

SNOWBOUND SERIES BOOK 4

Snowbound Vacation



Veronica Tower

Red RoseTM Publishing

Snowbond Series Book Four

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By

Veronica Tower



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Chapter One

Liz pushed the pedal of her graphite mica Mazda Miata to the floor and raced around the tractor trailer truck ahead of her on the mountain road. She enjoyed the chance to push the speedometer up past ninety, even though it was by no means necessary. It was the same sense of exhilaration that led her to drive with the window down and the heat blasting to ward off the frigid late February air. She liked the feel of the wind racing past her, whipping her long dark hair out beneath her warm stocking cap. When her cheeks got too cold she'd roll the window up for a few minutes, but as soon as she felt warm enough again she'd have it back down so she could feel the wind on her face.

Her cell phone rang and she glanced down at the caller ID to see the younger of her two older sisters calling. Kara was supposed to be at the airport meeting her young boyfriend as he returned from a business trip. The two had met in an airport just a couple of months ago and Kara had been both excited and nervous about the rendezvous. Excited to see Ron, of course, but nervous because he enjoyed public displays of...*intimacy* would probably be the proper word. Liz had never managed

to get all of the details, but she gathered Ron had made things pretty hot and steamy. This was all the more surprising because Kara had always been so conservative. Liz's older sisters just weren't as adventurous as she was.

She accepted the call and put the phone to her ear. "Hi Kara, still waiting for Ron?"

"Are you driving with your window down?" Kara asked. Her voice was far too loud for the phone and Liz moved it a couple of feet away from her. "It sounds like Niagara Falls is running past my ear."

Liz sighed and rolled her window half way up. "Is that better?"

"Yes," Kara answered in a much quieter voice. "Thanks! I don't know how Daryl puts up with that. You're going to both be sick for your little holiday if you're not careful."

Liz glanced at the empty passenger seat behind her and smothered a sense of regret. "The whole point of going skiing," she reminded her sister, "is to feel the rush of the wind past your body. What's wrong with getting a little head start?"

"I bet you aren't bundled up tonight like you will be on the slopes," Kara said.

Liz glanced down at her body. She wore a tight, fuzzy sweater which did more to highlight the curve of her ample breasts than it did to keep her warm. Her sleek black slacks were no better, but wearing a ski suit in the car would make her

feel claustrophobic.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Kara said.

Liz ignored her sister for a moment, checking the rearview mirror as she got ready to pass another car. The back window had fogged up again so all she could see were her own dark brown eyes and thirty-year-old mahogany face. She clicked the button for the rear defogger and tried to get a good look through the external mirror.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Kara repeated.

“Of course you’re right, Kara,” Liz said. “When aren’t you?” Then to change the subject she asked, “So when does Ron get in?”

“His plane is due in ten minutes and who knows—it might actually be on time for a change.”

“Wouldn’t that be a pleasant surprise,” Liz said. She looked up at the gray sky above her. “You know it really will be lucky if he gets in on time. From the look of the sky we should be getting more snow.”

The truck she had passed a few minutes ago came racing up beside her again. Liz eased the gas pedal down toward the floor to keep pace with him, refusing to let him pass back into the lane ahead of her.

“The weather report says it’s not supposed to snow until tomorrow night,” Kara told her.

“Well it looks like it could come early,” Liz said.

The truck driver did not give up, but took advantage of his greater mass to build some momentum on the down slope.

“I hope not,” Kara said. “We’ve already had an awful lot of snow this year—even for Detroit.”

That was true, Liz knew, but that was the kind of weather you got in Michigan. “So do the two of you have any plans or are you just going to take your boy toy home and ravish him?” she asked.

Kara uncharacteristically didn’t try and change the subject. “I would guess we’ve got the same basic ideas as you and Daryl,” she said, “except we’ll be at my house instead of a romantic ski lodge.”

Liz glanced back at the empty seat beside her and wondered if she should tell Kara that Daryl had broken up with her. She decided against it. She didn’t want to get into the details of how she’d let Mama mess with her and Daryl just as she’d interfered with their eldest sister Ruth and her husband all these years. Besides, Daryl hadn’t been her husband—just a boyfriend of three and a half months that Liz had gotten used to having around.

The damn truck slid in front of her while she was thinking about Daryl and put his blinker on. He was crazy if he thought she’d let him merge back into her lane.

“Liz, are you there?” Kara asked.

“What? Yes! I’m just think—oh, my God!”

The truck driver didn’t care that Liz hadn’t made room for him. He started merging anyway clipping the front end of her car with his rear fender. Liz dropped her phone, slammed on her brakes and held on for dear life as her car began to spin. The truck driver, belatedly aware of the danger, must have wrenched the steering wheel too far the other way because the cab suddenly veered back to the left but the body of the truck continued to swing right. The left rear wheels came off the pavement and the back of the semi struck the guard rail.

Metal wrenched, screeched and tore before the guard rail broke free and dragged along after the bed of the truck. Liz corrected her response to the looming catastrophe, hitting the gas instead of the brake and turning into her spin, trying to give her front wheels the traction they needed to pull out of this and gain control again. A car’s headlights flashed ahead of her but she was so disoriented that she couldn’t tell if it was in her lane or part of the oncoming traffic. She guessed it didn’t matter—both directions were dangerous to her now as her car spun out of control.

Ahead of her, the flustered truck driver over-compensated in the other direction and overturned his vehicle. Metal screamed and sparks flew as the truck ground against the pavement and continued to slide down the road.

Liz and her car spun past him, careening toward the far guard rail and the several hundred foot drop off beyond.

Her wheels finally began to find traction as she slewed across the wrong lane of traffic and finally righted herself. She pointed herself back at her own side of the highway and gunned the engine. Cars braked and swerved in the oncoming lane ahead of her, desperately trying to avoid a collision. Her Mazda threaded the needle, shooting forward into safe territory again until she skidded to a halt on the shoulder of the road.

Liz sat in her car, hands still gripping the steering wheel, fighting her body's need to shake and tremble.

She had no idea how long she sat like that. Car horns continued to blare in the dark gray air around her, but she was only distantly aware of them. Although her eyes were open, all she could see was the glare of headlights in her memory racing over and over again to seal her fate. Her ears rang with her own shrill screams endlessly repeating as she relived the near tragedy. Why the hell wasn't she dead? How had she gotten her car through that?

"Hey, are you okay?" a male voice asked from outside her partially opened window. "You must drive race cars in your spare time because that was some mighty fancy driving. I caught most of it in my rearview mirror. How are you still alive?"

Liz continued to look at her hands. Her fingers squeezed the steering wheel so tightly that they'd paled under the pressure. She was afraid that if she loosened them she wouldn't be able to stop them from shaking.

"Hey," the male voice said. He opened her door. "You're okay now! You did it! You're okay."

Liz couldn't look at him. She kept seeing those headlights racing toward her in her mind's eye.

She heard the metal click as the man unfastened her seat belt. "It's all right now. You did it and you're ready for the Indy 500 or what's that one where they race across Africa?"

His fingers touched her left hand where it sat clamped to the steering wheel and gently pried her fingers loose. "Here, why don't you step out of the car for a moment and get a breath of fresh air?"

His hand was remarkably warm in the frigid temperatures.

Liz let him steer her out of the car but her right hand stopped their progress when it refused to relax its grip on the wheel.

The man leaned in beside her to gently pry those fingers free as well. The movement brought his face next to her, forcing her eyes to see him for the first time.

For some reason it surprised Liz that he was white—white and clean-

shaven with rich black hair long enough to mostly cover his pale ears.

He freed her hand and helped her to her feet but Liz's knees immediately gave out and she collapsed against his body.

He caught her easily enough—almost as if he'd expected her reaction. "Let's take it slow," he said. "You've had a terrible scare and your body needs a little time to adjust to your survival."

"I, I was fine when it was happening," Liz whispered.

"You were better than fine!" the man assured her. "You couldn't have handled the situation any more perfectly."

"The truck driver," Liz remembered.

"I think he's okay," the man told her. "His truck is a wreck, but he pulled himself out of it and is walking around. I was the car in front of you," he added. "I saw the bastard cut in and clip you in my rearview mirror."

For the first time, Liz forced herself to look around. The semi-truck was a few hundred feet behind them now, turned over on its side and blocking at least two lanes of traffic.

"Was anyone else hurt?"

She tried to see if the guardrail on the far side of the highway was intact but with the gray night air, she couldn't tell for certain.

"I'm not sure," the man said, "I don't think anyone drove over the cliff, but I

think at least one other driver collided with the semi.”

“Oh, my God,” Liz said. “I didn’t even think of that.”

“Emergency vehicles are coming,” the man told her. “They’ll help everyone and get the rest of this straightened out too.”

Suddenly Liz became aware that she was leaning against this stranger’s chest, taking comfort in his strong arms. It embarrassed her—partly because he was white but mostly because she simply didn’t know him. She straightened up and was slightly unhappy to discover that her legs were ready to support her. “Thanks for helping me out of my car.”

“Glad to,” the man said. He didn’t quite let go of her, although he relaxed his embrace sufficiently to let her test her legs. “Are you sure you’re alright? You had quite a scare there.”

His eyes were brown like Liz’s and he was very handsome. “Yes,” she said as she took a tentative step away from him. “I think I can stand now. I’m sorry I had to impose on you for a few moments.”

“Hey, my pleasure,” the man said. He’d completely released his physical contact with her when she stepped away from him. Now he offered her his hand. “I’m Travis Lawton, by the way.”

Liz accepted the handshake. “I’m Liz Brennan.”

“I’m glad to have had the chance to meet you, Liz,” Travis said.

They both glanced self consciously at the wreck behind them sprawled out across the highway.

“I’m glad too,” Liz told him.

“Why don’t we take a look at your car?” Travis said.

He guided her to the rear of her vehicle and they examined the damage together. The paint job was ruined of course, and the driver’s side front corner had crumpled in so that the metal seemed to be in contact with her wheel.

Travis shook his head. “You’re damn lucky that this didn’t blow out your tire. I don’t think anyone could have controlled the car if that had happened. You’re going to have to get it towed.”

Liz frankly didn’t know if she was up to driving again anyway after what had just happened, but she was in the middle of nowhere on the edge of the Porcupine Mountains and she really didn’t want to be without her car.

“Oh good, the cops are here,” Travis said. He pointed toward the approaching emergency lights. “They’re going to need a statement, and then they’ll be able to help us fill out your insurance reports and get a tow truck up here. How far were you going? I’m just heading up to Mount Winter Lodge for the weekend, but I’d be happy to play chauffeur for you if you need a ride further than that.”

“You’re going to Mount Winter Lodge?” Liz asked. “That’s where I was heading.”

“No way,” Travis said. “Now that’s a coincidence.” He turned to examine the top of her car. “You like skiing? I don’t see any equipment.”

Liz shrugged. “I like to rent it when I get there,” she said. “It saves a lot of hassle.”

“If you don’t mind paying twice as much,” Travis said. “So what do you say? You want a lift?”

Liz really didn’t see that she had any other options. Her car was at least temporarily out of commission and she was by herself. She hoped that agreeing wouldn’t give Travis any additional ideas. She needed a ride not a one night stand. “That would be very nice,” she said, “thank you.”

“Great!” Travis said. “Why don’t we get your bags transferred to my car and then talk to the police officers?”

Chapter Two

“Maybe you should call ahead,” Travis suggested, “and warn the party you’re meeting at Mount Winter that you’ve been delayed.”

Liz gasped in sudden horror at what she had done. “Oh, my God, my phone!”

“What?” Travis asked.

“I left my phone in my car,” she explained. “I’d been talking to my sister just before the accident and I...”

Her voice trailed off as she tried to figure out what had happened to the cell phone. Her fingers began to twitch. It had been at least two hours since she’d had that phone in her hands—two hours in which she hadn’t checked her email, or her Facebook page, or her texts or her messages. Kara must be frantic with worry! And God help them all if she’d stupidly overcome her feud with Mama and let *her* know Liz was missing!

“I need to go back for my phone!” she said. “Can we turn around?” She looked across the highway at the miles long line of unmoving traffic. “Oh, God, we can’t do that, can we?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Travis said. “Your car won’t be there

anyway. The tow truck was already lifting it and if I heard correctly, he's taking it in the other direction."

"Oh, God!" Liz swore again. Part of her knew she was overreacting, but her cell phone often felt more important than her left hand.

"I'll try if you really want to," Travis said, "but maybe you're actually better off without it for a while. The tow truck driver isn't going to steal it and you were coming up here for a vacation."

Liz tried to calm herself—slow her pulse and moderate her breathing. She was definitely overreacting—but it didn't really feel that way.

She decided to try and be mature about the loss. "Don't turn around," she said. "I think you're right. We'd spend hours trying to get it back. I might as well just wait until tomorrow when I phone the garage to see how expensive this is going to be."

"You do know they aren't going to fix your car tomorrow," Travis said.

Liz stared at him. "Do tell? He said he'd look at it tonight!"

"Oh, and I'm sure he will," Travis agreed. "But tomorrow is Saturday and it's not going to get fixed until Monday."

"God damn it!" Liz cursed. "I'll bet you're right. Why didn't he tell me?"

"Because he didn't want you getting on your missing phone and finding a garage that would fix it right away."

Strangely enough it was this bit of news and not the nearly fatal accident that threatened to bring tears to Liz's eyes. "It's so unfair!" she said. "All I wanted was a quiet weekend away with my boyfriend and..." She trailed off speaking when she realized that had never been a genuine possibility—not since Mama had interfered again.

"I'm sorry," Travis said. His voice sounded a bit odd, not just quieter than it had been a few moments earlier. "I didn't know you were meeting your boyfriend."

"I'm not," Liz admitted. She didn't like the bitterness in her voice or the anger inside her that was generating it.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Travis apologized again. "I must have misunderstood you."

Silence stretched out between them for several seconds while Travis concentrated on the road and Liz tried to decide if she owed him an explanation. It had been nice of him to offer to drive her, after all, but it wasn't like they were good friends.

She decided that politeness required her to offer just a touch more clarity. "Daryl broke up with me two days ago," she said.

"Oh!" Travis said. The bastard even perked up a little. He sure as hell better not make a move on her while he was driving or she'd mace him in the face and damn the consequences.

"Now don't you get any ideas," she told him then cursed herself silently.

That hadn't come out the way she intended at all. It was supposed to be a serious warning, so why did it sound to her ears as if she'd just begun flirting?

"Oh, I won't!" Travis assured her with the same flirty tone that she had just used on him.

Liz had to find a way to cut this off right now. She liked nice, mature, *sophisticated*, black men. Oh who was she kidding? What she really liked were young, energetic, flirty and adventuresome black men—guys who were about Travis' age and build but who were *African-Americans*. Not cocky white guys who drove hot Mustangs and turned their evenings upside down to help a woman in distress.

The professional lawyer inside her began to analyze her mental statement as she would the testimony of a hostile witness. Liz cut that off right away. She had enough troubles without hooking up with a white guy as Kara had done and sending Mama off into another tantrum. Not that she wanted to hook up with him. Just because he was damn cute and-

Travis interrupted her mental analysis. "So why don't we have dinner together tonight when we reach the lodge? We could grab a quick bite and then depending on how late it is hit the slopes for some night skiing."

That really sounded like fun, Liz thought—an excellent prescription for overcoming the boyfriend-dumped-me blues. But she'd never dated a white guy

before and she was hesitant to accept the invitation. She didn't really think there was anything wrong with it despite having jokingly supported her mother's position on the issue for years. It was just that when push came to shove—Daryl leaving her coupled with her near death experience on the highway this evening had left her feeling less than adventuresome.

Rather than turn Travis down flatly she tried to redirect the conversation. “So aren't you meeting someone here?” she asked.

“A couple of old college buddies,” Travis admitted. “But that's the great thing about guys. We're always hoping to meet that cool, beautiful, extraordinary woman. So they aren't going to get mad at me for blowing them off to have dinner with someone like you.”

Liz enjoyed the compliment even as she pretended it hadn't happened. “What you really mean is that you're always on the lookout for a chance to hook up and your friends will forgive you if they think you're jilting them to get some.”

Travis laughed. “Well that goes without saying. Every single guy is looking for a chance to hook up. That doesn't make what I said any less true.”

“Married guys too,” Liz said. She was letting her cynicism out but since she wasn't planning to have dinner with Travis it didn't worry her.

“What?”

“In my experience,” she explained, “married guys are usually looking for a

chance to hook up too.”

“Oh, that’s harsh,” Travis said. “Aren’t you a bit young to be so cynical?”

Liz let her eyes show how absurd she found that concept. “Need glasses, do you, little boy?”

“I see just fine,” Travis assured her, “and I repeat: You’re not that old.”

Liz let him win the argument. She didn’t really want to drive home the point that she figured she had five years on him.

“So how about dinner,” Travis said again.

Liz sighed. He hadn’t been diverted. “I don’t think so,” she said. “It’s late, and I’ve just broken up with Daryl, and I’m tired and I don’t even have my skis yet, and-”

Travis reached over and patted Liz’s hand. “It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to explain anymore. You’ve had a hard night.”

Liz felt herself smiling in relief. “Thanks for understanding.”

“No problem,” Travis said, “but if you’re feeling better tomorrow or Sunday, the invitation stands.”

That was sweet of him, Liz admitted to herself, even if she didn’t plan to take him up on the offer.

He squeezed her fingers for a moment, then returned his hand to the steering wheel.

Chapter Three

Liz set down her book when the waitress approached her table. This wasn't the way she'd envisioned starting this weekend when she'd made the arrangements. Daryl was supposed to be here making her laugh and flirting with her—promising adventures in the hot tub and bed. Instead she was reduced to sitting by herself at a table reading a book her girlfriend, Treina, had pushed on her. Hottest thing she'd read this year, Treina assured her.

