

MEN OF ALASKA

# Someone to *Love Me*

A romantic scene of a man and a woman in a bathtub. The man is leaning over the woman, and they are about to kiss. The background features a warm, glowing fireplace. The overall mood is intimate and sensual.

Tory Richards

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

**Whiskey Creek Press**

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

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Someone To Love Me  
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## **Dedication**

To my readers.

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## **Chapter 1**

A high-pitched scream cut through the silence surrounding Luke Remington. He halted and brought his binoculars up, even while knowing the sound was a bird of prey. Nothing looked out of place against the frozen backdrop of snow and ice and the towering pines that dotted the Alaskan mountainside. No movement to indicate life, the human kind anyway.

He dismissed the beauty of the majestic eagle soaring overhead and sucked in air cold enough to burn his lungs. His gut, and the fresh shoe prints in the snow, told him he was getting close to the survivor of the plane crash. He knew the direction the pilot had taken would lead straight to a river. And a dead end.

He hoped the pilot wasn't stupid enough to try and cross the river to the other side. It would be suicide. Even if some of the water was frozen, the ice would never hold up beneath the weight of a person, even a small one. A sense of urgency came over him. If the person was foolish enough to leave the crash site, then they just might be crazy enough to try and cross over a frozen river.

The darkening sky revealed the signs of an approaching snowstorm. That was nothing new for this time of year. Lately it snowed every day, sometimes twenty-four hours a day for days on end. There were days when he couldn't leave his cabin. Those were the only occasions he regretted the

isolation of his mountain home. When he couldn't come and go as he pleased.

So why was he going out of his way to rescue someone who was probably going to end up invading his privacy for the next couple of months?

Luke knew the answer to that. Because it was the *right* thing to do. He might be a loner, but he was still human. He'd seen the small Cessna go down, and couldn't ignore the fact that there might be survivors. Only he hadn't counted on that person being stupid enough to leave the crash site.

He took a deep breath, exhaling a cloud of white air. It was a good thing he'd thought to bring his backpack with him because he knew the extra warm clothes would most likely come in handy. He began to follow the small footprints left behind in the snow, again.

His instinct told him the pilot was a woman.

Charlie Wayne came to an abrupt halt and stared in disbelief at the raging river in front of her. *Of all the rotten luck!* She glanced both ways. A sick feeling settled in her empty stomach. She couldn't see any way around it. At least nothing that didn't involve getting wet.

*Why isn't the blasted thing frozen over like everything else in this godforsaken wilderness*

She glanced down at her feet and frowned at the inadequate sneakers that were fast becoming caked in ice. She could barely feel her toes. Shivering violently, she strained to see to the bottom of the dark, churning water in an effort to determine if it was shallow enough to cross. One

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thing was certain, it was far too wide for her to try and jump over. Even with a running start.

The thought of getting wet appealed to her about as much as returning to the wreckage of her plane. Which Charlie knew she should never have left. She knew what the rules of survival were. And she had broken the most important one. Only staying could have meant her death, too. She'd been way off course. She hadn't had time to radio in a mayday call with her location. And the thought that no one knew where to begin looking for her had convinced her to leave the wreckage and take her chances.

The sky was turning a dismal gray. She knew from years of living in the north that it was going to snow and the temperatures were going to drop. The last thing she wanted was to become a frozen Popsicle for some carnivore to munch on when spring arrived. It was bad enough that disappearing would probably give her agent a heart attack. Charlie couldn't help wondering if she was going to make her next singing engagement. Now that her comeback tour was well under way, Charlene Benton was becoming a household name again.

Charlie pulled herself back to her immediate problem. It was already late afternoon and she'd have to find some kind of shelter before dark. The thought crossed her mind that if she turned around and headed back to the plane she'd be safe for another night. And in the morning she could try a different direction.

She searched the sky again for any signs of smoke that would reveal the possibility of a cabin nearby. She knew she

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was in a remote area, which the empty skyline emphasized with stark clarity. With a heavy sigh she turned to start walking again. And came face to face with a large, white dog.

