of that going around. How's everybody doing?"

"Great. Maggie's incision's almost healed and she's able to do just about everything. BP's good. Karson's gained more weight and is starting to smile a lot. We're all getting a bad case of cabin fever, though."

"I'm sure you're not the only ones. The Den's been pretty empty except for folks within walking distance."

"It seems so unfair not to be able to see you when I've only got a couple of weeks left."

Bryson's heart fell. "I thought you were staying until after New Year's."

"Yeah. That's the bad news. I checked in at work, and my supervisor begged me to come back by the twenty-eighth to cover a maternity leave." Karla's voice was subdued. "And flights are cheaper then, too. So I'm booked to leave the day after Christmas."

That ticking clock got louder in Bryson's head. "Sorry to hear that." There was an awkward silence on the line. "On a happier note, a cold front is supposed to be headed our way."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed it gets here quick and hangs around a while," Karla said.

"No more than I will. See you as soon as I can get there."



Karla hung up and turned to find Lars and Maggie watching her. They were curled up together on the couch, with Karson in her crib nearby snoozing off her last feeding.

"Any news from town?" Lars asked.

“Bryson says it’s supposed to get colder. Not much else.”

“Don’t be discouraged,” Maggie said. “I bet she’ll be here before the week’s out.”

Lars got to his feet and stretched. “I need some fresh air. Gonna cut some firewood.”

Maggie gave him a quizzical look but said nothing as he grabbed his coat and headed outside. There was enough firewood already split to last them at least a couple of months, but everyone had their own ways to deal with cabin fever. In truth, his leaving them alone *was* a ruse. Now that Maggie and Karson were both safely out of the woods, Karla had asked for some alone time to finally tell Maggie the truth about their mother’s illness.

She took the seat on the couch that Lars had vacated and let her gaze linger on the makeshift Christmas tree in the corner. It was the first one ever erected in the Rasmussen cabin. Lars and Maggie loved the holiday, but they didn’t believe in killing trees unnecessarily since the ones that grew here struggled so to survive the short growing season. So normally they went without one—instead stringing their lights and decorations on the windowpanes and ceiling. This year, however, because of Karla and Karson, they’d constructed a tree out of spruce boughs, wired to a frame that Lars had made. It was decorated with strung popcorn and cranberries, colored paper chains, and a variety of homemade ornaments.

“I put up a Christmas tree for Mom last year,” she told Maggie. “Just a tabletop-sized, with a lot of little colored lights and some of her favorite ornaments. She’d pick one up whenever she traveled.” Karla had held each memento in front of her mother’s face, praying for a sign of recognition, without success.

She met Maggie’s eyes, so much like their mother’s that her heart ached. “The tree was more for my benefit than hers. I doubt she had any idea what it was, but I couldn’t do much for her by then.”

Maggie looked understandably confused. “What do you mean?”

“I told you she had a heart attack—that’s what’s listed on the death certificate. But it wasn’t really what killed her. She had Alzheimer’s.”

“Alzheimer’s?” Maggie’s eyes widened for a split second as she absorbed the news. “Oh, how awful. That must have been very difficult for you.”

“It’s terrible to watch someone you love lose herself little by little.

The first hint I had that something was wrong was when she began to lose sense of time. We'd be at a red light and she'd insist it must be broken because it wasn't changing. Or she'd think a waitress had forgotten about us because our order didn't come in two minutes. Within a year she was having problems sometimes finding the right word for something. That's when I told her she needed to see a doctor. She resisted at first. I think she knew something wasn't right, but she was afraid to face it. To be honest, so was I."

Maggie didn't say anything, but she took her hand, and that small encouragement gave her courage to continue.

"Another year or so went by. She was living by herself, and I was so caught up with my own life I didn't see her enough to really get a handle on how bad she was getting. Then one day I got a call from a police department in Alabama. She'd gone out for groceries and somehow ended up three hundred miles away, knocking on a stranger's door in a panic, asking how to get home. That's when I forced her to seek help. She was diagnosed and started on Aricept to try to slow the progression of the disease. That's also about when she wrote that letter to me about you. Good thing, because within another couple of years she was losing her ability to read and write. Near the end, she barely spoke, and she couldn't make sense of anything—people, places, things. It was all a mystery to her; she was like an infant again." The image of her mother staring blankly at her, eyes devoid of any spark of recognition, haunted her.

Maggie squeezed her hand. "I can't imagine what you had to go through. I'm just sorry I wasn't there to help you through it."

"And I'm sorry that I have to be the one to tell you this. I wish to hell I didn't." Her stomach was tied up in knots. "Because there's a part of this you need to know. Something that will be very tough to deal with."

Maggie's expression changed from sisterly concern to apprehension, and she stiffened. "What is it? Tell me."

Karla took a deep breath. "The doctors were fairly certain, since she began exhibiting symptoms so young, that she had a rare form of Alzheimer's. It's called eFAD—early onset, Familial Alzheimer's Disease."

Maggie gasped. "Familial?"

"Yes. Scientists still aren't sure what causes Alzheimer's. They

suspect genetics plays a role, but there's no proof of that, except with the familial type. It's the only kind that's been conclusively linked to a particular gene called a deterministic gene that's definitely hereditary. It affects multiple family members across generations. In other words, if a parent has it, then their children have a fifty-fifty chance of getting it, too."

Maggie's face went ashen. "Oh, my God. You mean..." Her gaze went immediately to the crib.

"Yes. You may have it. And so may Karson. I'm so sorry." Karla was accustomed to imparting such a grave prognosis to patients, but she had never hated the task more than at this moment.

Maggie's eyes filled with tears as she reached for the baby and held her close. She said nothing for a very long while. "There's...there's no chance this could be a mistake?"