Liz ordered flounder, a salad and half a carafe of wine. Then she picked up the book again and examined the cover: *House Rules* by Veronica Tower. She'd been skeptical when she started reading. Interracial romance had never been her fantasy. But her pleasant encounter with Travis had helped her decide to give it a try and she was damn well glad she did.

Someone brushed against her chair, causing Liz to look up from her page.

"Oh, excuse me," a very handsome African American gentleman said. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Considering that the lodge restaurant was nearly two-thirds empty and there was no one else sitting even remotely close to her, Liz took this for a pickup

line and she simply wasn't interested. "That's okay," she told him, "you didn't do any harm."

For some reason, the man took her statement as an invitation to more conversation. "What's a beautiful woman like you doing alone at dinner? There ought to be a law against such a tragedy."

He smiled, evidently expecting her to swoon over his corny come on.

Liz put down her book and looked him up and down. His skin was slightly darker than her own and he had very broad shoulders. What's more, he'd shaved his head—a look she'd always found very masculine. Too bad she wasn't planning to hook up this weekend. Between this guy and Travis she'd have had plenty of opportunity.

She forced herself to smile politely. "Sometimes it's nice to go out by yourself and enjoy a good book."

"I agree completely," the man told her. "I'm Tyrone Banks, by the way."

A good strong name to go with that good strong body, Liz's treacherous mind observed. "Liz Brennan," she responded before she could censor the impulse.

He sat down without asking permission.

"Oh please, take a seat," she said, but her sarcasm was clearly lost on him.

"Thank you, I already have," he told her.

His smile sparked a surge of unwelcome warmth in her breasts and between

her legs even as his attitude irritated her. Well maybe *irritated* wasn't the right term. It could be fun to have a man take charge for a change. Cocky could be sexy in the right hands...

She picked up her book again to make it perfectly clear she'd rather read than talk to him and wondered how he would respond.

"You know I don't believe you," Tyrone announced after a few seconds of silence. "The book's a good prop but what you're really looking for is sitting here across the table."

Liz eyed him across the top of the book—having fun despite her determination not to. "Do tell?"

"You can pretend all you want," Tyrone said with a grin. "But you're not fooling anybody."

Liz put the book down and adopted a hostile expression. "What will it take to make you go away?"

Tyrone's grin broadened. "Now we're getting somewhere!" he said.

"And where is that?"

"You're talking to me for one thing," Tyrone said.

Liz picked up her book again, but the man reached across the table and plucked the volume out of her hands.

"Hey!" Liz cried as she reached to recover it.

Tyrone tossed the book on to an adjacent table almost daring her to get up and get it.

Liz took the dare, standing up and walking past him toward her book. She wasn't quite certain if she was angry or flirting, but whichever it was she was curious to know what he would do next.

Tyrone completely surprised her. As she walked past his chair he stuck his foot between her legs, tripping her.

Liz sprawled forward but Tyrone was ready, grabbing her by the arm and waist and pulling her into his lap. "Here now," he said, "you didn't have to go to all this effort!"

Liz finally decided that she was angry. Flirting and stealing her book was one thing. Actually laying hands on her was over the line.

"That's it!" she said. "Let me go!"

Across the room, half a dozen guys entered the restaurant. Travis Lawton was among them, laughing with his friends until he saw Liz apparently sitting on Tyrone's lap. His face fell and Liz felt competing surges of embarrassment and anger.

"Let go of me!" she snarled.

Tyrone instantly released his grip but intrusively ran his hands down her backside to her ass as she sprang to her feet.

Now she was really angry! She grabbed her book and spun around, wondering what she could possibly think she had seen in this man. “Would you go bother someone else?” she snapped.

Tyrone got to his feet. The expression on his face gave no evidence of doubt in his ultimate desirability. “Now is that what you really want? Because I think you’re really thinking: *How do I get this guy to stay?*”

“A gentleman always takes a lady at her word!” Travis Lawton announced. Liz hadn’t noticed him walking over but she was suddenly very glad that he was here.

Tyrone turned his full attention on Travis. He was broader than the white man but half an inch shorter. They both looked athletic—a football player versus a basketball star. “I don’t remember inviting you into this conversation,” Tyrone said. His manner was threatening but his words rolled out easily as if this were just another discussion.

“It’s not your wishes I’m concerned with,” Travis told him. He too had backed his tone down, but somehow reducing the volume of his speech had dialed up the hostility in his stance.

Tyrone’s eyes tightened as he tried to stare down Travis. At the front of the restaurant behind Travis, his friends suddenly realized that something interesting was happening across the room. They stopped laughing and began to watch the

confrontation, but they didn't rush over to back up Travis.

Tyrone paid the other men no attention at all. He took a menacing half step forward then broke out into a long guffaw. "Why didn't you tell me you were waiting on someone?" he asked Liz. "You could have gotten your friend here broken up playing games with me."

He sauntered away without a second glance giving no impression that the arrival of Travis and his friends had intimidated him in any way.

Travis watched him go, then turned to face her. "Are you okay? That didn't look friendly."

Liz found a smile for him. "He was a bit pushy," she agreed. "Thanks for coming over to help me out. That's twice in one day."

"Glad to," he said.

Somehow—and Liz wasn't exactly certain how it had happened—they were standing very close together. Too close really, but the proximity comforted her. She had to restrain the impulse to reach out and touch Travis—run her fingers up his chest and move in to reward him for rushing over to rescue her.

The waitress chose that moment to arrive with her food. The timing both frustrated and relieved Liz as she stepped back to give her access to the table. She hadn't come here this weekend to find a replacement for Daryl but suddenly she had two guys vying for her attention.

“How are you feeling?” Travis asked when the waiter left. “Any delayed effects from your crash?”

“I don’t think so,” Liz said. “At least not that I’ve noticed.”

“That’s good,” he said. He seemed to resolve some internal debate because he rushed forward and added. “Hey, why don’t you come over and have dinner with me and my friends.” He held up his hands as if to fend off her protest. “No strings!” he promised. “I know you said you wanted to have dinner alone tonight, but after watching you with that guy it occurs to me that what you really might like is a night without guys hitting on you. So why don’t you come join us. It’s awfully lonely over here and that’s no way to spend the first night of your vacation.”

Liz looked at his friends who were unabashedly watching Travis talk to her. It was easy to imagine them together in college standing like that wondering if there friend was going to score with the girl. “Are you suggesting none of them will hit on me?” she teased. “I think I should be offended.”

“Oh, no,” Travis assured her. “We’ll all hit on you, but with that many guys around you won’t have to take any of us seriously. What do you say?”

Liz felt genuinely tempted for a moment, but she smothered the feeling and picked up her book again. “I appreciate the offer, but I really do think I’ll just eat, read my book for a little while, and go to bed.”

There was no doubt that she’d disappointed Travis, but he didn’t let that

spoil his good humor. “It’s your call,” he said, “but if you change your mind, the invitation stands.”

They smiled at each other and then Travis returned to his friends.

Watching them all goofing off together made a part of Liz wish she’d gone with him.

Chapter Four

“Liz! Liz!”

Liz rolled over on her mattress and pulled a pillow over her head, wondering why her neighbors in the lodge had to have guests pounding on their door at such an ungodly hour.

“Liz!” The strangely familiar voice called before pounding some more.

Some people, Liz mused, were so inconsiderate. Why didn’t the lazy bastards just get up and open their door?

“Come on, Liz!” Kara called. “The manager told me you’re in there!”

It slowly penetrated Liz’s sleep fog brain that not only was the pounding incredibly close, but it was unlikely her neighbor was also named Liz. Add to that that she had finally recognized her sister’s voice and she groaned and pulled herself out of bed.

“Wait a minute, I’m coming.”

Liz dragged herself off her mattress and put her bare feet on the floor. Luckily, the carpeting was plush, so she didn’t have to deal with cold tiles or floor

boards. She stumbled across the small dark room and fumbled with the lock until the door swung open.

A Kara-shaped blur threw her arms around her. “Oh, thank God, I have been so worried about you!”

Liz blinked against the bright lights in the hallway and awkwardly patted her sister’s back.

“You didn’t call back!” Kara accused her. “You screamed and the phone got cut off but you didn’t call back. And then the news started reporting an accident on the highway and I thought you’d been killed!”

Liz broke the embrace and stepped back wondering what time it was. Her eyes were finally adjusting to the new light so she could make out the details in Kara’s mahogany face and her boyfriend’s Caucasian features behind her.

“Sorry about that,” Liz told Kara. “I should have called when I got to the lodge but I was tired and I didn’t think of it.”

Having hugged Liz and assured herself she was physically okay, Kara was able to joke again. “Tired?” she asked, “or just anxious to get to bed. Daryl, it won’t hurt you to get up and say hello. Ron and I just spent six hours fighting through work crews and traffic to come check on the two of you.”

An awkward silence filled the room as Daryl failed to answer Kara. “Um, Daryl didn’t come with me,” Liz confessed. She felt utterly humiliated by the

revelation. She was usually the one to drop guys and she'd never before felt the need to pretend she'd had a man when she didn't.

Kara's face filled with concern again. "Oh, Lizi," she said, falling into speech patterns they hadn't used since they were children. "What happened?" she asked as she wrapped her sister in her arms again.

It had taken Liz all of her teenaged years plus half her adult life to convince her father and two sisters to stop calling her Lizi. Her sisters had only grudgingly conceded after their father had died. She was not going to let Daryl become the excuse to start using the nickname again.

She pointedly broke Kara's embrace. "Don't call me *Lizi*! Oh, and, hi Ron, it was nice of you to drive Kara up here to check on me. Sorry about that! I know the two of you had other plans."

Ron smiled good-naturedly from the doorway. "I'm just glad you're okay," he said. Then he added, "Now why don't you get dressed—not that the t-shirt isn't fetching. Kara and I can meet you down at the bar and you can tell us what happened with Daryl."

Some hint of opposition must have shown on Liz's face because Ron instantly amended his proposal. "Or you can just tell Kara, if you prefer. I'm sure they have a pool room or an arcade in this place. But in the meantime, I need to go look into getting Kara and me a room for the night because I do not want to drive

back to Detroit before morning.”

“What time is it?” Liz asked, looking around vainly for a clock.

“A little after 1:00 A.M.,” Kara told her.

“And you’ve been on the road all this time?”

“We left as soon as we picked up Ron’s luggage at the airport.” Kara confirmed.

For the first time since Kara and Ron arrived, a feeling of guilt flooded through Liz. “I’m really sorry!” she said. “I should have called. I dropped my phone when a truck cut me off and, well, he crashed and I spun out and to make a long story short, my phone was still on the floor of my car when the tow truck pulled off with it.”

“Spun out?” Kara repeated. “Tow truck?” Suddenly she looked very concerned again. “You were in an accident?”

Liz grinned, suddenly enjoying herself. “This big truck clipped me and I spun across a couple of lanes of traffic. It could have been worse.”

“We saw where the crews were cleaning up the wreck,” Ron said. “You’re lucky you weren’t killed.”

An involuntary shiver ran the length of Liz’s spine. “Guess I’m just lucky then,” she said, trying to keep the mood light.

Kara hugged her again. “I’m so glad you’re alright! Now you get dressed and

Ron and I will meet you in the bar. Do you think the restaurant is still serving this late? All we had was McDonald's and that was a while ago."

"I don't know," Liz told her, "it's a small place. But they do have night skiing so maybe you'll get lucky."

"We'll check it out," Ron said, "but regardless, we'll still meet you in the bar. I could use a large black and tan. Between the airport and the road, I'm ready to relax."

He hooked his arm in Kara's and they strolled off down the hall.

Liz watched them go wondering why she didn't have someone like Ron in her life. It didn't have to be Daryl, but if not him, why not someone else? Why couldn't she find a guy who she wanted around more than a couple of months—or who wanted to stay with her?

She flicked on her light switch and closed the door. The lodge room was like a honeymoon suite—king-sized bed, hot tub, and mirrors all over the walls and ceiling. It should have been the perfect romantic getaway for her and Daryl, but now, staying here alone she felt a little bit cheesy. She also saw just how short her t-shirt was stretching just a couple of inches south of her crotch. It wasn't something she would normally have worn in front of Kara's boyfriend—not that she thought it was a problem. He was beautifully fixated on Kara.

She went to the bathroom, splashed water on her face, dragged a brush

through her hair a couple of times, pulled on a pair of blue jeans and slipped into her shoes. She hesitated with her hand on the door and forced herself to go back to the foot of the bed and pick up the bra she had discarded earlier that evening. Kara was more conservative than she was—or at least she had been before she started dating Ron.

Appropriately dressed, Liz wandered out of her room and went to find the bar. Kara was already there eating a bowl of pretzels, but Ron must still be trying to secure a room for the night. She wondered if he'd have any luck. It was the weekend after all. The lodge could easily be full.

Kara got up from her barstool and hugged her again. That was really becoming annoying. Where was all this touchy feely crap coming from? Kara must have hugged her more tonight than she had in the past year. Sure she'd had an accident but she hadn't even been hurt!

They sat together at the bar. Instead of the promised beer Kara had a glass of red wine in front of her. Drinking was just one of the many *vices* they kept hidden from their mother. "How are you feeling?" Kara asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, kept right on talking. "Ron's trying to get us a room so we have a little privacy while he's gone. Do you want to talk about Daryl or the accident? What should I order you from the bar?"

"Whoa, slow down a minute," Liz told her. "What are you so nervous

about?”

Kara closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing.

“Kara, what’s wrong?” Liz asked.

“I just keep thinking about what Ron said earlier. You could have died tonight! You’re my little sister and you could have died!”

Liz gave into another spontaneous hug. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

“It’s just that, you’re my little sister, and we don’t say this very often, but I love you!”

“Now you’re getting all mushy on me,” Liz said. She patted Kara on the back, touched that her sister was so concerned about her but wanting to get their relationship back to normal. Their family was very close in a lot of respects, but they didn’t talk about their feelings for each other that often—at least they hadn’t before Mama had tried to force Kara to stop dating Ron.

“I think you need to finish that glass of wine,” Liz told Kara. “And I’m going to get something for me. I know it’s late but I feel like a margarita.”

The bartender stepped forward, clearly having been waiting for just that sort of announcement. “One margarita coming right up,” he said.

“With plenty of salt, please,” Liz told him.

The bartender set about making the drink and Kara turned the conversation back to more serious matters. “So what happened between you and Daryl?”

Liz wasn't certain she wanted to discuss this with Kara, but she was absolutely sure she didn't want to talk about it in front of Ron. So she decided to make the best of the situation and try to get the subject out of the way as quickly as possible.

"Mama happened," Liz summarized.

Kara's expression grew even more serious. "How so? I thought she liked Daryl. He's black, he's a lawyer like you so she couldn't complain about his job. He's—"

"Almost five years younger than me," Liz cut her off.

Kara grimaced—probably because Ron was some fifteen years younger than her.

"So what happened?" Kara asked again. "I thought he was handling her pretty well. He saw what she did to Ron and what she'd already done to poor Al and he hung around anyway."

The bartender set Liz's margarita in front of her and she reached for her pocket book.

"No," Kara said, "I've got this one." She pushed three twenties across the bar and said: "Keep our glasses full. I think we're going to need them."

The money disappeared and the bartender topped off Kara's wine glass. He then showed the good grace to walk a few steps away from them.

“Now tell me what happened,” Kara urged Liz.

“I thought he was handling things pretty well too,” Liz said. “He never complained about Mama. I thought he took her digs and jibes like I do, letting them wash past, deflecting them with a little humor.”

“So what happened?”

“It was Valentine’s Day,” Liz said. “I screwed up.”

“What? How? I thought you two had planned a nice evening together.”

“We did,” Liz confirmed, “but I let Mama screw it up. This weekend was actually supposed to be my apology to Daryl but he-”

Liz’s throat hitched, surprising her with more emotion than she wanted to express.

“He...” Kara prompted.

“He told me he didn’t see how things could work out with my dysfunctional family antics,” Liz completed her sentence. She made it sound like legalese, not a painfully accurate description of everything that was wrong with her life.

“Wow!” Kara said. “He’s got our number, doesn’t he?” She took a long sip of her wine prompting Liz to take an even larger gulp of her margarita. The salt and the tequila made her grimace but that was part of what she wanted from the drink.

“He actually said a lot more than that,” Liz confessed. “It turns out he was getting pretty angry about a lot of things but had kept his mouth shut because he

enjoyed the sex. I guess there comes a point when the sex isn't worth all of the headaches."

Kara pulled back a little. Despite what Liz gathered to be a very active sex life with Ron, she was still reserved when it came to talking about it. Liz wasn't certain if the problem was talking about it with her or in general. Liz had never had a problem talking about sex with her girlfriends.

"So what exactly set him off?" Kara asked not so subtly redirecting the conversation away from the subject she was uncomfortable with and back to the one that was painful for Liz.

Ron appeared in the bar and made his way over to them. "I got a room," he announced, then froze in mid-stride at the sight of Liz and Kara's faces. "Oh, damn," he said, "I think I left my wallet at the front desk. Could you two excuse me for a few more minutes?"

He turned around and hurried away while Liz and Kara continued to look after him.

"In case you're wondering," Kara said, "that was sensitivity and not cowardice. You look like you're about to cry and well, Ron really is a good guy."

Instead of answering, Liz took another large gulp of her margarita. Her drinking method tonight was designed for impact, not enjoyment, and she felt the heat flood her chest and belly with approval.

“So what happened?” Kara asked again.

“You remember the big snow we had on Valentine’s Day?”

“How could I forget?” Kara said. “Ron and I watched Ruth and Al’s kids that whole weekend while they took their little *get reacquainted* holiday.”

“Well Mama pretended her pipes burst that night and spoiled Daryl and my evening.”