*Correction, wolf*

Her heart fell as fast as the blood freezing in her veins. She halted so swiftly that she lost her balance. One foot slipped down the muddy embankment into the icy water, but Charlie hardly acknowledged the freezing temperature. For a timeless moment she and the wolf squared off like two adversaries sizing each other up before a fight.

A feeling of doom settled in the pit of her stomach when she realized that if the wolf charged she'd have no alternative but to jump into the icy river. Facing one death to escape another. Freezing or drowning would be a welcome alternative to being torn apart and eaten by a wolf. A chill ran down the length of her spine that had nothing to do with the frigid weather, as their gazes remained locked.

*What is it waiting for?*

As if reading her mind, the large beast crooked its head to look at something in the opposite direction. Was there a pack lurking somewhere beyond the trees? Fear galvanized Charlie into action. She turned to run, knowing that if the wolf decided to come after her it would be over in a matter of seconds. There was no way, as numb with cold and as exhausted as she was that she could outrun a predator.

Especially a hungry one.

In her haste to get away she fell several times. She cursed with frustration. The snow, knee deep in places, slowed her down. But Charlie was determined not to let it keep her from

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putting as much distance between her and the wolf as fast as possible as her survival instincts kicked in. She could hear movement behind her but wasn't certain if it was the animal or the blood pounding in her ears.

"Wait!"

Charlie heard the command but didn't believe it. It had to be the wind playing tricks on her. She pushed herself harder, but all at once the wolf was upon her. A heavy force hit the back of her body with a strength that knocked her to the ground. She screamed, expecting to feel her flesh savaged by canine teeth at any second.

Something snagged the hood to her parka pulling it away from her head. Charlie was sure the animal was going for her jugular. She screamed again, not realizing her face was in the snow until it rapidly filled her open mouth.

She turned her head, and cried out desperately. "No!"

Maybe the sound of her voice would frighten the animal away.

"Get away from me!" she screamed, hearing the sound echo throughout the surrounding mountains.

The sheer weight and size of the animal was crushing, holding Charlie nearly immovable. She was helpless against its strength. Suddenly and without warning she was flipped onto her back. Her hands were pinned to the cold ground above her head. And she realized it was a man and not the wolf pinning her down. For a moment she could only lie there in stunned silence and gasp for air.

Charlie relaxed beneath him when she realized he wasn't a threat to her. Where had he come from, and where was the

wolf? She tried to move her head to see, but the hair he'd released when snagging her hood was wrapped around his gloved fingers preventing her from moving. He was slightly winded, looking her over with mild interest as he held her against the frozen ground.

"Why didn't you stop when I called out?" he said above her, his voice laced with more annoyance than concern. His hands shifted slightly, allowing her to move her head.

"The wolf," she whispered. She held herself stiffly beneath him. Her gaze darted everywhere around them. The wolf, where had it gone?

"The wolf," he said and Charlie's gaze was drawn back to the man. He was looking down at her, not an inkling of concern in his tone. "Won't hurt you."

He got to his feet, bringing her with him.

"Who are you?"

Charlie brushed at the loose snow covering her clothes. Then pulled the hood up and tucked in her hair. She watched his gaze fall to the socks covering her hands. The faintest hint of a grin spread across his chiseled mouth but disappeared in the time it took to blink.

"Luke." His tone was flat.

Movement out of the corner of her eye caused Charlie to look at the wolf again.

"Lady won't hurt you," he repeated, obviously noticing her unease. "Look, we're losing valuable daylight. We need to go."

The impatience and hardness of his clipped words caused Charlie's head to whip back in his direction. Go? Just like that



he expected her to go with him? Okay, she really had no choice, but he could at least be sensitive to her situation.

As their gazes locked it was unclear what was going on behind those watchful eyes of his. They narrowed on her slightly. She began to wonder about him, wondered if he was dangerous. Her gaze ran over his tall form, made massive by the heavy insulated snow jacket he was wearing. She couldn't tell what color his hair was because all that was visible was his rugged face. Most of that was covered with a neatly trimmed black beard. Eyes the color of dark chocolate stared at her set in a face that could be handsome if he softened it with a smile.