"Yes, there's always a chance. The doctors weren't absolutely certain, but most people with Alzheimer's don't start showing symptoms until sixty-five or so, and Mom was diagnosed in her forties." Karla had a hard time facing Maggie with the final admission. "There are blood tests for the particular gene mutations prevalent with most cases of eFAD, but I opposed them. Both for Mom, and for me."

Maggie looked confused. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I don't want to know if I have it. I couldn't approach life the same way with that future looming over me, knowing I would end up like she did. And the tests aren't a hundred percent reliable." She felt like such a coward sometimes, but better that, she'd decided, than having to deal every day with the near-certain knowledge that she would lose her mind.

"But you're saying there *is* a test that I could take, and Karson, too?"

"Yes. There's one lab in Massachusetts that offers a commercial test. You have to have a doctor request it, though. And many won't until you've had genetic counseling, to make sure you're equipped to deal with the results. The tests are also expensive and not always covered by insurance, so you need to check on that as well."

"How long does it take to hear back from the lab?" Maggie asked.

"Two to three weeks, on average."

Karson began to cry. It was time for her feeding. As Maggie

breastfed her, the silence lengthening, a look of resolve came over her face. “I *have* to know,” she said finally. “I have to know how long I have with her. I have to prepare for her future.” She looked over at Karla. “I’m going to see a doctor in Fairbanks about it as soon as possible.”

Karla looked down at her niece. “You’re braver than I am, Maggie.” Secretly, she’d hoped her sister would feel as she did—preferring to be kept in the dark and allow some reason for hope. Because if Maggie and the baby both showed the genetic predisposition for eFAD, then in all likelihood, she did too.



“Still only three degrees, and I bet it got well below zero again last night,” Lars reported with a grin as he shook the snow from his hat and coat. He’d headed down to the lake at first light, as he had every day for a month. “The ice is definitely thick enough for the plane now. You want to call her, or you want me to?”

Karla shot out of her chair, and Maggie and Lars both laughed. “She better be there and not off in Fairbanks getting groceries or something.” The wait had been excruciating and she couldn’t bear another minute of it, not when she left for home in only seven short days.

“The Den.” Grizz’s voice had become instantly recognizable after so many calls to Bettles.

“Hi, Grizz, it’s Karla. Is Bryson there?”

“Bryson? Hmmm. Lemme see.” His tone was definitely jovial, but her heart sank when he continued. “Sorry, she’s not here. She took off about fifteen minutes ago.”

“She’s gone?” Her elation melted away. “When will she be back, do you know?”

“No time soon. Skeeter’s taking her bookings for the next couple of days at least, maybe longer.”

Couple of days? “Well, that bites. The lake is finally frozen. Where did she go? Is there a problem somewhere?” Bryson had sounded as anxious as she was to get together again. Karla couldn’t imagine anything but a rescue mission or some other emergency taking her away for so long.

“No, no problem. Just said she had something important to do.” He paused for a few torturous long beats, then chuckled. “If you want

specifics you'll have to ask her yourself. I expect she'll be charging through your door in, oh, twenty minutes or so."

The burst of exhilaration made her woozy on her feet. "You'll pay for that, Grizz. Thanks!" She hung up the phone. "She's already on her way," she told Lars and Maggie. "And look at me. Crap." To the sounds of their laughter, she hurried to wash up and change out of the grungy sweats she'd been wearing for three days.

She was pulling on clean jeans when she picked up the sound of the approaching plane. The Cub buzzed the cabin, then veered off toward the lake. By the time she threw on her coat and boots and got outside, the noise had died. She met Bryson halfway up the trail and flew into her outstretched arms.

They hugged so tight that Karla had to fight for breath. Her heart was thumping like crazy. "God, I've missed you so much."

"No more than I've missed you." And then Bryson's mouth was covering hers in a searing kiss that reignited all the passion they'd shared their last night together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

You know,” Maggie said in a low voice as she dipped another plate into the rinse water and handed it to Bryson to dry, “it couldn’t be more obvious that you two have something very special going on. Karla couldn’t stop talking about you these last few weeks, and I’ve never seen you so starry-eyed over someone.”

Bryson turned to watch Karla, who was currently changing Karson’s diaper. “Can’t argue there. She’s a wonderful woman. It’ll kill me when she leaves.”

“I think so much of both of you, you know that. Seems a damn shame that you found each other, only to be split apart. Have you talked about what happens after she goes home?”

“No. Not really. What’s there to say? I’m hoping she’ll come back when she’s able. And I can maybe get down to see her once or twice a year, and try to get to Bettles more to webcam with her. But realistically, can anybody hope to sustain a relationship with that kind of limited contact? I expect she’ll move on before long and that’ll be that. So I’m just enjoying the time I have with her. I can’t think about the future.”

“I probably already know the answer to this, but you’d never consider relocating to Atlanta? Not that I’d want to see you go, of course.”

Bryson tucked the stack of clean plates into the cupboard. “I’ve considered it. Long and hard. Sure, a big part of me would be willing to sacrifice just about anything to keep from losing her. But I’d be giving up everything else that’s important to me if I moved away from Alaska. A big city isn’t for me. I’d suffocate. And what would I do there?”

Leaving the wilderness, her mountains, and the cabin she had built with her own hands was unimaginable, as was giving up being a bush pilot. "I'm afraid one day I'd resent Karla for forcing me to make that choice."

Maggie dried her hands with a towel and wrapped one arm around Bryson's waist. "I wish I could do more for the two of you, but I'll have to settle for giving up my sister for a few days."

"What are you saying?"

"Lars and I can take care of things from here on. Carry her home, spoil her rotten, and cherish the time she has left. But bring her back for Christmas and give us a chance to say good-bye, okay?"