“She what?”

“You heard me,” Liz said.

“But why?” Kara asked. It was funny how Mama kept finding new lows with which to surprise them.

“She called just when we were starting dinner,” Liz explained. “Daryl had actually cooked for me because the snow was too bad to go to the restaurant. We had candles lit and were just getting comfortable when Mama phoned. You had Ruth and Al’s kids and we know how much she hates Ron. Ruth and Al were in Jamaica, so they couldn’t help her. I really didn’t waste any time thinking about it and neither did Daryl. We called a friend of his with a four wheel drive and the three of us drove out to Mama’s house. It was hard going. We had nearly two feet of snow and the plows weren’t doing that well. And when we got there-”

She paused to gulp down the rest of her drink and smiled gratefully when the bartender slid a fresh glass in front of her.

“And when you got there?” Kara prompted.

“There wasn’t anything wrong,” Liz explained. “No pipes had burst, the basement wasn’t flooded, Mama was healthy—at least before I started strangling her.”

From the look on Kara’s face, it was possible she didn’t believe the last comment was a poor attempt at a joke.

“So after Daryl and his friend pulled you off Mama, what did she have to say for herself?”

Liz took a liberal sip from the new margarita. She could really feel it in her stomach and her upper lip began to tingle.

“Liz!” Kara prompted.

“She said she wanted to know if one of her daughters still cared about her,” Liz said. “She ruined my evening because she’s still mad at you and Ruth.”

“Oh, damn,” Kara said. There was no force behind the words, just sadness. “She’s really crazy, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know why Daddy put up with her all of those years,” Liz said. “Why didn’t he walk out on her? He couldn’t have been happy.”

“I think he stayed for us,” Kara said. “He didn’t want his daughters to have to deal with her alone.”

That would be like Daddy, Liz thought. He’d really loved his little girls.

“What I really don’t understand,” Liz confessed, “is why he married her in the first place.”

Kara set her wine glass down but didn’t appear to notice the bartender refilling it. “You really don’t know?” she asked.

Kara’s question unsettled Liz. Her sister’s eyes burned with intensity as if the inquiry made her very angry.

“No,” Liz said. She didn’t like how small her voice sounded in her own ears. “I don’t know.”

The anger transformed instantly into surprise. “Really? *You*, the lawyer in the family, haven’t put this together? Didn’t you ever see their marriage license buried in the family bible?”

“No,” Liz said, trying to figure out what the license could have to do with things.

Kara began to laugh. “You’re not joking are you? You really never figured this out?”

Bewildered, Liz slowly shook her head from side to side. “What could the license have to do with—*oh no!* You are not serious. Not Mama!”

Kara laughed bitterly. “Shocking isn’t it? Our oh so proper Mama hasn’t been married as long as she pretends to be.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” Liz said. A squeal of delight found its way into her

voice. Mama had been pregnant when she got married. All of those damning years of moral lectures and pretended superiority and she'd messed around with Daddy before her wedding day.

"You know she was actually quite attractive in those days and rumor has it she used to know how to have a good time."

Liz put her hands over her ears. "No, no, no, no, no," she laughed. "I am not listening. My proper Mama thinks sex is dirty and evil. One of the angels must have given her children because my Mama didn't do that kind of thing."

Kara kept laughing but the bitterness had transformed into genuine humor. "I know, I thought I was going to have a heart attack when I first noticed the discrepancy."

"But you didn't use it against her when she said all of those evil things to you and Ron at Ruth's house," Liz said.

"And what good would it have done?" Kara asked. "Why do you think Mama is this way? She must have received so much grief and so much pain from everyone over having Ruth too early that she scrunched up into the shrill evil creature we know today."

"And Daddy must have felt so guilty," Liz said.

"I don't know about that," Kara said. "Daddy loved us. And I think he loved Mama too, in his way."

Thoughts of Daddy stole the mirth away and both Liz and Kara reached for their drinks simultaneously.

“I miss him,” Kara finally said.

“Me too,” Liz told her.

“When I’m playing pool with Ron...” Kara started to say.

Liz remembered how much Kara had loved to play pool with Daddy. “I’m sure he’s really happy you found someone who enjoys the game like he did,” Liz said.

“I hope so,” Kara said. “I’d like to think he’d approve of Ron.”

“He makes you happy,” Liz said. “That’s all that Daddy would care about.”

“But—”

“Daddy never cared about white or black—not like Mama does. All he’d care about is that Ron is good to you and you love him.”

“You know that’s right,” Kara said. “Daddy was always willing to give a man an even chance. Why aren’t you more like that?”

“What?” Liz asked. She felt utterly astonished that Kara could ask her this.

“You always take Mama’s side on this one. Black women should not date white men—except in my case when I’m so much older than Ron that it is obviously me taking advantage of him.”

Liz felt a touch of anger stoking in her chest. “You can’t really think I believe

that!" she said.

"But you say it all the time~"

"I'm making fun of Mama!" Liz said. "Oh, there might have been a year or two in college when I really believed it, but of all the stupid things to think. I don't care who you or anyone else dates."

"Really?" Kara asked. "I always thought you were serious."

"Oh, for God's sake," Liz protested. "When have I been really serious about anything?"

"But, you don't date~"

"Neither did you before Ron," Liz interrupted her sister. "That doesn't mean anything! Or were you making a political statement by dating only black men?"

"No," Kara agreed, "but I might have been unconsciously avoiding white guys to avoid setting off trouble with Mama."

Liz's temper started to subside. "Well I might be guilty of that as well," she said. "What sane person is going to consciously set Mama off on one of her tirades?"

"She does make everything difficult," Kara agreed. "What are we going to do with her?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Liz noticed Ron peeking into the bar. She waved him over. "There's nothing we can do with her," she said. "Mama is crazy

but not in a way that we could get her committed. The real question is: Are we going to keep putting up with her behavior?”

“I don’t know how to stop it,” Kara said. “Oh, hi, Ron, we’re talking about Mama.” She paused to let him give her a quick peck on the lips.

“Everything okay now?” Ron asked. “I can give you more time if you need it.”

“No,” Liz said. “You might as well stay and get drunk with us. We’re done talking about important things.”

“Great! But let’s move to the restaurant. I really need something to eat!”

Chapter Five

Liz had a pounding headache when she woke up the next morning—the perfect excuse to roll back over and stay in bed. The only problem with this plan was that her body wouldn't accommodate her by going back to sleep so after thirty or forty minutes of tossing and turning she gave into the inevitable and stumbled into the bathroom. Her vanity case had a small bottle of Excedrin in it and she swallowed two tablets in the hopes of making her head feel right again. Then she stood under the full force of the shower for an indeterminate period of time trying to pound some vitality back into her body.

It didn't work, so she dressed, picked up her book and stumbled off toward the restaurant, where she found her head hurt too badly to let her read. Kara and Ron must have returned home without saying goodbye because she saw no sign of them.

Her body handled the eggs and toast better than she anticipated, so Liz donned her coat and braved the frozen outdoors. It was still cloudy with the threat of snow, which was actually a good thing because Liz's head couldn't have handled the bright glare of the sun off the snow. She stumbled down to the ski shop, rented her equipment and was just starting back outside when Ron and Kara wandered

in looking far too happy to have hangovers.

“Liz,” Kara greeted her. “We stopped by your room this morning but you were already out.”

Liz decided not to think about what her sister and Ron had been doing that kept the apparently healthy couple in bed long after her hung over self. It didn’t seem fair for them to be having so much more fun than her on *her* vacation. “I thought you had gone back to Detroit,” she told them.

“We’re already here and we’ve paid for the room,” Ron explained, “so we decided to stay and ski for a while. Hopefully the snow will hold off until we give up and go home.”

“We’ve had more snow than I know what to do with this winter,” Kara complained.

Ron put his arm around her. “It’s worked out pretty well for us,” he said. “All things considered, I wouldn’t mind another storm so long as it catches us together.”

Liz averted her eyes before they could kiss. She’d been all in favor of her sister obtaining a boy toy but that didn’t mean she wanted to watch them get all lovey dovey with each other—especially when she was currently manless herself. And she was definitely not planning to spend her vacation with the two of them. What she wanted here was a little quiet time to think about her life and her

future. She did not need an older sister sticking her two cents into that.

“Well you two have fun,” she said. “I’m going to hit the slopes.”

She picked up her skis and stepped outside while Ron held the door for her. She secured her lift pass to her ski vest and her skis to her boots, then made her way to a moderately difficult slope so she could warm up on her first run of the day. The lift gave her a view of the thousand or so people already on the slopes. The air was brisk with promise, but the gray clouds overhead promised that more snow was coming. Not that that was bad, of course. New snow was a good thing when you were out skiing.

She hit the slopes again for the third time that winter and quickly regained her rhythm despite the hangover. The cold wind in her face pressed against the pounding in her skull and pushed it back out of her mind, freeing her to concentrate on reading the terrain. She felt free—free of Daryl, free of work, free of Kara and Ron, and most of all, free of Mama. Out here nothing could touch her but the crisp, clear wind.

She completed her first run and went looking for a bigger challenge. Mount Winter had plenty of them—runs that made your legs burn and tested you at every turn.

She was sweating by the end of the second run and no longer bothered by her headache. By coincidence she ran into Kara and Ron at the ski lifts again but

separated from them once they reached the top so she could ski by herself. She went into her tuck, building her speed, wishing she'd learned how to do helicopter turns off the moguls like you see in the Olympics when another skier pulled up beside her, challenging her by his presence to see who could be first down the slope.

Liz accepted the gambit, and put a little more *umph* into her turns. They were going too fast to speak and she didn't know the identity of her competition.

She hoped it wasn't Tyrone.

Cutting past a tree a little closer than she should have, Liz tried to gain a few feet on her opponent. She took a small mogul and launched into the air, struggling slightly to maintain her balance when she landed again.

She loved it! The wind rushed past her face while the guy struggled to make up the couple of feet now separating them.

He was good and quickly caught up to her again. They separated left and right to avoid another skier and then came together again, skiing in unison. He started to pull ahead. His greater weight helped his speed but Liz's smaller body offered less wind resistance.

She couldn't get a look at his face. His scarf covered his chin and his hat and goggles obscured the rest of his features. She slipped a tad bit behind him now and had to concentrate not to get distracted by his form. She dug in her edges and

carved directly in front of him, forcing him to go wider to his right than he had planned. She could see the base of the slope now and she bent her knees low over the skis giving the race everything she had. Her legs burned with the strain but she still couldn't prevent him from slipping past her. A slight bump took her by surprise, lifting her out of the snow and letting her opponent stretch his lead. When she landed again she was clearly behind the man.

In a sudden spray of snow he pulled up short at the bottom of the run and Liz slid to a halt beside him.

"That was fantastic!" Travis Lawton said as he pulled off his glasses. "You're incredible!"

Surprised, Liz felt a conflicting jumble of emotions over his identity. She was genuinely glad to see him but also a bit put out that he kept showing up wherever she went. How had he found her on the slopes? Was Travis stalking her?

"I thought that was you ahead of me on the lift," he continued. "I'm glad I caught up with you. I didn't think I was going to at first. You were really flying!"

Liz pulled her glasses off and blinked in the bright sunlight. "You're a good skier," she acknowledged. She wondered why she didn't sound happier.

Ron pulled up beside them in a flash of spray. "Wow, Liz!" he said. "I thought I was good, but you were really flying."

Travis frowned, clearly perceiving Ron as competition.

Liz enjoyed the sign of jealousy. What was wrong with her? Did she want Travis chasing her or not?

Ron did not pick up on Travis' unhappiness. He offered Travis his gloved hand. "Man, you are really good too. I'm Ron by the way. And this," he pointed with his thumb at Kara as she swooped to a halt beside them, "is Kara."

"Travis," Travis said as he shook Ron's hand. He still looked confused as to how Ron and Liz fit together.

"Travis is the man who helped me out of my car after the accident," Liz explained. "He's also the guy who gave me a ride the rest of the way up here. Travis, this is my sister, Kara, and her boy toy, Ron."

Kara turned a sharp look in her direction, but as usual, Ron, found the description amusing. "Every man should be as lucky as I," he told Travis.

Travis began to look much happier. "It's good to meet you!" he said. "When did you get up here? I thought Liz had said she wasn't meeting anyone."

"We arrived about 1 A.M. last night," Ron answered. "Kara got concerned when Liz got cut off talking to her and didn't call her back."

"Oh, the phone," Travis said. "She dropped it in the car and the tow truck took off with it."

"It would have been nice if Liz had called from the lodge to tell us that," Kara said.

Ron stepped sideways through the snow until he could put his arm around her. “Oh, who are you kidding? We’re having a great morning thanks to Liz!”

Kara leaned into him slightly. “It has been a good morning,” she agreed.

“So, should we hit the slopes again?” Travis asked.

One thing Liz had to credit him with—he wasn’t afraid of a little rejection. It was too bad for him this had turned into an *examine her life* vacation.

“That sounds great!” Ron said as he pointed off to his right. “The lifts are that way.”

Startled, Liz shot him a warning glance. What the hell did he think he was doing? She didn’t plan to spend the day with any of them.

“Actually, I’m pretty cold,” Kara said. She shivered in her new vest. “Could we go back to the lodge and warm up first?”

Ron immediately tightened his half embrace, pulling Kara closer to him. “Of course,” he said. Then Liz could almost see a new idea ignite in his mind. “Of course Liz’s hot tub would do a better job than a mug of hot chocolate.”

Kara’s face retreated into a little embarrassed smile which Liz could not help but further tweak. “Thanks, Ron,” she said, “that’s just what I need to make me feel better this weekend—my sister and her boyfriend using the hot tub I had planned for Daryl and me.”

Now Kara began to look pained, but Travis reentered the conversation and

complicated the situation. “Well if it’s large enough for four,” he said, “you could still get at least part of your money’s worth.”

Kara’s way too expressive face was comical to behold. “I didn’t know I was coming up here,” she said. “I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

Ron arched an eyebrow at her. “I think Travis’ smart enough to have put that together,” he said.

“Oh,” Kara answered in a voice almost too small to hear. She was clearly surprised by the suggestion, but Liz couldn’t tell if she were simply uncomfortable with the idea or uncomfortable that it appealed to her.

She decided to put an end to this speculation. “I’m not quite ready to stop skiing,” she said to her sister, “but if you and Ron want to use my hot tub go right ahead.”

She felt her pockets trying to remember which one had her key card.

Kara sounded defensive, but determined. “We are not going to use your hot tub, but we are going to call it quits for a little while and maybe get a bite to eat.”

Liz stopped searching. “Are you sure?” she asked. “I think your boy toy over there has his heart set on it.”

“Ron will get over it,” Kara assured her.

“Ron will just plan a new get away around this fantasy,” Ron corrected her. “Only this time the hot tub will be out doors on a deck or patio overlooking a

forest. It will be night, and if I can swing it a light snow will be falling...”

As Kara turned to stare at Ron, Liz started laughing. “I told you I like this one, Kara. Now why don’t you two go pretend to have lunch while I get back to my skiing?”

“Oh we’ll be having lunch,” Ron said, “although I’m hoping the menu has changed.”

Kara shoved him good naturedly, almost tipping him over on his skis.

Liz watched them move away together, then realized Travis was still standing beside her expectantly. He was a nice guy, handsome, obviously interested—why did she keep pushing him away? Daryl hadn’t been the great love of her life. They’d only met at a Halloween party a few months ago. Was she getting old and tired like her sister Ruth—too old and tired to want to play the game anymore? Why couldn’t she figure out what she wanted here?

“So would you like to hit the slopes a couple of more times and then grab some lunch?” Travis asked.

A small part of Liz’s mind wanted to agree. Travis was a handsome guy. She was on vacation. It was a classic opportunity for a no strings rebound to pick her up after Daryl. Unfortunately, a more influential part of her psyche disagreed with that plan. It didn’t want to rebound. It wanted to wallow in a morass of self pity. “Look,” she said, “you’re a good guy and I really appreciate you helping me

yesterday, but I'm not looking for any companionship this trip. I just want to spend some time by myself."

The light dimmed in Travis' eyes even before he put his goggles back in place. "If that's what you want," he said. His voice sounded flat to Liz's ears as if she'd finally actually succeeded in driving him away.

Travis turned around and skied off in the direction which Kara and Ron had departed.

Liz stood looking after him feeling even worse than before.

Chapter Six

Liz felt seriously winded by the time she took a break from the slopes and hit the restaurant. It felt good. Daryl had enjoyed skiing with her but he'd never come anywhere close to achieving her level of skill. That meant that Liz had to hold herself back if he and she were to ski anywhere close to each other. Without her ex-boyfriend to worry about, Liz was suddenly free to push her limits, taking the slopes as fast as she could with the wind whipping at her face and blowing her hair out behind her. It was her favorite non-sexual feeling in the whole world and she'd never get enough of it.

As a child she had loved to spin—tilt-a-whirls, floor drops, octopi—anything that spun around and let centrifugal force slam you up against the side of your cart. When her sisters went staggering off the ride ready to vomit, Liz was just getting started. If she'd known in those days that astronaut training involved extended periods in dizzy-machines, she'd have pushed herself a lot harder in science and never entered law. For Liz, driving fast and skiing were the adult version of recreational spinning. It wasn't quite the same as the old ride but the wind still whipped through her hair and the world rushed past at an insanely wonderful pace.

She enjoyed it so much that she always hated to quit, but the need for food finally forced her hand. She also needed to check on her car and to find out when Kara and Ron were heading back to Detroit. And she wasn't really quitting for the day, she was only taking a break.