"I won't hurt you, either."

Did she look worried?

Charlie forced a smile, when what she really wanted to do was spin around and run the other way. She was completely alone with him and at his mercy, lost somewhere in the wilds of Alaska. She had no choice but to trust him, or die.

"I'm sorry if I gave you the impression you frighten me. I'm very thankful that you came along. I didn't know what I was going to do come nightfall. How did you find me?"

"I saw your plane go down. When I came across the crash site I realized someone had survived. Your tracks were easy to follow in the snow." His gaze raked over her with amazement. "I'm surprised you survived without so much as a scratch."

"I was lucky," Charlie admitted. She shuddered a little as she recalled her frightened, helpless feeling when the plane's

engines had stalled, forcing her to crash. Practices during flight school hadn't compared to the real thing.

"Very lucky," he agreed. "Why didn't you remain at the crash site? Search and rescue would have eventually found you."

"I know that's what you're supposed to do, but I couldn't count on anyone finding me." Charlie brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "I was way off course." She'd flown back and forth to Skagway enough over the years to know that. "None of my gauges were reading correctly, and before I was able to get off a distress signal they went completely dead."

He acknowledged that he was listening to her with a brief nod of his head. Then cast another brief glance at the sky. "We need to get going." He turned and began walking.

"Going where?" Charlie had to practically run to keep up with his long, brisk strides. "Is there a ranger's station close by?"

"I'm not a ranger." He continued to walk without sparing her a glance.

Charlie didn't know if she liked the sound of that or not. She struggled to keep up.

"Are you taking me to a ranger's station, then?"

"No."

It was clear he didn't want to talk but Charlie didn't let his sharp, one-word answers discourage her.

"Do you have some kind of transportation near here?" Her tone was hopeful.

"No."

She clenched her teeth. He certainly wasn't very informative. She was beginning to get annoyed. She fell to her knees and quickly got up again when he didn't even notice. She was panting by the time she caught up to him again and more than a little frustrated. In spite of the fact he'd come looking for her, she got the impression he'd leave her if she didn't keep up.

"Look, can you please slow down? I can't keep up." She wasn't going to whine, but she'd been walking for hours already.

"Where are we going?" In her opinion, nowhere fast.

When he didn't say a word she grabbed him by the arm to get his attention. "Luke..."

He swung around and glared down at her.

She caught her breath.

"I'd forgotten how talkative and troublesome females were."

His expression said he wasn't joking. Charlie's mouth dropped, she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "Excuse me?"

"Look, I've been living alone in these mountains for three years and have gotten used to not talking to anyone. To not being touched." His glance took in her sock-covered hand on his arm, before traveling back to her eyes. "Now I'm going to be punished for being nosey, and checking out a damn plane crash."

Charlie could only stare at him in stunned silence. She didn't know what to say. *If he feels that way why did he even bother?*

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"Look, lady—"

"My name is Charlie." She stood her ground in spite of his firm tone. And she would not cry.

Luke released a heavy sigh. "I'm not interested in knowing your name or anything else about you. I'm taking you to my cabin, which happens to be about two miles in that direction." He indicated the direction with a careless sweep of his arm.

Charlie's gaze followed the same route. She frowned. "All I see is snow and snow-covered trees. No roads of any kind, no paths, nothing to indicate we're heading anywhere near civilization, much less a cabin. Where is this cabin, in a cave?"

The next thing she knew he was glaring down at her. His mouth thinned.

"What?"

"Are you going to chatter all the way? Because I'm warning you right now, if you sap your strength I'm not carrying you. And before you ask, I don't have a phone."

How did he know she was about to ask him that? Charlie gave him a scowl. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?" She did her best to keep her tone light, feigning a smile. "What about a pigeon?"

"Look, we can talk later." He sounded aggravated, his tone sharper than the cutting edge of a hunting knife.

"Fine," Charlie snapped, tight-lipped.

He pulled his arm away and bent to a backpack he'd obviously dropped in his pursuit of her. She hadn't noticed it until now. She wondered what they were going to do after it got dark if they didn't reach his home. The backpack was the

size of a small car but she doubted it contained a blow up house with a fireplace in it.