Bryson grinned and kissed Maggie on the cheek. "Have I told you lately how fabulous you are?"

"Not often enough. Now get her packed up and out of here. You don't have much daylight left."

Bryson gave her another quick peck, then hurried over to Karla, who was settling Karson back into her crib. She wrapped her arms around Karla's waist from behind and whispered into her ear, "Have you any idea what you do to me when you bend over like that?"

Karla inhaled sharply. "Mean. Mean. Mean," she grumbled. "Why are you getting me all stirred up when we don't have a chance for some private time to do anything about it?"

"Oh, but there is. Maggie suggested I take you home with me until Christmas. You up for that?"

Karla turned in her arms, grinning. "Really?"

"How fast can you pack?"

"Just watch me."



They spent the bulk of the next few days in bed, with short forays out for meals and walks. On the morning of Christmas Eve, Karla was awakened by kisses and opened her eyes to find a breakfast tray loaded with her favorite foods. "Mmm. You're up early. How did you do all this without waking me?"

"I tried to be quiet." Bryson reached for a slice of toast. "But frankly, I've discovered you sleep like the dead if I thoroughly exhaust you the night before."

"Night before?" Karla laughed. "Morning, noon, and night before, you mean."

"Not that I'm getting tired of our routine, you understand, but are you up for a little adventure today? I've got something special planned. It'll involve going up in the Cub, but it's only a short flight."

She'd probably never fully embrace the idea of getting into Bryson's plane, but the prospect made her less anxious than it once did. She'd come to trust that Bryson's skill as a pilot was exceptional. "That's all you're going to tell me, isn't it?"

"Yup. It's a surprise."

"Okay, then. I'm all yours. So far, I have to say that your surprises have been more than satisfying." She glanced meaningfully toward the bedside table, where Bryson had stashed the strap-on that had gotten frequent use lately.

Bryson's cheeks flamed red. "Stop that. We'll never get out of here. Now eat up and get dressed. Put on the warmest things you have."

"Yes, ma'am. I so love it when you get all forceful like that."

At first light, Bryson flew them to Bettles. She steered Karla toward a small building tucked behind the post office. The sign outside read Arctic Independent Outfitters.

"Oh. This is where you and Lars work, right?"

Bryson nodded. "Come on, I'll show you around."

The door led to a small waiting area, with chairs and a television and a host of older magazines scattered about. At one end was a reception desk and a hallway leading to more rooms. An attractive woman Karla didn't recognize stood behind the desk, talking on the phone. She was five-ten or so and athletically built, with shoulder-length brown hair cut in a shag. Probably in her early forties. She hailed Bryson with a wave and cut short her conversation as soon as they approached.

"Hey, Bryson. Long time." When she rounded the desk and embraced Bryson, Karla felt a twinge of jealousy.

"Too long," Bryson replied, hugging the woman back with equal enthusiasm. "You ready to give up your day job and join the competition?"

The stranger laughed. "No, and no. But we should do dinner before classes resume. Have a lot of catching up to do."

"You're on. I'd like that."

Karla forced herself to smile as Bryson turned to make

introductions. Her heart sank at the realization she wasn't even gone yet, and Bryson was already making plans with an ex.

"Karla, this is a dear friend, Chaz Herrick. Chaz, Karla Edwards."

Chaz stuck out her hand and grinned at Karla. "Really happy to meet you, Karla. Bryson's told me a lot about you."

"Nice to meet you, too." Karla returned the handshake. She wanted to punch herself for feeling jealous and resentful of the fact that Bryson had never mentioned Chaz. After all, what did she expect? She had no claim on Bryson. She'd be leaving the day after tomorrow, and Bryson would go on with her life.

"Everything set?" Bryson asked Chaz.

"Yup. Just like you asked." Chaz winked at Bryson, who grinned. Karla felt another twinge of envy at their close camaraderie.

"I owe you. Come on, Karla. Let's get you suited up." Bryson took her elbow and led her toward one of the back rooms.

"Suited up? What's going on?"

"I'm not taking any chances on you getting frostbite again." Bryson showed her into a room filled with extreme-cold-weather gear—thermal parkas with fur-lined hoods, thick arctic gloves and face masks, and the white vapor-barrier "Mickey Mouse" boots designed for the U.S. military.

"Where are we going?" Karla asked as Bryson fitted her with an entire ensemble.

"You'll see."

Once they were both appropriately decked out, Bryson led them out the back entrance. Three dozen or more dogs, mostly huskies and malamutes, were chained beside small individual plywood dog houses. Another half-dozen dogs were hitched to a sled, standing off to one side.

Upon seeing the women, the dogs burst into a frenzy of excitement, straining at their chains and barking furiously.

"Oh, wow. We're going dogsledding?"

Bryson wrapped an arm around her. "Okay surprise?"

"The best. I can't wait."

"Come on, then." Bryson led her to the sled, which had a built-in seat in front, surrounded on either side by canvas to block the wind. Once Karla was comfortably settled in, with a thick lap blanket and

her feet propped up on a cooler, Bryson climbed behind her to drive the sled.

As soon as Bryson put her weight on the rear footboards, the dogs went crazy, straining at their harnesses and barking to be underway. The sled bounced up and down a few inches, but stayed fast, thanks to a large metal claw-like hook that was deeply embedded in the packed snow.

“All set?” Bryson shouted over the cacophony from the dogs, as she placed one hand on the handlebar and reached down to grab the snow hook with the other.

“Let’s go,” Karla hollered back.