She dropped her skis off at her room, grabbed her novel, and went to the restaurant. There was no sign of Kara, Ron or Travis Lawton for that matter, but Tyrone Banks was clearly visible at one of the tables closest to the entrance. Sitting across from him was a truly beautiful white woman with small breasts, long blonde hair, very pale skin and a wedding ring adorning her left hand. She looked very happy to be sitting there with Tyrone, but that didn't stop him from winking at Liz as she passed his table.

Liz ignored him, taking her seat several tables away and ordering her meal. She chose chicken soup and grilled cheese because both were light enough not to slow her down and easy enough to prepare that they should minimize her time in the restaurant. Then she took out her book and waited for her meal. The heroine had been invited to a poker game with some very interesting house rules and Liz was anxious to see how she'd handle the situation. More to the point, she wondered how *she* would handle it. She'd always considered herself to be adventurous. She'd actually played strip poker a time or two, but this...she really wasn't certain she had enough back bone to sit and play in a game like this.

Her food came and she consumed it without stopping her reading. Without someone to talk to, eating was an automatic affair which really didn't require any concentration. She was halfway through her second sandwich when someone pulled out the chair across from her and joined her at the table.

She closed the book on her finger to find Tyrone Banks appraising her again. She gave him the briefest moment of consideration, then reopened her book and resumed reading.

This time he didn't grab it out of her hand. Perhaps he was too original to repeat a pickup tactic like that or perhaps he didn't want to make a scene with so many more people present.

After ten or fifteen seconds he said: "I see your boyfriend hasn't come in from the slopes yet."

Liz ignored him, although it was difficult to concentrate on the story with Tyrone sitting across from her like this.

"I'm all alone for the moment as well," he said. "It seems to me that a hot man like me and a beauty like you ought to be able to figure out a way to take advantage of that opportunity."

She continued to ignore him, even though that meant rereading the same line three times.

"I know you're interested," Tyrone said. "You smiled when I winked at you."

Liz knew that was a lie but she didn't rise to the bait. Or at least, she didn't rise to it in the way that Tyrone intended. "Shouldn't you be sitting with your wife?" she asked.

Tyrone laughed. "Oh, Belinda's married alright, but not to me," he said. "Besides, she's off to the ladies room right now. We have a couple more minutes to talk about you and me."

Liz put the book down. "Let's do that," she said.

Tyrone grinned. He really did have great teeth and that shaved head was magnificent, but Liz didn't play second fiddle or go for guys whose eyes wandered while they were sitting with other women. She wanted someone like Travis Lawton who stayed focused despite a few setbacks and never lost his charm.

"What I see-" then broke off wondering where the thought about Travis had surfaced from in her head.

"What I see," Tyrone picked up her thought, "is you, me, a hot tub and a bottle of champagne."

Liz laughed. "You may be handsome but you've got nothing working in your head," she told him. "Why don't you go back to your skinny little girlfriend and enjoy the rest of your holiday? This is the closest you're ever going to come to me."

Tyrone frowned. He clearly hadn't expected Liz to outright reject him like this. He opened his mouth to say something, but Liz caught sight of the white

woman returning to his table.

She stood up. “Belinda!” she called out. “Tyrone’s over here,” she said.

She gathered up her book and her purse and left her meal unfinished.

The white woman—Belinda—looked confused but came over to the two of them. “What’s going on?”

Liz suppressed the urge to say something crude because this woman certainly hadn’t done anything to her. Instead she gave Belinda a brief *just met you* hug that further discombobulated her. “Have fun tonight,” she said. “I’ve got to get back to the slopes.”

She left it up to Tyrone to decide how to explain what had just happened and went to make her phone call and check in on Kara and Ron.

Travis had been right about the car—or at least he had been right by default because only the garage’s voice mail answered Liz’s call. She left a message recording the number of the lodge and her room and then arranged to extend her stay at Mount Winter one more night. That really didn’t seem like much of a hardship to her. She enjoyed the skiing and even though she had pressing cases in the office, she would enjoy taking a day off work.

Kara and Ron had already checked out of their room so they would be going back to Detroit tonight. Whether or not they had already left she had no way of knowing, but she decided it ultimately made no difference. She’d come up here to

be alone and if she didn't see them again this weekend, that wasn't going to bother her.

She returned to her room and traded her novel for skis. Then she returned to the slope and the rush of cold wind biting against her face. It felt even better this time because the long-forecasted snow was finally falling over the slopes—large fluffy flakes turning the beautiful landscape into something even more magical.

She hit the expert courses a couple of more times, enjoying the challenge and wishing for something more. At the top of the lift she thought she saw Travis Lawton talking to another woman. The sight angered her—which was absolutely stupid seeing as she had blown him off at least three times now. She decided to ski over in Travis direction and take a closer look—not that she was jealous or anything—just curious.

As she approached the couple, both looked up at her questioningly and she realized she'd been mistaken. The guy was about Travis' age but he had blue eyes, not brown. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I thought from over there that you were a man I know." The woman frowned at what must sound like a pick up line, so Liz rushed on to say, "I'm really sorry I disturbed you."

The guy grinned and held up one gloved finger as if he were making a point. "Hey, you're the woman Travis was talking to in the restaurant last night."

The woman he'd been talking to looked even less happy. Liz doubted she

was more than twenty years old and she obviously didn't like losing this guy's attention.

Liz didn't really care. "You know Travis?" she said. "That's who I thought you were. He was so nice to me last night after my accident."

"Yeah, he told us about it!" the guy said. "Hey, I'm Bill and this is Ann." He turned his attention back to the girl. "This is the woman I was just telling you about that my friend saw get hit by the truck and almost spin off the mountain."

Ann looked slightly happier that she was being included in the conversation but still far from comfortable with the situation.

Liz decided to take pity on her. "Look, I don't want to take any more of your time," she said, "I was just wondering if you knew where Travis was. I guess I sort of owe him dinner." She didn't know exactly why she said it that way—it was true that Travis wanted to take her out, but she still felt conflicted as to whether or not that would be a good or a bad thing.

Ann brightened considerably. "Wasn't he one of your friends who went off-piste looking for a little more action?"

Bill nodded. "Yeah, he went with Frank, although I don't think it was technically off-piste. They're following an old access road. Wanted to challenge themselves, I think."

That did sound more interesting than simple downhill runs, Liz thought.

“Where is the entrance to this access road?” she asked.

“Over the ridge, that way,” Bill indicated with a wave of his hand. “But they have a pretty good head start on you. If they’re racing or pushing themselves, you’ll never catch them.”

That was precisely the wrong tact to take with Liz if you were trying to convince her to act cautiously. “Oh, I’ll catch them alright,” she said.

She used her poles to push off in the direction Bill had indicated.

Chapter Seven

She found the old access road with the help of a warning sign ordering her not to take it. It lay nestled between two lines of white pine trees a quarter mile down from the summit of Mount Winter and tracked off in the general direction of Winter Valley. Like the official ski slopes, the road was mostly covered in a blanket of old snow which was beginning to disappear beneath the bright new flakes. The road was mostly visible as a sunken path between the trees—almost like a creek bed but much more regular.

Liz expertly slipped off the mountainside onto the old path. She didn't think it was paved beneath her skis, but she didn't stop to scoop away the snow and find out. She wanted to explore this back road and if possible catch up with Travis and his friend. She wasn't quite certain why this latter was so important to her, but it seemed the thing to do just the same.

With the fresh falling snow, it was hard to tell if many other skiers used this road. There were at least a couple of tracks ahead of her, fading in and out of view, but she presumed they belonged to Travis and his friend. Still, the road appeared to be in fairly good repair and that meant she could afford to let herself maximize her speed.

She found it exciting to be on the mountain by herself but not quite the thrill that she had expected the run to be. The snow began to fall harder, making it difficult to make out the paths of the skiers who had gone before her and visibility was getting worse not better. For a moment, she considered turning back, but moving up hill on skis was so arduous and unpleasant that she rejected the notion.

The afternoon began to grow dark. Either the hour was later than she had thought or the storm was getting worse. It might even be a little of both.

She rounded a bend. Visibility was becoming a genuine problem. Not only was the illumination declining, but the heavy flakes of snow were seriously obstructing her midrange vision. She admitted to herself that following Travis down this road had been foolish—following him alone had been downright stupid. Yet there was nothing to do now but keep pushing forward.

It occurred to her suddenly that she had no idea where the access road came out or why it had been abandoned. Would it wind its way back to the ski lodge or would it empty on to old county roads or a highway? Again she considered turning back, but if it had seemed difficult before, now it seemed nearly impossible. She saw no practical option other than to continue to push forward.

The old road was still a good path, broad and smooth. It required a bit of skill to make the sharper turns, but nothing Liz couldn't handle—nothing, that was, until she hit a small snow-covered fallen tree behind a particularly sharp

bend.

She was crouched low, thighs burning, leaning far to her left to steepen the curve and keep from running up over the side of the road into the trees beyond when a large green and white obstruction suddenly rose out of the snow in front of her. She had less than a second to react, but she threw her weight in the other direction and swerved wildly to the right. She had to lift one foot to clear a low rock and then she launched off the side of the road and flew through the air into the forest of trees beyond.

Now there was really no time for thought—especially regarding the two people she glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. Branches whipped at her face trying to knock her down as her skis landed once more in the snow. Tangles of concealed roots made the surface all the more treacherous. She veered left and right and further right in such rapid succession that her brain could not be consciously processing the dangers. She needed to slow her descent but it took all of the control she could muster just to keep from hitting one of the many trees looming out of the flakes in front of her.

She ducked low to clear another branch and lost one of her ski poles. Then she was out of the trees again and flying through the air over a bend in the access road. The brief moment of flight was exhilarating, but there was no good place to land and she skipped, swerved and sprawled when she touched down again,

knocking the wind out of her chest and driving the cold ground snow hard into her face.

She lay for a moment trying to catch her breath then she rolled over, sat up and grinned thinking strangely enough of the tilt-a-whirls she had loved as a child. *Can we do it again, Daddy? Can we do it again?*

She checked her legs. The safety release on her skis had snapped her feet free when she tumbled and her legs were bruised but she thought undamaged. So, evidently was the rest of her. She cautiously tested each lower limb before she fully trusted them but was soon working out the lingering stiffness by walking around the old lane.

One of her skis had come through the mishap just fine, shooting far down the road before finally gliding to a halt. The other had a significant bend that told her she'd be hoofing her way out of this mess. Despite the falling snow, the prospect didn't bother her too much. She was on a road so she was unlikely to get lost and that ride through the trees had been well worth a little inconvenience now.

Thinking of the trees made Liz remember her lost ski pole, so she climbed back off the road and backtracked herself until she found it. It was dinged up but basically functional—if she'd had two healthy skis to use with it.

She trudged back to the road, considered her options and decided to back

track her way to the landslide that had sent her into the trees. She'd stick to the road. It was easier traveling and she was less likely to get lost, and she thought she'd glimpsed a couple of people there and they might have a cell phone. Of course, the likelihood was that it was Travis and his friend—what was the name? And that would be just fine too—although she didn't think she was going to admit to him that she'd skied off the trail trying to catch him. There was no point in raising his expectations before she knew what she wanted to do with him.

The snow was really coming down hard now. The big flakes clung to everything, successfully blotting out just about all the color in the world with the exception of patches of brown tree trunk and green needles which still peeked out of the pines. Liz slung her skis and poles over her shoulder and started back up the road. She wondered how long she'd skied down this way—forty minutes, an hour? She still wasn't certain if it was smarter to try and walk back up the mountain or to continue down this road in search of civilization.

Night had to be almost upon her. Despite her early observations, the sky only seemed to get darker. And walking was harder than skiing. She felt quite winded before she hit the bend in the road that would presumably take her back to the people she'd seen by the fallen tree.

She trudged on, bucking it up, finding herself growing angry at Daryl again as she walked. Why hadn't he complained about Mama earlier? Why had he kept

it all bundled inside so that the first she knew how much it bothered him was when he was walking out the door? And why on earth did it bother her so much? She hadn't been thinking about marriage. They weren't even living together. Daryl was her self-described *boy toy* wasn't he? She'd dated half a dozen like him over the years—great in bed, fun at a party, but she hadn't been thinking about settling down and having kids with him. She really hadn't! So why was she so damned mad that he had left?

She caught a glimmer of movement ahead of her—a splash of red against the blanket of white. She waved with her free hand and called out to them. “Hello? Is everyone all right?”

A darker blotch of color appeared, shaking the snow off his coat and called back to her. “Hello? No, we’ve got an injured man here! Was that you who just raced by us through the trees?”

An injured man? Liz wondered. That had to be Travis if she was right about who these guys were because she didn't recognize the speaker's voice. “That was me!” she shouted. “The tree fall kind of took me by surprise.”

“Us too!” the speaker yelled back. “My friend here banged up his knee. He's not going to be able to ski out.”

Liz was close enough to see them now. The goggled and snowy red form of Travis Lawton was sitting on a boulder at the edge of the landslide and his

friend—*Frank*, that was the name—was standing beside him.

She finished walking up to the two men and raised her goggles.

“Liz?” Travis said. “Is that you?”

Liz affected to be surprised to see him. “Travis?” she asked. “How the hell do we keep running into each other?”

Travis laughed. “It must be fate,” he said. “Of course, I was in better shape the last time you saw me.”

Liz dropped her skis and poles and squatted down beside him. “How bad is the knee?” she asked.

“I don’t really know,” Travis said. “I’ve been afraid to pull my ski pants down and look. But I don’t think it’s broken, I just can’t put any weight on it.”

“You didn’t pull your pants down to look?” Liz asked. “What was the problem? Were you afraid your friend here would get turned on or something?”

“Actually, I am gay,” Frank said, “but Travis isn’t my type. I’m Frank by the way. Travis, ever the gentleman, failed to introduce us.”

“I’m Liz,” she answered him.

“I kind of figured that,” Frank said. “You’re the woman in the car accident?”

“That’s right.”

Liz had looked up at Frank while he was speaking to her but now she turned her attention back to Travis. “I think we should take these pants down and

look at your knee to see how bad it is.”

“I don’t want to do that,” Travis said.

Liz tried teasing him to get her way. “What’s the problem?” she asked. “Don’t tell me you’re shy!”

Travis grinned at her. “Well for one thing, it’s freezing out here. And for the other, I don’t think there is anything we can really do about the injury now—unless you have some medical training you didn’t mention during our drive to the lodge.”

Liz shook her head. “No, I’m a lawyer.”

“Good, she can help us with our lawsuit,” Frank said.

Liz ignored the comment. “So what is the plan?” she asked. “You’ve called for help, I presume. How long before the lodge gets someone here to carry you out?”

“We can’t call for help,” Travis said.

“Spotty cell phone coverage,” Frank added, “unless you’ve got a different plan with different satellites?”

Travis was already shaking his head. “You didn’t get your phone back from your car yet, did you?”

“No,” Liz confirmed his suspicion, “and you were right, the earliest I’m going to be on the road again is Monday”

She stood up because her legs were growing tired of squatting. “So you can’t call the lodge or 911,” she said, “so what’s your new plan? Why haven’t you gone for help yet, Frank?”

“We’ve been arguing about that for the past hour,” Travis said.

“I can’t leave him,” Frank defended himself. “He’s injured. Everyone knows you can’t leave an injured man.”

Liz certainly didn’t agree with that. Sometimes you had to leave him. “So what’s your plan?” she repeated. “Are you just going to sit here all night in the snowstorm and hope that somebody stumbles onto you and rescues you?” Her tone made it obvious how little she thought of that idea.

“Well you stumbled on us,” Frank said.

“But I didn’t find you before I damaged my own skis,” Liz told him. She turned to Travis. “What do you have to say? I thought you had more brains than this.”

Travis didn’t appear offended by her comment. “We passed an old equipment shed or garage maybe ten minutes back up the road,” Travis told her. “I think Frank should help me backtrack to it. If no one’s there, we can break in and at least I’ll be out of the weather while he goes for help.”

Liz frowned and tried to remember if she’d seen any buildings on the way down here. She didn’t remember any. “Are you sure?” she asked. “I don’t remember

it, and how would we find it in this weather?”

“Looking for it has got to be better than staying here,” Travis told her. “I’m literally freezing my ass off sitting still and this storm is going to get worse not better. I figure if we stay to the right side of the road we can’t help but run into it, even in this weather. And if we do, at least we’ll be warmer because we’re moving and we’ll be traveling in a direction we know has people in it.”

“There’s all kinds of things wrong with that plan,” Frank said.

Travis rolled his eyes. “Thus the argument,” he said.

Frank ignored him. “First, you’re hurt. You can’t walk by yourself and you might really aggravate your knee by trying.”

“To which I say—better an aggravated knee injury than death by freezing.”

Frank continued to ignore him.

“Second, even if we get back to the top of the road, in this weather, no one will be there. We’ll be near the top of the summit and everyone else will be gone because of this storm. So after climbing to the top again, we’ll still have to make our way all the way back down—and you can’t ski it.”

“So you’d rather stay here and freeze to death,” Travis told him.

“Why didn’t you leave Travis here and go fetch help?” Liz asked. “You might not even have had to go very far to get cell phone reception back. It may be spotty in the mountain or spotty because of the storm, but spotty means it works some

places. Maybe a hundred yards down the road, or a quarter mile that way and you can call 911.”

“I can’t just leave Travis here!” Frank protested. “What if something happened to him?”

“Frank,” Travis said. “Something’s going to happen to all of us if you don’t get us some help.”

Liz put her hand on Frank’s arm and wondered if maybe this wasn’t more than indecision and the bonds of friendship factoring into his reluctance to depart. Maybe Frank was more interested in Travis than he wanted Travis to know. “Hey, I can stay with him now. He won’t be alone.”

Frank turned on her. His eyes blazing at the suggestion he should leave. “You could also be the one to go fetch some help!”

Liz took a step back from Frank, certain in that moment that she was completely correct in her assumptions about Frank’s feelings toward Travis. It was sad—maybe even tragic—because while she didn’t yet know Travis well she had no doubt he was completely one hundred percent heterosexual.