She was frozen to the bone. Thinking about a roaring fire and a cup of hot cocoa wasn't helping. On top of that, snow had gotten down her back when her hood had been pulled off during their struggle. Her goose bumps had goose bumps. She ripped off the frozen socks on her hands, and pulled the sleeves of her parka down over them.

She watched in curious silence as Luke pulled out a stack of clothes and something that resembled a rain poncho in an ugly shade of green. It reminded her of something she'd seen her brother wearing once in a picture of him taken when he was in boot camp.

"Two miles can seem like ten in these mountains. It's going to start snowing harder and the clothes you have on aren't adequate. In these frigid temperatures it won't take long for frostbite and hypothermia to set in."

Charlie's eyebrows arched high with astonishment. Her mouth fell open when it dawned on her what he was getting at. "Surely you don't expect me to change my clothes out here, like this!" Her arm made a sweep of the openness of the surrounding area. "Two miles or ten miles doesn't make any difference to me. I'm in good shape," she insisted, which had absolutely nothing to do with the fact he wanted her to change clothes.

His eyes narrowed, his gaze ran over the length of her almost as if he was trying to see through her clothes. "Are you cold now?"

Charlie nodded reluctantly, but only because she had a feeling he already knew the answer.

"How cold?" he asked.

She was numb she was so cold.

"A little," she lied, unable to meet his eyes. He didn't know her. Maybe he wouldn't recognize the signs that gave her away.

"You're lying," he said without a second thought, dashing her hopes. "We don't have time to argue over this. Put these clothes on and the rain poncho, which will keep you from getting damp again as the snow continues to fall."

Her eyes clung to his stony gaze. She was looking for understanding, but only found steadfast determination. She knew it wouldn't be to her advantage to fight him on this. He looked about as solid as one of the pines towering over them and just as unbending.

"What about you?" She was hedging and they both knew it.

"My jacket repels water and I'm used to these temperatures."

Charlie realized he wasn't going to give an inch. She reached up and unzipped her lightweight parka and slipped it off before shaking her hair around her for the little bit of warmth it would offer. Luke just watched until he finally noticed her fingers were so numb she couldn't undo the buttons to the flannel shirt she was wearing. He pulled his gloves off with his teeth, shoved them in a pocket then brushed her hands aside with an impatient growl.

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Charlie caught her breath and accepted his help with reluctance. Her eyes looked everywhere but at him. She welcomed the rush of heat filling her frozen cheeks. His warm fingers worked deftly at the buttons, and when he was done he pulled her shirt open. She thought his hard mouth curved into a slight grin, but it was so fleeting she must have imagined it.

She had a second flannel shirt on just like the first. Luke quickly got rid of that one, too. He stepped back when he came to the sweatsuit. Was he wondering if he'd reached the last layer? Wordlessly, Charlie reached for the hem, and pulled the top over her head. Then, just as quickly kicked off her sneakers and wiggled out of the bottoms. His brows shot up, but he remained silent.

"This is the last layer," she said, making no effort to remove her cashmere sweater and ski pants. She shrank back with a cry when he reached forward to touch her. However, all he did was test the dampness of her clothes.

"You can leave these on. Just slip the clothes I brought over them. But take off those socks and replace them with these." As he spoke he rummaged through his bag until he found what he was looking for, a pair of thick, wool socks.

Charlie did as she was told. She sighed with gratitude from the warmth that came with putting on new layers of warm, dry clothes, even if they were miles too big on her. Luke helped her with her socks and sneakers.

He glanced up at her from his position at her feet. "How does that feel?"

"Wonderful."

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Before straightening he stuffed the clothes she'd removed into his bag. "Good, let's get going." He slipped the rain poncho over her shoulders.

The sky darkened at an alarming rate. The snow began to fall harder. For a moment Charlie watched powdery flakes land upon Luke's beard, before carefully tucking her hair beneath the hood of the poncho.