The sled took off along a well-packed snowmobile track heading north. The dogs were running flat-out, going twenty miles an hour, but it felt more like fifty. The only sounds were their pants for breath and the *shoosh* of the runners on the snow. In the distance was the Brooks Range. The days were the shortest of the year, the sun clearing the horizon for only a couple of hours before it disappeared again. When it could be seen, the world around them seemed always in twilight, with long, deep shadows stretching from every mountaintop and tree. Karla was almost afraid to speak, because she felt as though they were in some vast natural cathedral.

“Enjoying yourself?” Bryson asked after they’d gone a handful of miles.

She half turned to look up at Bryson, smiling and rosy-cheeked, the flaps of her fleece-lined bomber’s cap flapping in the breeze. The perfect picture of the confident outdoorswoman, blissfully content in her wild, untamed environment. “This is incredible. Thank you for arranging it.”

“My pleasure. We have Chaz to thank. She packed everything and got the dogs ready to go. Just sorry we couldn’t spend some time with her. I think you’d like her a lot.”

She doubted that. “I don’t remember seeing her name on the Web site.”

“She’s helping out, she’s not one of our regular guides. Chaz works for Orion Outfitters out of Winterwolf, leading kayak and backpack trips during the summer. The rest of the year she’s a biology professor at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. We became best buds when I went to school there. Chaz is a lot like me—endures the city but flees

to the bush every chance she gets. Every Christmas break she and her partner Megan come up and spend a few weeks in Bettles leading sled-dog trips.”

“Her partner? She’s gay?”

“Yeah. They met when Megan was a client on one of Chaz’s kayak trips. Megan was a vice president for World News Central in Chicago, but when they fell in love, she took a different job to move up here and be with Chaz.”

“How long have they been together?”

“Three—no, almost four years, I think. They went to Canada to get married a few months ago. I stop in at their cabin north of Fairbanks when I’m in the area.”

Karla went quiet, thinking about the similarities. This Megan had given up a great job and big-city lifestyle to move to Alaska for love, and apparently with no regrets if she and Chaz were still happily together. Could she do that? Change her whole way of life, leave all her friends and job behind and start over with Bryson and her new family here? Somehow, the challenge seemed less daunting than it should. Though her job in the ER was satisfying—she felt she was making an important contribution in people’s lives—it also took a heavy toll. Too many of her patients were victims of urban violence: shootings, stabbings, rape, bar fights, carjackings. She saw the worst of what people could do to each other.

Alaska’s beauty had soothed her troubled soul and helped her find the perspective she needed. The people here seemed to genuinely care about each other, so much they’d leave their doors unlocked to a stranger. Most important, though she’d only been here a matter of weeks, Bryson had completely captured her heart. She couldn’t imagine being happier with anyone else.

But even if she could make such a drastic change, what did Bryson want? They hadn’t discussed what would happen after she went back to Atlanta. Bryson seemed as caught up in their relationship as she was, yet she hadn’t asked for more than these precious few days together and hadn’t declared her love. Perhaps Bryson was this way with every woman she was involved with. Was she foolish to even be considering such a thing?

They were racing down a frozen river when Bryson laid a hand on her shoulder and pointed to a particularly spectacular group of rugged

mountain tops. “Arrigetch Peaks. The entrance to the Gates of the Arctic National Park.”

“Arrigetch?”

“It translates as ‘fingers of the outstretched hand.’ An Eskimo legend says their creator stuck his glove here, and the frozen fingers turned into granite to remind them of him. Cool, huh?”

“Stunning.” The day was so clear she could see for miles in every direction. “How big is the park?”

“Thirteen thousand square miles,” Bryson said. “Roughly the size of Switzerland.”

“That boggles the mind. It makes me feel so small and insignificant.”

“Kind of the opposite for me. Native people have lived here for fifteen thousand years or more, and not much has changed in all that time. I half expect to see woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers around the next bend. Being here makes me feel ageless, like I’m part of the whole history and evolution of the earth. Like I’m making time stand still.”

Karla realized even more how much Bryson could never leave Alaska. It had formed who she was and was as necessary to her happiness and well-being as the clean air and crystal-clear water. If they were ever to be together, it would have to be here. Bryson wouldn’t be Bryson anywhere else, certainly not in a concrete jungle that rarely saw snow.

They sped along in silence for another half hour, absorbing the ever-changing view, until they came to the first sign of civilization—a fabric-covered Quonset hut that had been erected next to the trail. Bryson slowed the dogs to a stop and set the snow hook. “Ready for some lunch?”

“Starving. What’s this place?” Karla got out of the sled and stretched.

“It’s one of the stopping points for our sled-dog trips into the Brooks Range. Got a little heater inside and some cots.” Bryson took the cooler off the sled and led them into the hut. Chaz had packed them a small feast—chicken-salad sandwiches and coleslaw, a bottle of white wine, and brownies for dessert.

As they packed up to leave, Bryson looked at her watch.

“Are we heading back now?” Karla didn’t want their adventure to end.

“Yes, we should. It’ll be dark soon.”

“Is it safe to be on the trail at night?”

“It’s well-packed, so the dogs will follow it naturally. And I have a good headlamp. We’ll be fine.” Bryson secured the cooler to the sled. “It’s all according to plan. There’s one more sight I want you to take home with you, so you won’t forget us too soon.”

Karla closed the few feet separating them and hugged Bryson tight. “No chance of that. You’ve given me so many wonderful, unforgettable memories. The best ever.”

Bryson kissed her, a slow sweet kiss that felt like good-bye. “I’ll cherish every single moment we’ve spent together, Karla,” she said, her voice breaking with emotion. “I really hope we’ll keep in touch. I don’t want to think about my life without you in it, somehow.”

“I can’t imagine how I’ll just pick up where I left off, when I go home. The thought of not going to sleep wrapped up in your arms is awful.”