“Frank,” Travis said, “you’re the best skier of the three of us. You’ve got the best chance to make it and make it fast.”

Frank hesitated.

“My ski was damaged,” Liz told him. “I’d go if I could, but my ski was

damaged.”

She could see in Frank’s expression that he still wanted to find an excuse to stay with Travis.

“Frank, buddy,” Travis said, “you’re losing the little bit of light you still have.”

Frank conceded to Travis and Liz’s logic. “Okay, I’ll go.”

He looked about him, clearly trying to decide if he should go up the road or down.

“Up is going to be a real bear,” Travis told him, “but we know the road is clear in that direction. If you go downhill, there’s a really decent chance that you’re going to run into something else like this tree and have no one there to help you.”

Frank nodded, picked up his skis, and started climbing across the snow-covered tree. “I hear you,” he said. “I’ll try and phone ahead every fifteen minutes or so. Try to buckle down here and stay out of the wind.”

“No,” Travis told him, “Liz and I are going to try for that little building I saw. If nothing else it will be a chance to get out of the snow, but maybe we’ll be lucky and there will be power and heat as well.”

Frank stopped clambering over the rocks. He clearly did not like that idea. “I don’t want you moving on that knee,” he said.

“You don’t have a say in the matter,” Travis told him. “Now get going-”

“You’re a really great athlete,” Frank protested. “If there’s something seriously wrong in there, you could screw your chance to play sports in the future.”

“Are you a professional athlete?” Liz asked.

“No,” Travis said. “He’s talking about local leagues. It’s not important.”

“Yes, it is!” Frank said. “You love sports.”

“I also love being warm,” Travis told him. “Now get going.”

“Well maybe I could help you get as far as that building.”

“No! We need you to get help, not wasting a lot of time helping me back up the mountain.”

Frank looked from Travis to Liz and back again. It was completely evident to Liz why he was so agitated, but Travis just as obviously didn’t get it. “Come on, Frank,” he said. “What are you waiting for?”

Frank shook his head. “Try not to let him hurt himself,” he told Liz.

Then he finished clambering over the tree, put on his skis and started laboriously making his way back up the mountain. In moments the growing snow storm obscured him from view.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him,” Travis said. “If you hadn’t come along, he’d be arguing with me until we froze to death. He should have left an hour ago...”

Liz couldn't help but smile. Travis really didn't get it. "He likes you," she said—knowing he still wouldn't understand. Most guys wouldn't want to understand this about a good friend.

"Yeah, I like him too," Travis said, "but that's—"

"Travis," Liz raised her voice ever so slightly to make him pay attention. "Frank likes you!"

Travis opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. He shook his head vigorously. "No," he said, "it's not like that."

"You know he's gay," Liz said, "he just announced it when he introduced himself."

"Yeah, of course," Travis said. "I mean: who cares? But that doesn't mean he—"

"He likes you!" she cut him off. "And he's very much afraid you're going to die on him while he's gone."

"That's—"

"Frank's problem," Liz said.

"No," Travis protested. "I mean—I'm not—"

"I'll bet he knows that too," Liz told him. "You being straight makes it all kind of sad. I'm sure Frank wishes he wasn't attracted to you."

"But—"

Liz decided to change the subject of conversation. "Were you serious about

backtracking to this building you mentioned?” she asked.

Her change in topic momentarily flustered Travis. “Sure, I guess, I mean, anything is better than sitting out here in the snow.”

“Then we’d better get moving,” Liz told him, “because the sun is down and it’s only going to get colder.”

She looked over the tree. “How the hell did you get on this side of this mess with your knee all banged up?”

“That is how I got to this side,” he said. “I found a way to fly without planes or drugs—banged the heck out of my knee as I hit the ground on this side.”

Liz frowned at him. “It’s going to be a bitch and a half getting back over.”

Chapter Nine

Climbing over the fallen tree proved to be an even more arduous task than Liz had anticipated. Travis could neither bend his knee nor put substantial weight upon it. That would have made the climb difficult in any circumstances but it was brutally painful to accomplish it with ice under foot in a treacherous snowstorm. He used a ski pole as a cane and leaned heavily on Liz's shoulder when he wasn't depending on her to haul him up and over a branch.

On the other side they sat panting for several minutes until the cold of the storm compelled Liz to try and get them started again. "So are we going to do this or what?" she asked him.

Travis sighed. She suspected he had changed his mind and really wanted to stay where they were, but his overall evaluation of their situation had not changed. "I guess we have to," he said. "We sure can't stay here."

He waited for Liz to climb to her feet and then accepted her help to clamber back to his own. He was larger than her and far heavier and she really had to strain her muscles to get him vertical again. Even with her effort, he couldn't stop his face from twisting in pain or a low groan from passing his lips.

He paused to adjust his goggles down over his eyes and to wrap his snowy

scarf across his mouth. Then he picked up the ski pole again. "I'm ready when you are."

Liz wasn't looking forward to the walk either. It would have been difficult under normal circumstances, but Travis' injury made it feel near impossible. She moved up beside him. "You're going to have to lean on my shoulder," she told him. "We have a long way to go and we're only going to get there if we take it nice and slow."

Travis settled his weight on her shoulder. Not all his weight, Liz felt sure, but it was enough to indicate that this was going to be even harder than she'd feared.

Together, they took the first tentative steps with Travis biting down on a wince and trying to pretend his knee didn't really hurt. "This isn't going to be so bad," he said.

"We'll just take it slow," Liz told him as she encouraged him to lurch another couple of feet forward.

The old snow was a few inches thick, crusty and hard on top but softer once you broke through that surface covering. The new snow fell soft and thick, already making up a couple of inches on top of the old surface. The combination of the two made for slick and treacherous footing. If they weren't careful, they'd both wind up injured on their asses.

“You know, you’re really lucky it’s me here and not my sister, Kara,” Liz confided.

“I’m willing to concede your point,” Travis told her. He had to grunt out the words between steps. “But would you mind telling me why?”

Liz was glad to. It was the reason she had started the story—to try and take Travis’ mind off the journey.

“On New Year’s Eve,” Liz began, “Kara went out to party in open-soled high-heeled shoes—despite the prediction of a monumental snowstorm.”

Travis obviously remembered the storm, but didn’t get the point. “I suppose that would work if you got dropped off and picked up at the front door of your party.”

“She drove herself,” Liz told him. “Ron and her were suffering from a miscommunication caused by my charming mother.”

She wished she could see Travis’ eyes but the goggles they were both wearing made that impossible. She’d very much like to see how he responded to this first somewhat tongue-in-cheek mention of Mama.

“So maybe she should have worn boots and carried the shoes,” Travis said.

“Kara has never been that sensible,” Liz told him.

They were thirty feet from the fallen tree now and starting to catch a slow and painful rhythm.

“So what happened?”

“She got mad at Ron at the party, stormed outside, broke her shoe—she was lucky she didn’t break her ankle—and then drove off the road in the storm.”

Travis sounded horrified and completely missed the point of her story. “Was she alright?”

“No, she spent six months in traction and then died,” Liz told him. She thought the sarcasm in her voice was heavy enough for anyone to pick up on, but Travis’ eyes widened in shock. “Really?”

“No, you idiot!” Liz snapped. She was trapped in a snowstorm with an injured man and suddenly he was showing as much intelligence as a brain damaged banana. “You met her today, remember?”

Travis laughed. Apparently it was impossible to offend him. “Oh, right, your sister. Okay, I admit that was a dumb question, but then, what-”

“But what’s the point of my story?” Liz interrupted.

“Well, yeah.”

“Can you imagine how much more difficult this would be if you had my weak older sister in her high heeled shoes trying to help you climb this roadway?”

Travis’ laughter bellowed out across the snow.

It was a good sound to hear, because after he took a break to catch his breath his grunts of pain seemed to get louder with each and every step.



In the city, snow seems bright even in the dead of night. It reflects the glow of the ever present street lamps and headlights and lies against a backdrop of asphalt, dirt and graffiti. In the forest on the side of a mountain in a heavy storm that wasn't the case. There were no lights to reflect off the crystalline structures of the flakes and thus nothing to brighten them and illuminate the trees. And the forest, Liz learned, without moon or stars or flashlights to hold back the gloom, was darker than her parents' basement with the lights off. At least there they'd still had the well windows.

Liz didn't quite know how Travis was still walking, or have any idea how far they'd come. She just trudged on beside him holding more and more of his weight as they stumbled in the dark toward some no longer believed in salvation.

Liz slipped—her foot hitting an icy patch and with a shout of pain, Travis came down on top of her. They lay there in the snow for a few moments, trying to recover their senses, when it suddenly occurred to Liz that the ground beneath her was too flat and regular to be the dirt road they'd been following.

She rolled away from Travis who was still groaning in pain and felt the surface with her hands while her eyes tried to make out her surroundings in the darkness. She lifted the goggles off her eyes and placed them further up her forehead. Snow immediately assaulted her bare flesh, but without the plastic

further dampening her vision Liz was able to make out the shape of the building in front of them.

“Travis, I think we found it,” she said.

Travis stopped groaning. “What?”

“The building you saw. I think we found it,” Liz repeated.

Travis pushed himself into a sitting position. “I was kind of hoping for burning lights and electricity,” he said.

Light the place didn’t have. Electricity remained to be seen.

Liz felt along the wall until she found the door and turned the handle. It was locked of course. Nothing could be easy. There didn’t appear to be any panes of glass in the door itself, but she did find a window near it.

She was about to break the window with Travis’ ski pole when it occurred to her that she really couldn’t see well enough to be certain this building was abandoned. So she pounded on the door with her fist and her foot for a couple of minutes before taking the more drastic step of breaking in.

Travis pulled himself up beside her and handed her his key chain.

“Don’t tell me you have a key to this place,” Liz told him.

“No,” Travis said. She figured he was trying to smile but was too damn tired and in too much pain to laugh. “There’s a really small penlight on the chain. It will help you a little when you get inside.”

Liz took the penlight and tried it out. It was nowhere near as bright as a flashlight, but she supposed it would be better than nothing.

Taking the ski pole, she smashed the glass window and did her best to break out all the glass. Then she clambered through, expecting to hear the fabric of her ski suit rip on a glass shard, but apparently she'd cleaned the window well enough to get through unscathed.

Inside the building it was even darker than under the trees and the penlight did very little to illuminate things. She followed the wall the few steps back to the door and felt around for the knob. It swung open without much effort, letting in a heavy drift of snow.

Liz stepped outside to help Travis. He was shivering worse than she was and the penlight showed his face was beaded with sweat. Even knowing how much pain he was in, she hadn't realized how difficult this walk must have been for him.

"Hey, let me help you inside," Liz told him. She wrapped her arm around his torso and Travis leaned heavily upon her as he wincingly stepped with her through the door.

The darkness must have bothered him even more than it had her because he immediately asked if she had tried the light switch.

"You really think there's going to be any power?" Liz asked. "I thought you

said this place looked abandoned?”

“You never know until you try,” Travis said. “And I only got a quick look at it as I skied past.”

Liz felt along the wall next to the door and flicked a row of switches.

A bulb exploded somewhere above them and a couple of overhead lights turned on. Two birds fluttered across the high ceiling while a couple of small rodents scurried toward the corners of what appeared to be an empty six or seven bay garage. “Oh my God,” Liz said. “There is power. How did you know?”

“People often forget to turn the electricity off when they leave a building,” Travis said, “especially if the government is involved or a large corporation. If this place were a private business in and of itself, the power would have gotten shut off when it stopped paying its bills. But if Alpine County owns it, or it’s part of Mount Winter Lodge, it may be that no one even realizes they’re still paying for it.”

He looked around. He was sweating profusely despite the cold and his shivering seemed to be getting worse. “Could you bring me that chair?” Travis asked. “I really need to sit down.”

Liz jumped to do as he had asked, rolling a black metal office chair across the concrete floor to him.

“Thank you,” he whispered. The words were simple but the expression of

relief that passed across his face was absolutely eloquent.

Liz closed the door, substantially cutting down on the amount of wind blowing into the garage. It didn't make the place warm. She suspected it would be drafty even if she hadn't broken one of the windows, but the snow was no longer falling on their heads and that was a whole lot better than their circumstances outdoors.

"I wish we hadn't sent Frank out ahead of us," Travis said. "I think that was a mistake."

"Why?" Liz asked. Her worries about Frank over the past hour or two had all regarded how quickly he could get back to the lodge and get help to them, but from the tone of Travis' voice she guessed that wasn't what was worrying him.

"There's too much chance he could get hurt trying to get out of here in the dark," Travis said. "And frankly, no one's going to come for us until the storm's done anyway. He'd be safer here with us and we could use him now to help us survive in here."

Liz could see that, but there was nothing she could do about it now so she pushed any small regrets she had out of her mind. They had reached shelter from the wind and snow so the most immediate danger was over. Now she'd have to step it up and see what she could do to get them through the night. "What would you have Frank doing if he was here?" she asked.

Travis hugged himself. It was probably an unconscious gesture as his shivering was getting worse. Since they weren't walking anymore, his body would be calming down and all of that sweat was going to turn very cold. Of course, all of her sweat was going to freeze on her as well.

"The first thing we need is a heat source," he said. "A lot of times garages have big space heaters because they're so drafty in the winter. If you can't find one, we're going to have to make a fire, so keep your eye out for old newspapers to help get it started, and anything wooden you think we can burn. I see some old wooden pallets over by that coke machine. We'll be able to use them if worst comes to worst."

"Did you say Coke Machine?" Liz asked. She turned to follow Travis' gaze and for the first time noticed a dirty soda machine in the corner.

"Don't get your hopes up," Travis said. "The odds are high that if there are any cans of soda left in it, they've already frozen sometime this winter and burst."

Liz's spirits fell. "Are you trying to depress me?" she asked. "I could really go for something to drink."

"Me too!" Travis told her. He tenderly touched his knee. "And could you also keep your eye out for a first aid kit. I could really use some aspirin or something to help take the edge off this pain."

"Of course," Liz told him. "Let me look around."

The garage was not the sort of place she wanted to go poking—especially when every dark corner was likely to hold rats or squirrels or skunks or something worse. But there really wasn't much of a choice and she was getting much colder now that she wasn't working so hard to hike up mountain roads.

There was no space heater in the open bays so she gingerly pushed open the door to what appeared to be an office.

"Travis! There's a phone in here!" she called out excitedly.

Travis tried to scoot his chair in her direction, but the effort obviously jarred his knee. He winced, then said: "That's great! Do you think we should call 911 or the lodge?"

"The lodge has a snow rescue team, right?" Liz asked.

"I think so," Travis said. "Assuming they can get out in this weather."

"So let's start with them."

"No, let's start with Frank," Travis said. "Assuming he's gotten somewhere he has cell reception, let's find out if he needs help."

Liz agreed and picked up the phone. She'd half expected to be greeted with empty silence, but the welcome sound of a dial tone greeted her ear. "It works," she said. "Give me the number."

Travis rattled it off and she called Frank. The first two times she got voice mail. The third a very tired voice answered. "Yeah?"

“Frank, it’s Liz. Travis and I made it to that old garage Travis saw. There’s a phone here, obviously. How are you doing?”

“I’m about halfway down the slope at Mount Winter,” Frank told him. “Damn it was dark on that road, but it’s not so bad here.”

“Great!” she said. “We’ll call ahead and tell them you’re coming.”

“Is Travis alright?”

“Yes,” she said, wondering if she were telling a lie. “He hurts, of course, but he’s off his knee now and we’re working on getting some heat going so we can warm up.”

“I feel really guilty about leaving you,” Frank said.

“Well if you’re almost back to the lodge, you made the right call,” Liz told him. “I’m going to hang up now so I can call them.”

She did so without waiting for his response. It was rude, she knew, but she was damn cold and Frank needed to get off that mountain too.

“You heard?” she asked Travis.

“Yeah, thanks.”

She dialed information and got transferred to the front desk of the Mount Winter Lodge. She expected to have some difficulty there but the staff was surprisingly professional. She got transferred immediately to Emergency Services where she explained her situation and received the bad news—no one could come

for them until the storm ended.

She hung up feeling more than a little depressed.

Travis tried to cheer her up. “You know they wouldn’t be able to get us out now even if they got here,” he told her. “And since we’ve reached shelter, we must be pretty low on their list of priorities.”

That made a certain amount of sense to Liz, but it didn’t make her feel better. “Yes, I know,” she said, “but I’d still feel better if someone who knows what they’re doing was coming to help us.”

Travis smiled despite his pain. “You’re doing great, Liz. I couldn’t have gotten here without you and I really don’t want to think about how bad a shape I’d be in if I was still arguing with Frank where I had my accident.”

She tried to smile for him, but she felt too overwhelmed by their circumstances.

“Do you want to know what makes me feel better when things are bad like this?” Travis asked.

That did pique her curiosity. “What?”

“Doing something! When you do something about your problems—no matter how small—it makes you feel more in control.”

Liz knew that to be true in her professional life, but she’d been hoping for something a little more specific. “Okay, what do you suggest?”

“Well since there doesn’t appear to be a space heater, I think we should make that fire.”

“A fire?” Liz asked. “You said something about that before, but in case you haven’t noticed, we’re indoors and there’s no chimney.”

“Architecturally speaking,” Travis said, “the chimney is a relatively late invention. In the middle ages and the ancient world, people mostly used a hole in the ceiling.”

Travis’ little history lecture did not amuse Liz. “I didn’t notice any gaping hole up there,” she said.

“No there isn’t, but the building is drafty to begin with and you did break the glass out of a whole window. I don’t think smoke is going to be a problem, but if it is we’ll just break a couple more windows.”

“Are you serious about this?” Liz asked.