His eyes met hers briefly as his fingertips brushed against her cold cheeks. For a second his movements faltered, his dark eyes frozen on hers, and then he turned away.

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## Chapter 2

Charlie didn't know how long they'd walked only that she was certain she couldn't go on much longer. It was snowing hard. She could barely make out Luke's bright red jacket in front of her. If he was worried about her keeping up he didn't show it.

Her stomach growled loudly. The last thing she'd eaten was a bagel and cup of coffee the morning before. The persistent hunger pangs cut through the silence, making her that much more aware of their stark surroundings. When Luke finally stopped, she was so preoccupied with thoughts of food that she plowed right into him.

"Sorry."

"We're almost there." He pointed straight ahead. "Are you going to make it on your own steam?"

Charlie wondered if he was having second thoughts about carrying her if she needed it. She nodded, and almost fell to her knees. *Thank God.* A few minutes later his small cabin finally came into view. At least she hoped it was his cabin. By the time it took them to finish their journey and walk up the steps to the porch they were cloaked in the most frightening darkness she'd ever known.

The ghostly howls and hoots of the forest creatures as they came out to forage for food under the protection of darkness didn't help calm her fears. She almost let out a hysterical laugh when the thought of the abominable snowman popped into her head. How many times had her

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brothers frightened her with those made up stories when they'd been growing up? She stumbled as they entered the cabin, but Luke's quick reflexes stopped her from falling.

His deep voice cut through the darkness. "Wait here until I turn on a light."

Charlie found herself released as soon as she found sure footing. She closed the door behind them, and turned back to get her first look at Luke's home. Primitive. That was the only word she could think of to describe the unfinished log walls and the jagged stone fireplace which dominated one whole wall. She glanced down at the rough stone floor and decided she liked his home. It was basic, getting back to nature. A life that suited a rugged mountain man. *Him*.

She was mildly surprised that he'd turned on a small brass wall lamp over the mantle of the fireplace. She'd half expected to see him standing there with a kerosene lantern.

"You have electricity but no phone lines?" Her gaze followed him as he moved to turn on a matching lamp on the other side. It wasn't a bright light, but cast a dim, almost romantic glow in the room.

He ignored the skepticism in her tone and bent to start a fire in the hearth. "I have a generator."

Charlie glanced around the interior of the one-room structure. There were no doors that indicated there were other rooms with the exception of one that she guessed led to the bathroom. A wooden ladder led up to a tiny loft. From her angle Charlie could see a bed and a chest of drawers. Nothing else.

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Just the necessities decorated Luke's home. There were no pictures, no pretty curtains in the windows, nothing to show that it was more than just a hunter's cabin out in the middle of nowhere. The main room was sparsely furnished with a camel-colored sofa and matching recliner that looked like leather. A large chest sat on a braided rug as a coffee table in front of the couch.

The kitchen area was furnished with a small drop leaf table and two chairs. There was a stove, a refrigerator, and a sink all against one wall. A small counter was the only thing that separated the kitchen from the rest of the downstairs.

Yes, he appeared to have all the necessities with a few exceptions. Charlie glanced at him. He was quiet, watching her.

*Does he regret my being here? Invading his privacy, his space?* It was hard to tell by his granite expression.

"Come thaw out by the fire."

He didn't have to ask twice. Charlie moved as close as she dared and held her hands out toward the dancing flames. She closed her eyes as they licked at her frozen body, warming her from the outside in. She didn't question Luke when he began to slip the rain poncho over her head.

"Get too close to the fire in this thing and you'll be hotter than you bargained for."

"Sorry." She chuckled softly. She'd forgotten the poncho was made out of heavy plastic. She shook her hair free before he had a chance to step away. As if they had a life of their own the silky strands reached out to him, brushing against his face and curling around his fingers.

Luke's expression changed, his eyes darkening. Charlie watched his nostrils flare, slightly mesmerized over the transformation that came over his handsome face. She caught her breath as he slowly brought his hand up, bringing her hair beneath his nose. He inhaled deeply. Then, as if he realized what he was doing he dropped his hand and gave his head a slight shake. He moved away and hung the poncho on a peg on the back of the door. While there he removed his own jacket and thick wool sweater and kicked his boots off onto the mat by the door.