“My cabin will seem very, very empty.” Bryson let out a long, resigned sigh. “Well, we better get going.”

Once Karla was tucked back into the sled, they took off again, headed back the way they came.

When darkness fell, it became clear why Bryson had kept them out so late. A brilliant display of northern lights streaked across the sky from horizon to horizon, undulating curtains of green and red and yellow. Karla had glimpsed the amazing sight from the Rasmussen cabin, but the surrounding mountains and frequent overcast skies had diminished their impact. On this clear, cloudless night, as they flew along the flat plain between the mountains and the village, the aurora borealis was an awesome spectacle. The most amazing natural phenomenon she’d ever witnessed. “There are no words for this.”

“I never tire of it. It’s always changing. Different patterns, different colors. You should see them on a night when there’s a lot of shooting stars.”

All too soon, they could see the lights of Bettles in the distance.

“I got us our same room at the Den tonight. We’ll head to Lars and Maggie’s in the morning.”

Karla had told Bryson about Maggie’s decision to have her and the baby tested for eFAD and had filled her in about her own fears about the results. Bryson had absorbed the news with a grim expression. “Do you

think I'm being a coward...not wanting to know Maggie's test results?" she asked. Bryson's opinion of her had become very important.

"Not at all. You're incredibly brave, Karla. You took a lot of risks and faced a lot of your fears in coming here and finding Maggie. It's understandable you're reluctant to hear that kind of news. I'm not sure I'd want to know, either, if it were me."

Karla had never told Abby about the strong possibility she might have eFAD, because she'd been too afraid it would scare her off. Who would want to take a partner with such a wretched future? But Bryson struck her as the kind of woman who'd stick by someone she cared about, no matter the heartache ahead. "Does it put you off? Knowing I might have this?"

"It scares me," Bryson admitted. "Knowing you might not be yourself, might have to deal with what you watched your mother go through. But it doesn't make me any less inclined to want to spend every minute I can with you, as long as I can, if that's what you mean."

She was sure Bryson was speaking from her heart. But she also knew better than Bryson that the loved ones of Alzheimer's patients suffered the most, not those afflicted with the disease. Could she in good conscience place Bryson in that position?

The answer seemed clear. No. She couldn't do that to Bryson. She loved her too much. She would take the test, too. If she had the gene mutation, she'd spare Bryson the anguish of watching her lose herself. But if she didn't, she'd take it as a sign that they should be together. And she'd move heaven and earth to make that happen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bryson awoke wrapped possessively around Karla, as though even in sleep she couldn't bear the thought of letting her go. She listened to the slow cadence of her breathing and unconsciously matched her own to it. *Don't go*. Though her life had sometimes been lonely, she had settled into a routine, had carved out a place where it was comfortable if not always complete. But being with Karla had changed all that. Now she needed more. Love doubled the joy of every experience, large and small. A good meal, a walk, an evening spent in front of the fire. Nothing would be the same again.

She wished they could be waking up in her cabin with presents under a tree and other adornments to make this a Christmas morning to remember. Grizz wasn't much on decorating; he'd strung colored lights around the window of their room, but it was the only sign of the holiday.

Karla stirred, shifting slightly so her face nestled against Bryson's neck.

"You awake?" Bryson whispered.

"Mmm. Sorta." Karla hugged her tighter. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too. Can't say I could imagine a more perfect gift than to wake up in your arms."

"Good. 'Cause I'm afraid I haven't had the opportunity to buy you anything."

"Your being here has been exactly what I wanted and needed." Bryson kissed Karla's forehead before pulling away to turn on the bedside light and retrieve a small package from her coat. "I did get you

a little something. I hope you like it.” She’d spent hours shopping in Fairbanks one day, trying to find the perfect gift.

Karla slowly unwrapped the colorful paper and opened the small box within. It contained a pair of jade earrings, rimmed with gold. “Oh, Bryson, they’re lovely.”

“Jade’s the state gemstone. And the gold is from the Wild Lake Mine, not too far from Maggie and Lars’s cabin.”

“Oh, that’s just too cool. Thank you so much.” Karla hugged Bryson, then immediately put the earrings on. They crawled back under the covers.

“I’m glad you like them.” Bryson hugged her close. “Now, where do you want to stay tonight? The sun’s only up for a couple of hours, so if you want to spend all day with Maggie and Lars, we’ll either need to bunk with them or come back here. I can take off from the lake at night, but I can’t land at my cabin. If you choose my place, we’ll only have about ninety minutes with them if we take off from here just before first light.”

Karla groaned. “That sucks. I want to spend Christmas with them, but I’m very protective of the little time we have left together. I love this room, but at your place there’s less chance we’ll disturb the neighbors when you get all wound up and ready to come.”

“Hey, you should talk. I’m surprised Grizz didn’t come up here last night and ask us to keep it down.”

“What can I say? You drive me crazy. I forget about anything and everything else.” Karla kissed her neck while her hand slid purposefully down Bryson’s stomach. “There is one benefit to these short days,” she added, glancing at the clock. It was only seven-thirty. “We’ve got, what, four hours before the sun comes up and we can leave? Plenty of time for a proper good morning.”

“More than plenty, sweetheart.” The endearment slipped out easily, without any forethought.

“Sweetheart, huh?” Karla’s tone went from playful to serious.

“Never called anyone that before,” Bryson admitted, equally serious.

“Bryson...”

“Yes?”

“I thought of something else I can give you for Christmas.”

“What’s that?”

Karla’s eyes were moist as she reached for Bryson’s hand and placed it on her chest. “I give you my heart, Bryson. Near or far, no matter what the future holds, I want you to know that I love you.”