“Yeah,” Travis said. “If we don’t get a fire going, we’re both going to die of hypothermia.”

Chapter Ten

“Okay,” Liz said. “We’ve got crumpled up newspapers and broken boards from those pallets steeped over them. How are we going to get this fire started?”

“With this.”

Travis pulled a small roadside flare out of the first aid kit Liz had stumbled across in the office while she gathered up the old newspapers. He’d swallowed the Excedrin tablets he found inside dry as they still didn’t have a source of water, but so far at least, the medicine didn’t seem to have done much for his pain. He’d wanted to help pull the pallets apart but Liz wouldn’t let him. She’d constructed the soon-to-be camp fire herself and now was ready to see if it would light.

Travis handed her the flare. She’d never used one before, but she’d seen cops strike them on TV.

She scraped the wick across the concrete and it sputtered to life, burning brightly in the garage. She then stuck the flare into the newspaper and watched her little campfire come to life. There was a lot of newspaper beneath the wood, crumpled tightly in multiple layers. It had to burn long enough now to get a few sticks burning but to catch the broken shards of pallet boards on fire. A minute or so passed before she was sure that that had happened. In another minute it was

obvious that the larger boards had caught as well.

Travis patted her on the shoulder. “You did it,” he said. “We’re not going to freeze to death after all.”

Liz wasn’t so sure of that. She put her bare hands in front of the small flame. It was warm, but not *heat your house* warm. And this big empty garage would be a lot harder to heat than any house. And the smoke still worried her. It was gathering along the ceiling and maybe some was escaping, but then again, maybe not. It was hard to be sure. “It’s still damn cold!” she noted.

“Yeah!” Travis agreed. “I wish we had a blanket. We need something for the concrete floor and something above us.”

He looked around the empty bays but he obviously didn’t see anything and neither did Liz. That should have troubled her more than it did. She knew they needed heat, but cold as she was, she still didn’t want to lie on or under some old bug covered blanket.

“Well, I guess there’s always snuggling for warmth,” he said.

Liz started to laugh before she realized Travis was completely serious. “You’re not coming on to me, are you?” she said.

Travis hesitated. “Look,” he finally said. “I like you. I thought when we met that it was a great opportunity. You’d just broken up with your boyfriend and let’s face it—you’re a beautiful and interesting woman. But you’ve made it clear you’re

not interested and I've got to accept that. I'm certainly not going to push it here when we're depending on each other like this."

Travis slid to the edge of his seat and then without waiting for Liz's help attempted to lower himself to the cold floor beside her. He didn't do it very well. The chair skittered away from him and he fell with a cry of pain to the concrete, knocking the first aid kit to the floor as well.

"Be careful!" Liz hissed. "Haven't you hurt your knee enough for one day?"

Travis didn't say anything. Tears of pain had welled up in the corners of his eyes and he obviously didn't want Liz to see them.

"Oh, come here," she said scooting next to him. "Why do guys have to try to be so damn tough all the time?" She started to slip her arm around his shoulder then thought about the knee again. "You know it's well past time we took a look at that."

Travis shook his head. "I don't want to."

Liz tried to make light of the situation. "Come on, now, hiding from a problem doesn't make it go away."

"No, I'm serious, I don't want to," Travis said.

"But why?"

He grimaced as if he wasn't sure he wanted her to know the reason. He finally decided in the affirmative. "Gently touch my knee," he said.

Liz felt puzzled but she did as he asked, lightly putting her bare fingers on Travis' ski pants over his injured knee.

He winced. "That's not what I meant," he said. "Start on my shin and move upward."

If he had said start on my thigh, Liz might have thought he was playing a game with her, but the shin was not a well-known erogenous zone. She put both hands on his shin feeling the whole leg through the fabric of the ski pants and began to work her way upward. As soon as she approached the knee, Travis cried out in pain.

"Travis?"

"Keep going!" he grunted.

She did, her eyes widening with concern as she explored very swollen flesh. It was impossible to be sure through the fabric of his pants, but she would guess the knee was easily twice the size a healthy knee should be. "Travis, we have to take a look at this!"

"Why?"

"Because it feels like it's just about the size of a bowling ball, you idiot!"

"I know, that's exactly why I don't want you to look at it," Travis said. "It's cold in here, and if I take my pants down my knee may swell even more and then I might not be able to get them up again. I don't want to try and make it out of here

in the morning without ski pants covering my legs. I'm cold enough with them!"

Liz had to agree with that last thought. Fire or not, it had not gotten a lot warmer, but she still thought they should try and look at it. "Isn't it bad to stop an injury from swelling?" she said.

"I don't know," Travis said. "We wrap a sprain, so maybe not, but I'm not going to take my pants down over this."

Liz tried cajoling him with a little teasing. "Don't tell me you're embarrassed by what I might see down there?"

Travis did not take the bait. "Your mixed signals are really confusing me," Travis said, "but as this knee would keep us from using my equipment even if you are interested, I don't think we have to get into the specifics."

Liz shook her head, unsure exactly how to take Travis' response. He'd used the word *confused* but the sound of his voice screamed *irritated*. And he had a right to be, she knew. She was giving conflicting signals.

"May I ask you something?" Travis said.

"What? Sure," Liz answered.

"Why did you follow me down the old access road?"

Liz's mouth began to spin her lie before her brain fully decided on a course of action. "I wasn't following you!"

"Of course you were!" Travis insisted. "And don't get me wrong, I'm lucky

you did. Heck, I'd be lucky to have you following me without this banged up leg. I'd just like to know what kind of game you're playing."

She had started to warm to him until he added that last statement. "I am not playing a game!" she snapped.

"Great," Travis said. "Then you won't mind explaining to me what you *are* doing."

While he waited for Liz to respond, Travis painfully repositioned himself closer to the fire. He was stretched out on his side and he got his gloved hands up in front of him. Then he decided to try taking off his gloves and warm his flesh directly in front of the small blaze.

Liz saw an opportunity to change the subject. "Maybe we could build that up a little higher," she said. She piled a half a dozen more pieces of pallet onto the blaze. As she did so, Travis traced the smoke accumulation across the ceiling. It was hanging thicker, ruffled by erratic gusts of wind coming through the broken window. The smoke wasn't low enough to begin escaping that way yet, but from the look on his face, Liz didn't think he was pleased with the progress it was making.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't think our makeshift chimney is going to work as well as I had hoped," Travis said. "The wind is going to back up the smoke. I wonder if we

wouldn't be wise to break another window on the other side of the garage."

"Won't that make the draft worse?" Liz asked.

"Yup," Travis agreed. "But it will also keep us from suffocating if too much smoke builds up in here."

As they watched, a trail of smoke did escape through the broken window, but the next gust of wind broke the gray stream and effectively stopped up the hole from the perspective of the escaping smoke.

Liz got up, picked up the ski pole again and went to break another window.

"Smash it as high as you can," Travis said. "You're not climbing through this one, so it shouldn't have to be as big a hole."

Liz glared at him for a moment, then slammed the end of the ski pole into another pane. It cracked and shattered on the second blow. Smoke immediately began to curl out of it, leaving the garage. The wind occasionally blocked this egress as well, but overall it seemed to be functioning properly.

She brought the ski pole back to Travis then dragged three more pallets over near him and spent a few minutes pulling them apart. It was very hard work and she was sweating profusely in her ski-suit by the time she finished. That was definitely not good.

She built up the fire and then unzipped her vest—experimenting with wearing only her sweater in the cold garage. It wasn't warm but she could live

with it.

She put the vest down on the cold concrete floor and sat on it. The larger fire was definitely warmer—hot enough to be uncomfortable on the facing cheek even as the other half of her remained cold.

“Do you want me to help you with your vest?” Liz asked.

Travis slipped it off on his own and sat on it as Liz was doing. “That is better,” he said.

“Hey, what’s that?” Liz asked.

She pointed to a silver packet near Travis that must have fallen out of the first aid kit when it tipped off his chair.

Travis found the packet. “Hey, it’s an old space blanket,” he said.

He ripped open the package and unfurled a crinkly silver sheet of metallic-like material. Actually it was hard to tell exactly what it was made of.

“These are heat reflectors,” Travis told her. “They’re noisy as hell but they should help us trap our body heat and really warm us up.”

“What about the fire?” Liz asked.

“Oh, we’ll leave that side open but, here, help me with this.”

Together they finished unfolding the strange blanket so that it lay over the top of them but not fully. Travis rolled up his vest to use as a pillow and Liz followed suit. When they were finished Liz lay on her side with her back to the

fire with Travis beside her lying on his back. The space blanket was spread over top of them but not completely covering Liz. They hoped that they could catch the heat of the flames with the blanket and funnel them in to warm them. There was really nothing they could think to do about the cold of the concrete.

“This is definitely better,” Travis said.

Liz considered making a joke about taking Travis’ pants down again, but she censored herself. Lying beside him like this with her head propped up on one arm and the lines of her body physically touching his was too similar to post-coital lovers for her comfort. She didn’t want to encourage the comparison in Travis’ mind.

“So why did you follow me down here?” Travis asked again.

“That again?” Liz asked. She tried to keep the question light-hearted, but she wasn’t certain that she succeeded.

“I’d just like to know,” Travis told her. Then he said it again. “I really would like to know.”

Liz took a deep breath. She didn’t think it was fair he was making her talk about this here in an abandoned garage in the middle of a snowstorm, but at the same time, part of her really wanted to confess. “I kind of like you,” she said.

The bastard smiled. It was almost a cocky grin. “That’s really good to hear,” Travis told her, “because you really got me down when you wouldn’t ski with me

earlier.”

His revelation embarrassed Liz. “I’m sorry about that,” she said. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking this weekend. I’m just not certain what I want right now.”

“That’s okay,” Travis said. “You just broke up with a guy. He must have been very important to you.”

“No,” Liz said. “That’s what’s so strange about all of this. I liked Daryl, but up to the moment he broke up with me, I didn’t think he was all that special. I certainly wasn’t thinking marriage or anything like that.”

She was having a lot of trouble looking at Travis as she spoke, which was awkward as she was propped up on one arm leaning in his direction. Travis seemed to recognize this. He slipped an arm beneath her and encouraged her to put her head on his shoulder. If she wanted to, she could pretend her movement was about warmth not comfort, but she definitely derived both from the gesture.

“How long were you dating him?” Travis asked.

“We met at a Halloween Party,” Liz told him. “So we dated for a little less than four months all told.”

“That’s a decent period of time,” Travis observed.

“No, it isn’t,” Liz said. She had her hand in front of her resting on Travis’ chest. It felt good. He was wearing a wool sweater and it warmed against her fingertips. Warm—not hot like her backside felt where it faced the flames.

“Yes, it is,” Travis insisted. “Even if you only saw him once a week that’s a lot of dates. Something must have been pretty good about him for you to stay with him that long.”

It was good sex, Liz wanted to say, but not only would that make her sound shallow, it obviously wasn’t the whole story.

“So he broke up with you, I’m gathering,” Travis said.

“That’s right,” Liz said.

“And that’s unusual?” he asked.

This made Liz laugh.

“What did I say?”

“Oh, no, it’s just, that isn’t an easy question to answer. You see, my mother is a really difficult person. We Brennan sisters didn’t really fully admit that until recently but she’s so difficult that it’s fair to say she has psychological problems.”

“I’m not sure I understand your point,” Travis said.

It felt good to be lying here with Travis talking about these things. Strangely the circumstances made her feel very safe. The extremity of their position seemed to justify confession, and quite frankly it was very unlikely that she would ever see him again once they were rescued. “Well, most guys I’ve dated never made it past the first meeting with Mama. She’s just—well it’s not nice to say, but she’s just mean.”

“But Daryl made it past the first meeting?”

“Yeah, he got through several, and well...”

“He still used your mother as his excuse to break up with you,” Travis guessed.

“That’s it,” Liz admitted.

“And you’re wondering if any boyfriend is ever going to pass the Mama test,” Travis finished.

The observation so surprised Liz that she propped herself back up on one arm so she could look into Travis’ face. His expression was quite serious. There was not a hint of jest in his eyes. “I’m not worried about—oh my God I am!”

The revelation felt like an explosion in her brain. The problem wasn’t her—it was Mama! Mama made all men unhappy. First she’d made Daddy miserable and now she was working on Al, Ron and ... well Daryl was gone so she’d won with that one.

“But that’s not the real issue, you know,” Travis announced.

He might as well have been speaking in a foreign language. “What are you talking about? Of course, it is. Mama could make Attila the Hun look soft when she gets started on one of her tirades.”

“Oh, I agree that she’s a problem, but she’s not what’s going wrong with your relationships,” Travis said.

This statement brought out Liz's sarcastic side full force. "Oh, do tell," she said. "And you figured this out because you've known me how long?"

"You just told me yourself what the real problem is," Travis said. "You dated Daryl for four months and you weren't thinking of marrying him."

Almost anything else that Travis could have said would have surprised Liz less. "What are you talking about?" she asked. "No one thinks about marriage after just four months."

"Of course they do," Travis said. "Heck, some people are already married after just four months, but they have different problems and we can forget about them. Most people, if they like someone enough to keep dating them sixteen whole weeks, begin to wonder what it would be like to be with them forever. You weren't doing that. So either you recognized some inherent flaw in Daryl or you've got personal reasons for avoiding long term commitments."

"I'm a career woman," Liz protested.

"What's that have to do with anything?" Travis asked. "Millions of career women have very successful relationships. What are you afraid of?"

He asked the question like he'd already figured out the answer, but Liz couldn't see it. "I don't know, I mean, this is crazy, isn't it?"

"What are you afraid of?" Travis asked again.

She had to look away from his beautiful brown eyes. The intensity of his

stare felt that unnerving.

“Liz, most people grow up knowing one romantic relationship very intimately. It affects the way they view all of their own relationships—sometimes this is a good thing and sometimes it’s bad.”

“You’re talking about my parents,” Liz said.

“For most people, that’s the one, and you’ve already said you think your mother’s a very difficult woman.”

“Well, yes, she is, but-”

“And I bet in your heart of hearts, you think—or you fear—that you’re a lot like her.”

“No!” Liz said. “I refuse to be anything like that-”

“Refuse?” Travis interrupted. “That sounds like a conscious decision to change your life for the better—a conscious decision to change the things in you that are like her. How did she treat your Dad?”

Tears welled up in Liz’s eyes. They embarrassed her, but she couldn’t control them. “She was horrible to him,” she whispered. “Every single day she tried her best to rip him down.”

“And you loved him a lot, didn’t you?”

“We all did!” Liz affirmed. “Ruth, Kara and me—we adored him.”

Travis pulled himself up on to his side. It had to hurt, but a brief grimace of

pain was the only hint of his discomfort. “Liz, you don’t have to repeat your parents’ mistakes. You’re not your mother. You don’t have to make your husband miserable.”

“Ruth is,” she whispered, “or at least she was. They’re really trying to make things better now.”

“And Kara and Ron are obviously very much in love,” Travis told her.

“So you think I should try and make things works with Daryl?” she asked.

He smiled and gently rubbed a tear from her cheek. “No, Liz, I think you should try and make it work with me.”

He kissed her, very gently, upon the lips. Despite the cold, a shock of heat and electricity passed between them.

Liz wanted desperately to kiss him back. She had always been very liberated sexually, but right now, she couldn’t make herself respond.

“But I don’t know what I want yet?” she said. “I don’t know if I want to get married or-”

“Shhh,” Travis whispered, “I don’t know if I want that yet either. We still haven’t had our first date. In three or four months, if we’re still together, there’ll be plenty of time to start figuring out the longer term things like meeting families and living together.”

“But I-”

He kissed her again and it really felt nice. She'd have expected his lips to be dry from the cold but the scarf he had covered them with had kept them moist and healthy. The tip of his tongue pressed very gently against the seam between Liz's lips and she tentatively opened up to him and felt his warm flesh flutter lightly just inside her mouth.

She slid her hand up his side at precisely the same moment Travis lowered his hand from her face to cup her hip through her ski suit. The space blanket crinkled noisily marking the movement and she began to kiss him back more fully, letting her tongue play butterfly wings against his.

She closed her eyes and began to relax against him as the intensity of their kiss began to build. Their lips pressed harder together as their tongues delved a little bit deeper into each other's mouths. Her fingers dug into Travis' woolly sweater scratching at the thin shirt beneath. His thigh pressed against her legs and slowly slid between them as he shifted his weight and leaned more fully against her body.

"JESUS CHRIST!" he shouted rolling back away from her and clutching his injured knee. "Oh God in Heaven!"

Liz scrambled to her knees and hovered over him, uncertain what she should do. Tears squeezed out of his tightly closed eyes and rolled down his cheeks. His breaths came in rapid shallow pants as he tried to get a handle on the

pain.

Liz felt mortified to have indirectly caused such agony, but as the pain finally receded it was Travis who expressed embarrassment. “Note to self,” he gasped. “Do not put weight directly on the swollen knee.”

A chuckle escaped Liz. She didn’t want it to, but it slipped out past her lips just the same.

“Oh sure,” Travis said. Liz might be wrong but she was pretty certain he was struggling not to grin as well. “Make fun of the poor stupid injured man.”

Liz lost it as a big belly laugh guffawed out of her. “I’m sorry,” she wheezed, “but if you think about it—this really is funny. We can’t catch a break at all today, can we? We’re trapped in the snow a couple miles from anyone; you’re injured; you finally get me to warm up to you and now we can’t make out.”

Travis started to laugh as well. He eased back into a prone position and let it all out. “Oh, God, you’re right,” he said. “I can’t get you off my mind and then I finally get you in my arms and I can’t do anything about it.”