She could feel the strong, rapid beating of Karla’s heart beneath her palm, and her own pulse matched it. “I feel the same, Karla.” Her voice was husky at the admission. “I’m so much in love with you the thought of you leaving is tearing me apart.”

They moved into each other’s arms and clung to each other, faces wet with tears. Bryson couldn’t speak; the longing that enveloped her was suffocating.

They lingered in bed until just before first light, then headed to the Cub. Both agreed to put on a brave face when they arrived at the Rasmussen cabin. There was no need to let their despondency over the future dampen their Christmas with Lars, Maggie, and Karson.



Maggie had prepared a Christmas brunch, and afterward, they turned to the happy task of exchanging presents. Most of the packages beneath the tree were for Karson. Maggie had sent Lars out shopping before she was released from the hospital, and he had gone overboard. But there was also a smattering of gifts for the rest.

Lars and Maggie gave Bryson a new sweater and set of carving knives, and she gave them a pair of powerful binoculars with a built-in digital camera. For Karla, Maggie had instructed Lars to seek out something uniquely Alaskan, and he’d chosen a splendid example of Inuit art—a polar bear carved from whalebone.

“It’s amazing.” Karla turned the piece over in her hands, examining the fine detail work. “Thanks so much.” From her pocket, she withdrew a small bundle wrapped in tissue paper. “I’m sorry I don’t have something for each of you. Didn’t expect to be here over the holidays. But I have something for Maggie.” She handed the gift to her sister. “It was our mother’s. She rarely took it off.”

Maggie unwrapped the delicate necklace and held it up for the rest to see. “It’s beautiful, Karla. Are you sure you want to part with it?”

“It’s been a great comfort me, I’ll admit. But being here with all of

you has helped me find my own inner strength.” She glanced at Bryson and smiled before returning her attention to Maggie. “She’d want you to have it. And it matches your eyes.” Karla helped her put it on.

“I’ll cherish this.” Maggie embraced her.

“And one more thing.” Karla handed her another small tissue-wrapped gift. “Lars made the frame.” It was one of the pictures she’d brought of their mother, taken in her teens, not long after she had Maggie.

Maggie stroked her thumb over the photo. “Thanks, sis.”

“Not that Karson hasn’t already raked it in this Christmas,” Lars said, surveying the abundance of toys and clothes piled beside the baby’s crib with a smile, “but there’s one more gift we’d like for her from the two of you.” He took Maggie’s hand and they both looked at Bryson and Karla. “We’d like you to be her godparents.”

“I’d be honored,” Bryson immediately replied.

“I’d love that, too,” Karla said. “But I’m not sure when I can get back here. When are you planning to have her baptized?”

“We’d like to do it fairly soon,” Maggie said. “Probably in the next couple of months, and we realize it’s apt to be tough for you to make it back that soon. But you can have a proxy stand in for you.”

“Then I happily accept. And if there’s any way I can be here, you know I will.”

“Wonderful,” Maggie said, embracing her.

“This calls for that bottle of champagne we’ve been saving.” Lars retrieved the bubbly and they raised their glasses in a toast. “Here’s hoping this Christmas is only the first of many we can spend together.”

“Amen to that,” Maggie added.

Bryson raised her hand and smiled. “That makes it unanimous. You have to be here, Karla.”

“I’ll do my best.”

All too soon, it was time to say good-bye if they were to get to Bryson’s before full dark. They all trooped down the trail to the Cub.

“I’m sorry we can’t stay longer,” Karla told Maggie as they hugged each other tight. “Thanks for understanding.”

“Thank *you* for everything.” Maggie started crying. “For finding me, for coming here, for helping with Karson. Please keep in touch as best as you can.”

"I will. I promise. I'll miss you all so much." Karla's own tears began to fall. She kissed the baby good-bye and hugged Lars before climbing into the passenger seat behind Bryson.

"Be careful," Maggie yelled to Bryson over the roar of the propeller. "Precious cargo you have there."

Bryson waved. "Don't I know it. See you guys soon."



Their lovemaking that night was bittersweet, punctuated with tears over their imminent parting. Bryson prayed that a storm would blow in and strand them there, but though a blizzard had socked in the southern part of the state, the forecast called for moderate snow and light winds in the interior. They got little sleep and were bleary-eyed when it came time for Karla to pack for the flight to Fairbanks.

The satellite phone rang just as they were heading out. "Bet that's Maggie, calling for a final good-bye," Bryson said as she reached for it. But the voice on the other end was Skeeter's.

"Bryson, we've got a bad situation." His voice was grave. "Three mountain climbers are in trouble up on Trapper's Peak. They tried to hike down this morning and one fell into a crevasse. A woman. They got her out, but she's got two broken legs and a broken arm, and who knows what else. From their GPS, they're at six thousand feet, on the edge of a glacier."

Skeeter didn't have to say more. He went quiet, awaiting her decision. Few bush pilots but her would risk such a flight, and the elevation was too high for the two private air-ambulance services that served Bettles in emergencies. The Anchorage Rescue Coordination Center might dispatch an Alaska Air National Guard chopper, but it would take hours to reach them. Trapper's Peak was in her backyard. "I'm on my way. Call you when I get in the air."

"Roger that. Be careful."

She briefed Karla on the situation as she packed a bag with extra supplies. "I don't have a choice, honey. I'm sorry. I can drop you in Bettles—it's on the way—but I'll have to take right off again. You can catch the Wright Air Flight later and still make it to Fairbanks in time, but I won't be able to see you off."

Karla's heart fell. "That's it? This is good-bye, then?"

Bryson hugged her tight. "Afraid it has to be. Come on, we have to leave."

"Is it dangerous, where you're going?" Karla asked once they were in the air.

"I've done a lot of glacial landings. But yes, there's always a risk. The winds that high can be tough, you can't tell the snow depth before you get down, and you have to worry about hidden crevasses. But I'll be fine."

"The woman who was injured—how serious is she?"

"Bad, I think. Multiple broken bones. Don't know what else."

Karla pictured the woman and her friends, high on the mountain, waiting for the welcome sight of the Cub. How many people had Bryson saved? "Are you taking a doctor up with you?"

"The nearest doctor's in Fairbanks. The clinic in Evansville just has a CHA."

"What's a CHA?"

"Community Health Aide. Not surprised you haven't heard of it, it's an Alaska thing. CHAs get basic medical training and staff rural areas. They're not equipped to deal with something like this. And the one in Evansville hates to fly."

The decision came more easily than she expected. "Then you'll need to take me with you."

Bryson half turned in her seat. "Are you serious?"

"Very. She'll stand a much better chance if I triage her on site before you move her."

"I'm not saying I disagree. Frankly, I'd feel a hell of a lot better about transporting her if you're there to treat and stabilize her. I can have an air-transport ambulance standing by in Bettles to get her the rest of the way to the hospital." Bryson paused while she steered the Cub through a narrow canyon. "But, Karla, I won't have room to take you both at the same time. You'll have to stay up on the mountain until I can come back to get you. And you'll miss your flight."

"There'll be others. And I'll just have to deal with waiting for you. Her life could depend on it."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes."

Bryson turned the plane away from Bettles and headed northeast. She radioed Skeeter to update him and to tell him to get an air ambulance

to Bettles ASAP. He'd already done that; one would be standing by when she arrived with the patient.

Twenty minutes later, they were circling the area. Two of the climbers appeared as tiny, waving specks of colored parkas in a sea of white. They'd erected a tent, and the injured woman was evidently inside. Bryson made several passes over the glacier, assessing the best approach. The winds here were capricious, shaking the little plane so fiercely at times that Karla fought to keep her breakfast down.

"Okay, get ready. Brace yourself," Bryson shouted over the prop as she lined up for an uphill approach some fifty yards from the climbers.

Karla gripped the back of Bryson's seat and watched in horror as they descended. She could make out no depth of field in the solid glare of white below. It was impossible to detect how close they were to the glacier's surface until the skis actually touched down.

The snow looked so soft and inviting that she was unprepared for the bone-jarringly bumpy ride that followed as Bryson fought to stop the plane before it reached an ominous-looking mound of white invisible from above. She held her breath and closed her eyes, cursing under her breath.

The Cub lurched to an abrupt halt, but they were safely down, with just enough room left to turn the plane around. "You okay?" Bryson asked as she unbuckled herself.

"I'll tell you when I get my stomach back."

Bryson retrieved her first-aid supplies while Karla slogged toward the tent. The snow was knee-deep, and she was glad she'd put on her long underwear. The two uninjured climbers met her halfway.

"Thank God," the first one, a blond man in his thirties, said. "I'm Eric. This is Al. My wife Jane's badly hurt. We don't know what to do. Please help her."

"I'm Karla. I'm a nurse. Does your wife have any medical conditions I should be aware of?" she asked as they walked to the tent.

"No, she's very healthy. Hardly been sick a day in her life."

The tent was a small dome model, designed for two or three people. The injured woman was lying on one sleeping bag, an unzipped second one covering her. She was conscious and groaned as Karla bent over her to assess her condition.

"Jane, my name is Karla. Try not to move around."

Bryson appeared in the entryway with a large First Responder

First Aid kit, equipped with a stethoscope and BP cuff, in addition to an impressive collection of gauze and tape and other essentials. “Anything I can do?”

“Not right now. You don’t have a neck brace or backboard, do you?”

“I’ve got a foldable stretcher and soft collar.”

“Great. Get them, and anything you can find to rig splints with.”

While Bryson did those tasks, Karla took her patient’s vital signs, then used the paramedic scissors from the kit to cut away her clothes to assess her injuries. She talked to Jane as she worked, asking questions that helped focus her examination as she worked through the trauma triage protocol.

Jane’s husband hovered just outside the tent, listening.

Bryson returned quickly with the supplies she’d requested. “How’s she doing?”

“Vitals are good,” she said, loud enough for the husband to hear. “Multiple fractures in both legs—all closed, and an open fracture above the elbow in her left arm. Possible broken ribs, and I can’t be sure about any internal injuries. But under the circumstances, it could be much worse. No indication of head, neck, or back trauma. But I want her immobilized just to be safe. Is the plane ready to go?”

“I have to turn it around and pack down a short runway with snowshoes,” Bryson replied. “Won’t take long.”

“Go ahead and do that while I splint her fractures. I’ll need all four of us to get her on the stretcher and out to the plane, so come right back when you’re done.”

“You got it.”

Within a half hour, Jane was secured in the back of the Cub, kept warm by one of the arctic sleeping bags. Bryson had to remove the passenger seat to make room for her. “It’ll be dark soon. I’ll have just enough light to pick up Karla, so you two will have to hike out.”

“I want to be with my wife,” Eric protested. “Can’t you come back with a bigger plane?”

“I don’t have time to argue,” Bryson said. “Radio in when you get down the mountain and within sight of the river, and someone will pick you up there and take you to the hospital in Fairbanks. I suggest you get moving.” She handed Karla her survival duffel. “There’s a tent and

sleeping bag and other supplies in there, including an emergency radio. Keep warm, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I'll be fine. Be careful."

As Bryson took off, the men hurried to stow their gear. "I can't thank you enough," Eric told Karla as they shouldered their packs. "It's damn lucky you could get here so quick."

Karla wondered how Bryson and the men would have managed without her. "You're welcome. Now get going. I'm okay."