Now that the moment of crisis had passed again, Liz began to feel better about their situation. She ran her fingers in a circle on his chest down the wooly sweater, up onto the front flap of his ski pants where they covered his abdomen and back onto the sweater. “Well now, maybe I spoke a little too quickly,” she suggested. “It’s not as if we can’t do anything. It’s just that *you* can’t move around

a lot, can you?” She unhooked the straps fastening the flap of his pants and exposed the rest of his sweater.

Suddenly Travis didn’t see anything funny in their situation. He grew quite still, every nerve fiber in his body apparently focused on Liz’s fingers as they caressed his chest through his sweater. “No, I can’t,” he agreed.

“And I’ll bet that bothers you,” Liz said. She briefly toyed with his left nipple through the fabric then broadened her search to explore the whole pectoral muscle. “I’ll bet you like to take the lead and direct the action.”

“Yes...I do,” Travis conceded.

Liz let her fingers trail down his stomach until they explored his flesh near his belt line. Perhaps the fire beside her was having an effect because the air in the garage didn’t feel quite so frigid anymore. “Well I’ve got news for you, Travis. I’m a lawyer. I love to be in control too. No, that’s not quite precise enough. I *expect* to be in control of everything—especially my relationships. Do you have a problem with that?”

Travis’ white face was beginning to flush and he was clearly having some difficulty concentrating. Evidently, he *really* liked having Liz caress his abs. “I can...definitely see...some advantages in that.”

Travis’ slow loss of composure radically enhanced Liz’s enjoyment of the situation. She slipped her fingers beneath his sweater and the underlying damp t-

shirt. Travis' flesh was smooth and taught over his tight muscles. His breathing became even more labored as she explored him.

"You're so strong, Travis," she whispered. "You proved that out on the trail already, moving forward despite your pain. It's more than your physical ability to lift things. You've got incredible stamina and *endurance*." She trailed the last word out suggestively. "Would you like to show me how much *endurance* you have?"

"Oh yes!" Travis gasped. He seemed to have forgotten all about his injured knee which made Liz feel even better about herself and their situation. She reached further beneath his shirt and caressed his pectoral flesh. His sweater had hiked up with her hand exposing his tight stomach to the cold air but he didn't seem to mind.

She straddled his stomach being very careful not to bump the leg with his injured knee. She was still wearing her ski pants—as he was—so there were definite limits on what they could do but it felt better to be on top of him this way. She pulled the straps of her own ski suit off her shoulders so that only her sweater covered her upper body.

She bent down and lightly bit Travis' lower lip. An image of Daryl flashed through her mind. She'd played with him in similar ways. She played with a lot of guys over the years: Carl, Marc, Eddie, Lamont, and, well there was no point in remembering all of them right now. She had Travis beneath her and he was lifting

his head to kiss her mouth and his hands were sliding up her body to cup her breasts and-

“Ohhhhhhh,” she arched her back breaking the kiss and moaning as she tried to add pressure to her twat by sitting harder on his abs. The ski suit was too thick and soft to give her much help but those fingers gently squeezing her were almost enough to bring her to orgasm.

Her string of boy toys had all been good in bed but she didn’t remember any of them making her respond like this—not with a simple kiss—not with a pair of hands on her breasts. She’d had genuine fun with the other guys—getting them down on their knees between her legs—directing them to drive their stiff pricks deep into her pussy. But despite a plethora of climaxes, none of them had sent shivers down her spine like Travis’ fingers had just done as they gently rubbed her nipples.

Still straddling him, Liz crossed her arms in front of her and grasped her sweater at the waist. Travis willingly released her as she plucked it up and over her head tossing it dangerously close to the fire. She hadn’t intended to get her shirt too, but was instantly glad she had as Travis’ hands slid back up her body to caress her through her sports bra.

She shivered again, partly due to the cold, but mostly as a result of his magical fingers kneading her soft flesh. She collapsed into his hands, weight

bearing down on top of him so he clutched her more firmly even as she pressed back down to his chest.

Her hips slid out over his, discovering a bulge impressive enough to be felt even through their ski pants. Then her mouth latched back on to Travis' and they kissed and their tongues danced and the heat increased within their bodies as she squirmed against him looking for the right pressure to ease the need flaming between her legs.

His sweater was part of the problem so she worked it up over his head with his t-shirt and didn't really care that he was now squirming with his back on the cold concrete floor.

Evidently, Travis didn't care about that much either because his attention remained wholly focused on her. He got his hands beneath her sports bra and touched her bare globes for the very first time making her whole body seize up with pleasure. Perhaps the timing was part of the excitement. Everything was a first with Travis: first time in a snowstorm; first time in a garage; first time with a white guy-

"What was that?" Travis asked her.

The question confused her and he must have seen that in her expression.

"I thought I heard you whisper something about *firsts*."

She buried her face into his neck and started nibbling at it as she answered

him. “I didn’t realize I was talking out loud,” she said. “I was thinking about all the firsts this is for me—out here in a snowstorm...in a deserted garage...by a campfire.”

She found his ear and kissed it, sucking the lobe into her mouth, making Travis groan with pleasure. She loved the sound he made when she got to him like this so she sucked on it again.

His hands found their way around her back and he pulled her more tightly against him. “I can’t believe any of this is happening,” Travis said. “This afternoon was a nightmare—but this is my wildest fantasy.”

Liz lifted herself up just enough that she could look at him. “You mean you imagined yourself making love to me on the oily floor of a garage by a campfire?” she teased.

Travis grunted and propped himself up on his left arm so he could kiss her throat and feel her breast again. “Actually, I kept imagining taking you in that hot tub Kara and Ron were talking about, but I’ve also fantasized about doing it by a campfire.” It was a little bit hard to make out all of his words because most of them were said while he was still kissing and licking her neck and throat. “Of course, I thought that campfire would be in the woods in the middle of summer, but who am I to complain about inconsequential differences?”

His mouth went lower and caught the top of her breast making Liz hiss with sudden pleasure. She’d always enjoyed having guys pay attention to her

breasts—most women did—but for God’s sake he hadn’t even gotten to her nipples yet and she was damn close to climaxing. That was theoretically possible—her nipples were super sensitive—but she’d never had the pleasure and neither had any of her girlfriends. Talk about exciting firsts...

“I just—”

Travis’ mouth slipped onto the full mound of her breasts and sucked it hard through her sports bra catching half her aureole through the fabric and unintentionally dragging the cloth tight across her nipple. The burst of pleasure cut her off in midsentence and she had to close her eyes to ride the sensation.

She tried again. “Wow,” she moaned. “I just—*oh God!*”

Travis’ lips found her full nipple and trapped it between them. Liz’s entire body began to shake in response quivering on the proverbial knife edge between sanity and ecstasy. “I just...thought...of another...first—*oh God, Travis!*”

He lightly bit her nipple through the bra and her whole being exploded in pleasure. Her body stiffened spasmodically as if jolted by an electric current and she rode up on her knees unintentionally yanking the nipple out of his mouth. His right hand caught her between the legs and pressed hard, cupping and directing the climax back into her body. Unable to control her muscles, Liz fell to the left, putting Travis’ body between her and the fire and allowing him to roll onto his good leg and suck her nipple back into his mouth. Her body jerked again and

continued coming.

His right hand left the fork of her legs and came up to her stomach. Then it slipped beneath her fluffy ski pants and panties to course through her tangled bush and touched her wet pussy. His middle finger slipped directly between her labia while the second and forth fingers cruised outside the lips and pressed them against the middle finger.

Liz's orgasm increased exponentially as she bucked up against his hand serendipitously driving her poor ignored clitoris hard against the base of his middle digit. Screams of pleasure pierced the night air. "Harder! Oh, God, *please! HARDER!*"

Travis struggled to comply, ramming his hand deeper inside her and squeezing her *mons veneris* from without and within. This didn't mean he lost focus on his own agenda. With his free hand he ripped her sports bra up her chest exposing her nipples directly to the frigid air. Their already turgid flesh hardened further and then his sweet hot mouth sucked her directly inside him and she started coming all over again.

Completely out of control, Liz lay bruising herself against the cold concrete floor while her poor body flailed and seized and spasmed in unfathomably wonderful abandon.

Chapter Eleven

The cold surface of the concrete combined with the frigid air brought Liz back to full wakefulness. She lay uncomfortably on her back with her ski pants and panties down on her thighs and her sports bra up around her neck. That meant her bare buttocks were directly on the concrete as was an unfortunately large amount of her back. The heat that she had experienced in the throes of passion had long since dissipated leaving her exposed and starting to shiver in the open air.

Travis lay beside her, his upper torso twisted onto its side so that one arm could stretch across her body. She could hear him breathing deeply beside her—not quite asleep but not truly awake either. His legs were still sprawled mostly flat in concession to his injured knee. They were still clothed but his chest and abs were as naked as her breasts.

Liz sat up looking for the too-thin space blanket. Her right arm instinctively covered her breast as her left hand made a show of modesty by covering her pussy.

“Have you any conception of how beautiful you are?” Travis murmured. His hand had slipped to her hip when she rose and he still sounded as if he were more

asleep than awake.

“Have you any conception as to how cold I am?” Liz answered. “Why is there no heat in here?”

Travis rolled fully on to his back so he could stretch out his arm and throw a couple of pieces of pallet on the fire. Then he let his head loll back over so he could look at Liz. His left hand came up to stroke the underside of her breast beneath her covering arm. “Come on,” he cajoled. “Let me see you!”

“It’s too cold!” Liz protested.

In response, Travis leveraged himself up into a sitting position and reached for his sweater. Rather than hand it to Liz to put on as she expected, he laid it out on the floor beside her and slipped it beneath her bare ass when she lifted her cheeks up to make room for it.

The sweater felt far warmer than the cold concrete had on her ass.

“Better?” he asked. He stroked the underside of her chin with his finger, encouraging Liz to lean closer to him so he could kiss her.

She resisted his efforts. “I’m still cold,” she pouted.

“I’m more than willing to try and do something about that,” he said.

She almost conceded to his advances when something that had been said earlier in the evening reoccurred to her. “Wait a minute! I thought you said I should be looking for a longer term relationship. So why are we doing something

that feels like a one night stand?”

Travis pulled gently at the arm covering her breasts but failed to budge her. “So you’re not planning to see me again?” he asked.

The question disconcerted Liz enough that she let him move her arm. How had he turned her question around on her? He was the one who’d started them kissing. He was the one who’d just rocketed her through a string of orgasms. “You haven’t even told me where you live!”

Travis sat before her happily examining Liz’s breasts. The cold air kept her nipples puckered and hard and he clearly appreciated the view. He moved in closer clearly preparing to lick the little ebony tootsie rolls protruding from her mahogany flesh. “And you haven’t told me where you live,” he reminded her. “Do you really think that any amount of distance could discourage me from trying to see you again?”

He licked her.

She shivered.

She let go of her pussy to grip his head with both hands and push him back away from her. “Stop doing that!” she said. “I’m talking to you. Stop acting like you’ve never seen a breast before.”

He grinned at her. “There haven’t been as many as you probably think and I certainly haven’t played with one like this.”

He tried to wrestle her back down to the floor but he was handicapped by his need to keep from putting any strain on his right knee. After defeating him in the little contest of strength, Liz asked: "What do you mean by that?"

Suddenly Travis looked embarrassed or maybe even worried like he'd just put his foot in his mouth. "I just meant I'd never been with a black woman before. You're so beautiful and exotic and I just...damn! I just love the color of your skin. It makes me want to pour honey all over you and lick you clean."

Liz burst out laughing. "Honey? Where the hell did that come from?"

"I don't know!" Travis said. "It's just your so damn delectable and I...I really love the way you felt when you were coming in my arms."

The more Travis said, the funnier Liz found it. "And the way I feel when I orgasm has exactly what to do with my skin tone?"

Travis was really starting to get flustered. "Nothing! It's just, I've never met anyone like you and I..."

Liz finally took pity on him...sort of. "Honey, huh? You're just planning to drip it all over me?"

"Oh yes!" Travis sighed. "On your nipples, down your stomach, between your thighs..."

Food play had never really been Liz's thing, but Travis had succeeded in piquing her curiosity. "Sounds sticky."

Travis finally began to relax again. “You have no idea!” he said. “First we’ll play with our tongues and then we’ll rub it all over us while we make love.”

Liz couldn’t quite believe how seriously she was considering this. She tried to dismiss the image. “Oh, come on, you’d probably get sick on the sugar before you finished cleaning my tits.”

“I doubt it!” Travis said. “I like sweet. In fact, I’d love to show you how much if you’re willing to straddle me.”

“Do you really think I’m going to prop myself up like that in this cold air?”

Travis pulled gently on her arm, encouraging her to come closer to him.

Liz gave in and began to straddle him but he stopped her with a hand on her pant-covered leg. “Take those off first,” he suggested.

She hesitated. “It’s cold!”

“I know. I’ll keep you warm!”

Part of her wanted to do as he suggested, but the rest worried about the frigid air. The fire helped—it took the edge off the cold by heating the half of her that faced it—but taking the edge off was very different than granting genuine warmth.

“Come on,” Travis said again. “I’ll keep you warm!”

Liz sank back on to her ass, grateful that Travis’ sweater kept her from sitting on the floor. Then she began to push the ski pants the rest of the way down

her legs, very conscious that she was the only one getting naked. Part of her—the intellectual side—hated that. Being the only one getting naked was not good in terms of relative power. Strippers got naked while men watched. One-sided nudity was too often a symbol of vulnerability. But a stronger part of Liz thrived on the way Travis looked at her body. His hungry gaze warmed her—not enough to counteract the cold but enough to make her pussy tingle. His injury also turned the power relationship on its head. And frankly, she knew in her heart that his knee was the only thing keeping him from getting naked beside her.

Liz's pants got caught on her boots, making her stop to work them both off before she could finish baring her legs. This left only the warm wool socks in place and frankly nothing would convince her to remove those tonight.

She carefully set her ski pants on the other side of Travis' body. This way she could put one knee on his sweater and the other on her pants. Then she straddled him again, stretching the soft lips of her pussy slightly apart before resting them directly on Travis' abdomen.

"That's more like it," Liz told him. Her palms flattened on his chest and ran over his smooth white skin. His muscles tightened beneath her hands letting her feel the impressive definition of his chest and his abdomen.

Travis ran his own hands up Liz's sides to cup her full breasts. The chill of his palms passed into her and made her shiver even before his thumbs began to

play with her nipples. “I want to kiss you,” Travis whispered.

Liz leaned forward, settling her breasts more firmly into his hands, and kissed his lips. His tongue came questing outward and she played with it a while as she slowly ground her pussy against his stomach and felt the juices begin to leak out of her and smear across his smooth flesh.

He started to roll her over in the general direction of the fire but a twinge in his knee clearly diverted him before he’d moved her more than a few inches.

His head dropped back on his vest. “This damn knee!” he cursed. “The most incredible woman I’ve ever met is straddling me and I can’t do anything about it!”

“Oh you’ve done plenty already,” Liz told him, “and we’re not finished yet.”

She kissed him again, then went to work on his face, kissing and licking his cheek bones. She could feel the prickly shadow of his coming beard against her skin. Her hands rode up onto his shoulders and her fingers dug into the tight cords of his muscles.

“I want to make love to you, Liz,” Travis told her, “but I just don’t think-”

“Shhhhh,” Liz shushed him. “Don’t think. Let me worry about everything.”

She turned around on his body so she could examine the situation in his lower half. The ski pants still covered his hips and of course that meant she couldn’t see his cock. “I’m going to lower these a—oh!”

While Liz had been examining Travis’ ski pants he had taken advantage of

her new position to lick her inner thigh. His hands slid up over her ass and took hold and he began to lick and suck the soft flesh leading toward her pussy.

“Ohhhh,” she moaned again. “That feels *real* nice!”

She couldn’t see Travis’ expression but she could certainly feel his response. He planted a wet kiss higher on her thigh and sucked hard on the sensitive skin as if giving her a hickey. His fingers tightened on her ass cheeks, digging into the generous flesh and heightening her pleasure. Her breathing grew more rapid in response and her brain seemed to stutter like an old fashioned record player hitting a scratch.

Travis shifted his attention higher on the other side, licking at the spot where Liz’s thigh met her groin. The fine stubble of his impending beard scratched both the outer surface of her labia and the smooth supple flesh of her inner thigh sending two distinct sets of shivers quivering through her body in competition with those triggered by his mouth. Her highly sensitive nipples scraped across his stomach setting off a third ecstatic set of sensations that weakened the muscles in her arms so that her head dipped down until her cheek rested on Travis’ groin directly above the spot where his ski pants hid his cock.

He moved his mouth again, exploring the other side of her pussy where the pliant flesh met the softness of her thigh. Even as his hot wet tongue began to tantalize her, the cold air of the garage kissed the moisture his tongue had left

behind on the other side. Hot and cold cradled her pussy intensifying her sensitivity just as his five o'clock shadow played sand paper against her private parts.

She knew she was supposed to be exposing him, getting his cock stiff and hard so she could try and ride him without further harming his knee, but with that capable tongue working its way up the folds of her labia it took all of her concentration to breathe and ride the storm building within her groin.

He sucked her flesh from the side, pulling the labia apart as he kissed her, but not penetrating her body. A hot line of juices ran freely between her lips and down on to his face. His mouth moved minutely forward to take the whole of one labia—half of the entrance into her pussy—into his mouth so he could suck gently upon it. It almost felt as if he were nursing it, or better yet, sucking her labia as he would the juice from a slice of orange, and her body responded by growing hotter and more intense, showering him with a never ending flow of her excitement.

Liz longed for release. Her pussy burned with ever increasing need and her thighs began to quiver unbearably. Her heart skittered excitedly in her chest, racing her lungs to see which could pump faster. Her hard tits pressed against the tautness of Travis' abdomen and her cheek rubbed the bulge through the shield of his thick winter garment.