The mountaineers were out of sight within minutes, leaving her alone on the mountain. The wind was starting to pick up, so she wrapped herself in Bryson's sleeping bag while she waited, praying the Cub could make it back before dark.

She could see for fifty miles or more, but detected no sign of another living thing, just snow and mountains and valleys. Formidable and frightening, yet startlingly beautiful. The sun skimmed along the horizon, painting an amber hue over the western sky and casting deep shadows from the cliff face behind her. She felt like the last person on earth.

Dusk began to fall, and just about the time she'd decided Bryson wasn't coming back, she heard the distant hum of the Cub's propeller. It was another ten minutes before she actually spotted the plane. By then it was too dark to make out much beyond the pair of white lights on the wings. She turned on the flashlight she'd found in the duffel and tried to signal her position.

Bryson came straight in this time, landing in the same spot as before. As Karla hurried to her, Bryson hopped out of the pilot's seat and turned the Cub around.

"You all right?" Bryson quickly refit the passenger seat into position and stored her duffel in the hold.

"Really happy to see you. I didn't relish spending the night up here alone."

They made it back into the air without further incident and were soon headed toward Bettles.

Karla leaned forward in her seat. "How's Jane?"

"Still stable when we got there. She went right onto the air ambulance. They should be at the hospital by now. She wanted me to thank you. You know, you made a huge difference today. I always

really worry about these kinds of calls. Not the flying so much, but what injuries or problems I'll have to deal with. There's only so much I know to do."

"I'm glad I was able to help. We made a good team."

"That we did."

The lights of Bettles came into view, and Bryson radioed in their approach. "I got us our room at the Den," she told Karla as they touched down. "Sorry you missed your flight, but I have to admit I'm thrilled to get another night with you."

"Me, too, Bryson. You know, I almost hope that when I call to rebook, they tell me all flights out of here are full for the next six months."

The Cub rolled to a stop and Bryson came around the plane to help her out. But instead of heading toward the Den, she took Karla in her arms in a fierce embrace. She could feel Bryson trembling, but it was too dark to make out her features.

"You're shaking. What is it?"

"Karla, you...you could..." Bryson's voice broke, and Karla realized she was crying. "You could just not go back."

"What are you saying?"

"I want you to stay. To build a life here with me. I know it's asking a lot. We haven't known each other that long, and you'd be giving up so much. But I love you, with all my heart. I've waited my entire life for you and I just can't let you go. I'd do anything and everything possible to make you happy." Bryson's hand caressed her cheek. "Please. Think about it? I need you. *We* need you. Maggie. Lars. Karson. The whole village, and beyond. Your skills could save a lot of lives."

"I have thought about it, Bryson. I've thought about little else." Her pulse was racing. "Actually, I made a pact with myself, to have the Alzheimer's test...to see whether I could be with you without saddling you with the prospect of having to take care of me. To watch me go through what my mother went through. I planned to come back if I didn't have this awful future. I was going to surprise you."

"Don't you know none of that matters?" Bryson kissed her, long and hard, then hugged her close. "Life is full of risks and uncertainty, sweetheart. I know that better than anyone, doing what I do. I've learned it's best to seize whatever happiness you can, while you can. As long as I have you, I can face anything life may throw at us."

"I want so much to believe that, Bryson. I do. But—"

"Karla, I know you've been through so much that it has to be tough to trust what I'm saying. But I believe with every fiber of my being that we belong together. That your coming here wasn't just about finding Maggie, but also about finding me. That fate had a role in all of this, somehow. If you search your heart and find you feel the same, then shouldn't we follow what seems to be our destiny?"

Was it that simple? That destiny had brought her here? It certainly seemed so. Being here with Bryson felt *right*. Completely and absolutely *right*. Preordained. To fight that seemed unconscionable. "On one condition."

Bryson inhaled sharply as she tightened her arms around Karla. "Whatever it is, the answer is yes."

"I'm grounding you for at least a week, so we can make love in every way imaginable."

Bryson laughed. "Done." She lifted Karla and whirled her around, then kissed her. "Come on. I know some folks who'll be just about as happy as I am about this. You get one phone call and maybe some dinner, then it's straight to bed. And don't expect to get one wink of sleep tonight."

Karla's heart soared as they strolled toward the Den, arm in arm. "Yes, ma'am. Have I mentioned I love it when you're so forceful like this?"

About the Author

Kim Baldwin has been a writer for three decades, following up twenty years as an executive in network news with a second vocation penning lesbian fiction. She has published five other solo novels with Bold Strokes Books in addition to *Breaking the Ice*: the intrigue/romances *Flight Risk* and *Hunter's Pursuit* and the romances *Force of Nature*, *Whitewater Rendezvous*, and *Focus of Desire*. Four of her books have been finalists for Golden Crown Literary Society Awards. She has also published two books in the Elite Operatives Series in collaboration with Xenia Alexiou: *Lethal Affairs* (translated into Dutch as *Dubbel Doelwit*) and *Thief of Always*. The third book in the series, *Missing Lynx*, comes out in February 2010.

Kim has also contributed short stories to five BSB anthologies: The Lambda Literary Award–winning *Erotic Interludes 2: Stolen Moments*; *Erotic Interludes 3: Lessons in Love*; IPPY and GCLS Award–winning *Erotic Interludes 4: Extreme Passions*; *Erotic Interludes 5: Road Games*, a 2008 Independent Publishers Award Gold Medalist; and *Romantic Interludes 1: Discovery*. She is currently at work on her tenth novel. She lives in the north woods of Michigan, but takes to the road with her laptop and camera whenever possible. Her Web site is www.kimbaldwin.com and she can be reached at baldwinkim@gmail.com.

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