He released her lip and kissed her, spreading his mouth to greet hers and

pressing his tongue into her moist heat. Her labia split open and Travis penetrated Liz. His tongue dipped between her most sensitive flesh and Liz's hands clutched at the legs of his ski suit as she tried to ride out her body's response.

He gasped—interrupting his exploration as Liz's actions tightened the pressure of the pants upon his swollen knee. She let go of that side of him immediately, moving her fingers down to the cold concrete floor and after a few seconds Travis' mouth closed on her pussy again. His tongue returned to her lips and eased itself back within her.

Liz settled her hips lower, driving Travis' tongue deeper inside her body and increasing the pressure of his face against her pussy. He responded to her action by pulling himself up by his grip on her ass and plunging his tongue deeper into her body. He began to quest about, sliding his tongue from side to side and driving it back and forth—fucking her, as it were, with the dexterous little muscle.

He was upping the ante, but Liz still wanted more. She tried to change the angle of his pleasurable assault by pushing her ass higher into the air while still keeping her pussy tight in his face. Travis didn't get the hint. He kept probing between her lips with his tongue when what she really wanted him to do was to suck on her clitoris.

She pulled her hand off the floor and thrust it between her legs. The balls of her fingers were cold from the concrete and the delightful chill made her shiver

with pleasure as she ran her fingers through her bush to her clit. The very first contact sparked a spasm of joy that shook her so hard it got Travis' attention.

He pulled out of her pussy and nipped at her fingertips where they fiddled with her little joy button. His warm tongue swirled over them and then down at last onto the swollen nub of flesh that packed more ecstatic pleasure into its tiny mass than the rest of her body combined.

She moved her hand up to her nipple and pinched, adding a second arc of pleasure to the near-electrical current Travis' tongue generated beneath her.

One of his hands slid down from her ass cheek to the back of her thigh as he pulled and twisted at her body, trying to get the best angle.

She pinched her tit again, cruelly twisting it as the heat soared between her legs and roared out through her body. The cold wasn't bothering her now. She was so hot that ice would melt if it rested on her flesh. Suddenly, the bent over position with her pussy on Travis' face and her cheek on his groin felt too restrictive. She reared up, arching her back, twisting her nipples with both hands, but the movement ripped her clit out of Travis' mouth. Frustrated beyond her ability to express, she hurried to turn around, so that this time she straddled him at the neck where he could attack her cunt from the front.

His mouth found the access much easier as he pulled himself up and consumed her entire clitoris. Liz's hands grasped his head. Her fingers snaked

through his hair. Her arms flexed, pulling him more tightly against her as he sucked her inside of him with all of his strength. His tongue pressed flat against her clitoris and then began to beat it from side to side while he sucked for all he was worth.

With a scream of uncontrollable pleasure, Liz came, squirting her juices into Travis' mouth as she climaxed again and again.

He ramped up the pressure, digging his fingers into her ass and burrowing his face even harder against her. His tongue moved like a living animal, mashing her clit from side to side, pushing back the hood to torment the ultra-sensitive flesh hiding beneath it into ever more powerful climaxes.

She pulled him tighter—locking his face between her thighs, falling over with his head between her legs and his merciless lips demanding even more from her body.

She passed that invisible line where pleasure stopped being good and became almost a thing of horror—the stimulation so powerful that she desperately needed it to stop. She wrenched at Travis' hair but her own traitorous thighs helped him to stay in contact with her. He diddled her clit with his tongue, sucking and slurping while she screamed her voice raw. And when her body finally began to calm despite the continuing stimulation, he slid his fingers inside of her and reignited the fading climaxes. He found the spot in her vagina that was right

beneath her clitoris and pressed upward as he sucked, breaking through Liz's exhaustion to send her body bucking and prancing through new waves of orgasmic passion.

Chapter Twelve

The heat of the fire brought Liz back to her senses. She lay on her back far too close to the blaze, half her flesh figuratively burning while the rest of her froze.

Travis lay on his back—almost beside her—his head resting about three inches south of her crotch as if he'd fallen asleep kissing her pussy and his head had nodded down onto her thigh. He slept peacefully—happy and content with his face nestled against her body—as peacefully as she had been doing before the conflict between heat and cold woke her. The space blanket remained somewhere at Travis' feet where she had shrugged it off. God alone knew how long ago doing neither of them a bit of good as the heat of their passion dissipated and was replaced by the cold winter air.

She scooted herself about so that she lay properly beside him, pulling the space blanket up and turning her bare back and ass to the dying fire so that her naked breasts and pussy faced her man. He looked very peaceful—very content—as if he had been the one to come a few dozen times and not her.

A mischievous thought flittered through her mind: “If this is what Kara is getting out of Ron I should have tried a white guy years ago.”

Travis stirred beside her and his hand brushed against her stomach. He tried

to turn over toward her but the knee obviously dissuaded his not quite conscious mind. He settled instead for working one arm beneath her and cradling her in against his body. He smiled when her breast touched his chest but she wasn't certain he was really waking up until his left hand came up to stroke her nipple with the back of his fingers.

A spasm shook Liz's pussy at the same moment he touched her tit. She stretched languorously and slid her arm across his chest. "I thought I was going to be the one in control tonight."

"You can be in control next time," Travis told her. "Once the knee is better, you're welcome to have your way with me."

The warmth of his flesh felt good against her breasts and stomach. It balanced the heat of the fire behind her—not quite as hot but certainly cozy. "I have to wait that long?" she asked. "You're going to make me wait until your knee is healed to feel you inside me."

Travis' eyes opened to a slit so he could look at her and judge her mood. "I suppose we could try something after I get it braced." A sly smile turned his lips. "If you're going to twist my arm over it..."

Liz shook her head. "I don't think so."

Travis' eyes opened the rest of the way. "What?"

"That's too long to wait," she said. "I'm going to take you right now, here by

the campfire, like you dreamed of in your fantasy.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Travis said. “I mean—don’t get me wrong—I want you! But sex is a pretty vigorous activity.”

Liz sat up. “Don’t worry!” she told him. “I’m going to do all the work. All you have to do is lay back and enjoy it.”

She turned around sticking her ass toward him again. She didn’t straddle his chest this time because she knew that would be asking for trouble. She just stuck her rear up alongside his body.

He reached for her, of course, but she was more than ready for him. Even as he touched her butt, she grasped hold of his ski pants and pushed them down to his thighs.

The shock of pain he felt paralyzed his amorous efforts, but she was willing to bet that he’d forgive her for hurting him a little when he started coming deep in her pussy.

“Geeze, Liz!” Travis gasped. “It’s injured, remember?”

Liz gave him an unsympathetic glare. “Guys who are about to get their cock sucked should act a little tougher.”

He settled back down with his head on the vest and let her continue.

He wore gray briefs beneath the ski pants and the bulge inside them did not look nearly as impressive as Liz had expected. She’d fucked guys with small cocks

before and the sex could still be good—but it just wasn't as exciting if the guy only had a couple of inches.

She tried to hide her disappointment by pushing the briefs off Travis' hips and down his thighs to the ski pants. Lying on his groin in the tangle of his pubic hair lay two—maybe two-and-a-half—inches of cock that literally seemed to be shrinking as she looked at it.

“Hey, it's cold down there!” Travis protested. “If you've got no sympathy for me, at least take some on the big guy. He wants to be your friend!”

Big guy? Liz wondered. This was by far the smallest cock she had ever seen. Maybe it was true—maybe black guys were just bigger.

Still, she couldn't very well back out now, could she?

She slipped her slender dark fingers around Travis' penis so that the frighteningly cold flesh disappeared completely in her tiny hand.

“Thank you,” Travis breathed. “That feels a thousand times better. It's cold in here.”

“That was true,” Liz thought. With her intense anticipation of another round of sex dissipating, she began to feel the cold again on her breasts, stomach and thighs.

She flexed her grip a couple of times, suddenly sorry she'd begun this. She knew that didn't make her a good person. Travis had given her a string of

incredible orgasms. But his cock was such a let down after the rest of him that it threatened to spoil the whole evening for her. Why did she have to start this? If she'd just gone back to sleep they could have been rescued in the morning. Travis would have gone to the hospital and she might never have seen him again. Never mind the honey. That would have been better than this disappointment.

“Hey!” Travis said, catching her attention and pulling her out of her reverie. “That does feel better, but it wouldn’t be hard to make it feel a lot better yet.”

Liz suppressed a sigh and got busy. She ducked her face down to his groin and opened her hand, letting her lips lightly kiss the head of the tiny penis. Then she rubbed her cheek against the still cold flesh and considered the best way to get this over with. She’d jack him off—not ride him. She’d use his poor knee as the excuse but suddenly she really didn’t feel like subjecting herself to the mess involved in making him come in her pussy.

She folded her hand around the slender shaft and tried to kiss his balls. The cold had driven them up into his body but a couple of warm smooches had them peeking out again. She stopped to look them over, letting go of Travis’ dick to feel them with her hand. They were actually bigger than his cock. How the hell did that make any sense?

She picked the penis up again—all two-and-a-half to three inches of it—and licked the head. The cock actually moved in her hand beginning to swell in

appreciation of her actions. That was nice really—small didn't mean unresponsive. She liked it when a man reacted to her touch and Travis' dick certainly did that.

She ringed the small head with her thumb and forefinger easily enough and then licked the very tip.

Travis grunted so she did it again before folding her fingers back around the shaft. It was just long enough so that the glistening tip extended past her forefinger—long enough to pump if her hand were wet.

She let go of him to address the situation, licking her palm until it was nice and slick, then taking Travis in her hand again.

His hand began to stroke her thighs, which she really appreciated. She spread her legs slightly for him, giving him free access to her pussy should he choose to take advantage of it.

His cock was slightly larger than she had realized—large and thick enough that she couldn't completely cover it with her hand. She began to pump up and down—not gripping too hard but letting her fingers run lightly over the surface of his skin.

Travis continued to tickle her inner thigh in an absent minded fashion—as if simply touching her made him happy.

Liz licked the head of Travis' cock when it popped out between her fingers. It was definitely thicker than when she had started and the circumcised rim began

to stand out away from the stiffening shaft. He was substantially larger than her hand now—a situation which delighted Liz—and she began to pay more intimate attention to him. Her lips encircled the swelling head and she bobbed up and down in time with her fingers. He continued to grow in her mouth swelling thickly, beginning to fill her.

Travis tickled her pussy with his fingertips, then suddenly moved his hand to her smooth ass cheek and began to finger the sphincter muscle that guarded her rectum.

She stopped sucking on him. “What are you doing?”

“Dreaming,” Travis told her. “Have you ever let a guy take you up the ass?”

Five minutes ago, this conversation would not have troubled her. Travis’ cock was less than three inches long and not substantially thicker than her thumb. Now however, he’d surpassed six inches and still hadn’t gotten truly stiff and hard. She wasn’t sure she wanted him thinking about sticking this prick up her asshole.

“I don’t see how you can even think about that with the shape your knee is in,” she said.

Travis flashed her a cocky smile. “Thanks for worrying about me, but I’m not thinking about tonight. I plan to still be fucking you long after my knee is better.”

Heat flashed between Liz’s legs and her knees grew weak. “Yes,” she

whispered.

“What?”

“Yes, I let a man take me in the ass once,” she confessed.

Travis’ cock surged in her hand. In the space of about three seconds it gained at least two inches in length and half an inch in diameter.

The heat between Liz’s legs roared into an inferno.

“I, um, that *really* excites me!” Travis told her.

His cock continued hardening. Damned if it didn’t look more than eight inches long now. “Oh, I can see that,” Liz said.

Travis tickled the sphincter muscle, exciting every nerve ending in her body.

He licked his finger and then pressed it against her anus again. “Will you let me take you here?” he asked.

His finger began to press into the opening.

Liz had to consciously remind herself to keep breathing.

“We can...talk about it,” she said.

He penetrated her to the first knuckle of his forefinger, driving the breath out of her body even as his cock turned to iron in her hand.

“Say *yes*!” he told her.

His left hand came up to ever so lightly touch her clitoris. He was holding her from both sides.

His right forefinger began to massage her sphincter muscle as the tip of his left middle finger gently caressed her engorged clitoris.

Liz's voice rose an octave. Even with everything that had already happened between them tonight she simply couldn't believe how intensely wonderful Travis was making her feel. She felt just a hair trigger away from yet another orgasm.

"Say yes!" Travis repeated.

"Yes," she squeaked.

He pressed into her from in front and penetrated her from behind, causing Liz to collapse in the throes of another powerful climax. Her hand clenched on his cock, digging into its iron sides as if possession of the rod could ground her against the waves of passion. She rocked and vibrated between Travis' hands. His finger, thrusting deep where it should not be, seemed to intensify the vibrations radiating out from her pussy. She was terrified of moving too wildly. His damn knee was right in front of her and she bit her lip, buried her face in his hips and fought desperately to ride the passion without completely surrendering to it.

This, of course, only succeeded in intensifying the effects as the cold concrete pressed into her tits and Travis continued to fiddle her to ecstasy.

Almost as an act of self preservation she reared herself up and swallowed nearly nine inches of manhood. Liz had always prided herself on giving a good blowjob but at first she showed nothing of her technique. She swallowed down

and sucked and slurped until she succeeded in distracting Travis from her body. His hand slipped out of her anus to grasp her thigh and as the new stimulation diminished she was able to assert her control again, twisting with hand and mouth as she bobbed up and down, using her tongue to completely engorge his huge beautiful cock.

When she felt sufficiently in control, she took her mouth off his prick and leered at him. “Are you ready?” she asked, “because I need you now!”

She didn’t wait for his answer. Instead she picked herself up in the frigid garage air and squatted over Travis’ immense prick. She held it between her legs so that the swollen purplish head brushed against her dark lips. Both cock and pussy glistened in the air and then slowly she began to lower herself onto it.

“Oh Liz!” Travis sighed. “Oh, honey!”

She couldn’t speak herself. A truly large cock had to be taken slowly—had to be given time to let the pussy accommodate itself to its length and its girth.

Liz eased herself down without bobbing on the shaft until he penetrated every inch of her insides. He felt heavenly within her. Had she actually ever thought she didn’t want to fuck this man?

She slowly leaned forward, placing her hands on the ground beside him so that she braced her stomach above his and could begin to ride his cock in the manner least likely to jar Travis’ knee. Her breasts hung down below her—too

tempting for Travis not to touch. Then she began to ease herself forward, letting that long cock scrape her inner depths clean before lowering herself onto him again. She'd had a couple dozen hard and furious orgasms tonight. This one was going to be slow and delicious. Gently bringing herself and her man to climax together before lying down on top of him to sleep in his arms with his penis still buried in her depths.

She shuddered through her first gentle climax after only six or seven passes. Travis grunted, clearly enjoying the feel of the long sensuous shudders racking her body, vibrating his cock as she made love to him.

Liz waited for her body to calm and then set at it again, gently fucking her man, building the pleasure in both of them until the slow ecstasy peaked and overwhelmed her again.

She shuddered and breathed and waited for her body to calm again. Travis' dick felt harder than ever inside of her, losing none of his power as he patiently waited for her to continue her slow dance upon his shaft.

The third time Liz came, Travis' hand on her ass painfully tightened and liquid heat filled Liz's pussy. She stopped riding in favor of grinding herself down upon him and squeezing his dick tight between her thighs. He shuddered and quaked and tried desperately not to jerk his legs. His arms wrapped around her back and hugged her ever more tightly against him. She could feel his hot breath

panting against her ear until the fervor gently faded and he drifted off to sleep beneath her.

Still holding him inside her body, Liz managed to throw a couple more boards on the fire and pull the crinkly space blanket up over them. Then she lay back down on top of him breast to chest and fell asleep in his arms.

Epilogue

It was light outside when Travis' cell phone rang, waking them both from their pleasant drowse. The snow had stopped falling and the early morning sun had peaked through the clouds. Just the presence of natural light took the psychological edge off the chill although it was still incredibly cold even beneath the space blanket.

Liz helped Travis fumble for his phone, then threw a couple more boards on the fire while he started talking. "Hello?"

"Hey buddy," a familiar voice said. "It's Frank. How are you hanging in there?"

Travis' pulled Liz back against him. They'd had to get dressed again last night. The weather was just too cold without their steamy sex heating things up for them. But there was no rule against hugging your lover through a ski suit.

"We're both great!" Travis said. "A bit cold, of course, but we're just great."

"That's good to hear," Frank said. "Are you both still in that old building we passed?"

"It's an old garage," Travis clarified. "It looks abandoned, but the power was still on so who knows?"

“Right—the rescue team from Mount Winter Lodge is about to leave to get you. I’m going to travel with them. They seem confident they know the place you’re talking about and I can certainly show them.”

“Great!” Travis said. He winked at Liz and tried to tweak her breast through the chest flap of her ski pants. “How long do we have?”

Frank ferried the question to the rescue team and waited for a response. “At least an hour—maybe two—he reported. We’re leaving now.”

“We’ll see you in a couple of hours then,” Travis said. “And I hope you’re bringing some sort of stretcher because there’s no way I’m walking the rest of the way out of here.”

“It’s all taken care of,” Frank said. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

Travis hung up the phone. “An hour or two...” he mused. “I wonder what we can do to fill all of that time?”

Liz slid her leg over his waist and then slipped the suspender straps of her ski pants off of her shoulders. She hadn’t bothered putting her sports bra back on so her breasts bounced immediately into view when she pulled off her sweater. Her nipples responded immediately to the cold air, standing out proud for Travis’ inspection.

“I do love the way you think,” Travis said. He wrapped his arms around her back and planted a wet kiss in her cleavage.

Liz wrapped her arms around his head, not so subtly encouraging him to keep kissing. “I like the way you do everything,” she said. “But I’m especially curious to learn just what it is you do with honey.”

The End

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