Charlie glanced down at her wet, muddy feet. "I'm sorry, I should have..."

Luke waved her off. "Don't worry about it."

"This feels wonderful," she admitted, referring to the fire. "I was frozen to the bone."

"You would have been a lot colder if I'd waited until morning to search for you. It would have been a miracle if you'd survived the night at all."

"Give me some credit. At least I was smart enough to throw on some extra clothes." She smiled. "And I did survive last night."

It had been a nightmare. She'd grabbed everything she could find and piled it on top of her for warmth. To keep from freezing to death she'd remained awake, getting up every once in awhile and jumping around to get her blood circulating. She doubted she would have been able to do it a second night.

Luke nodded. "The temperature drops drastically during the night, exposure to it for a long time can be fatal. You wouldn't have been so lucky a second night."

His comment caused Charlie to shiver. "You don't like to mince words."

Luke's gaze shot down to the inadequate covering on her feet. She wondered what he was thinking and watched his jaw clench. She didn't have to wonder long.

"Frostbite isn't picky."

His eyes traveled slowly up the length of Charlie, making her warmer than the fire. She knew she was reading more into it but it had been a long time since a man had looked at her as though he liked what he saw.

"You'd better remove those wet sneakers."

She tried to avoid looking at Luke, uncomfortable now that he'd shed some of his clothes and she saw how solid and powerful he was. She couldn't help but admire his large physique. The jacket and sweater he'd removed hadn't been hiding anything. He was built just as broad shouldered as the garments had implied.

He was a handsome man. She wasn't usually attracted to men with facial hair, but in jeans and a red flannel shirt Luke was surprisingly appealing to her. His thick, black hair was shiny and slightly long, hanging just below his shoulders. When he ran his hands through it like he was doing now she couldn't help but wonder if it felt as silky as it looked. Her gaze moved over the shape of his strong jaw and the thick corded muscles in his neck before the sensuous smoothness of his mouth drew her interest.

*What would kissing him be like?* Charlie felt a warmth sweep through her that had nothing to do with the blazing fire. What was she doing? It wasn't like her to let her imagination run wild with silly notions like that. She bent to untie her sneakers.

"So, what's next?"

She removed one shoe, then the other, placing them on the stone platform in front of the fire to dry. It wasn't until she removed the last layer of damp socks that Charlie realized Luke hadn't answered her. She turned her head in his direction, meeting his watchful eyes. She caught her breath at the look in them and halted, before rising to her full height of five feet five. Not very impressive when he was well over six feet. The way his eyes were staring at Charlie made her feel vulnerable. She got the impression that it wasn't her he was seeing at all.

Then he realized she was looking at him, waiting for his reply. He didn't look the least bit embarrassed that she'd caught him staring.

"A hot bath will do you some good."

That wasn't what Charlie meant. She smiled, and turned her frozen rear toward the fire.

"No, I mean when do you take me into town?"

"The nearest town is thirty-one miles down the mountain from here," he said in a hard voice.

"So? You have a vehicle, don't you?"

It didn't take long before her backside began to thaw out. She started to peel off the sweatsuit he'd given her earlier.

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But when she felt cool air touch her bare midriff she realized the top was clinging to the one beneath.

"Will you help me, please?"

The last thing she wanted to do was show Luke she wasn't wearing a bra.

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## Chapter 3

*Help her?* Luke hesitated. His gaze fell to her exposed flesh. Smooth and soft came to mind. Earlier she'd looked about as shapeless as Frosty the Snowman. Until she'd begun removing her clothes and he'd seen how shapely she was. He'd hoped that when he got her here in a more intimate situation he'd find that he'd been mistaken about her allure. But with each layer she removed he was able to see how right he'd been. Charlie had a nice shape with curves in all the right places.

He didn't want to get any closer to her than he had to. Her being there scared him. He hadn't been alone with a woman in years. And that long, wild hair of hers... For a split second she'd reminded him of someone, the image so fleeting that he let it go. Because he didn't want to remember.

"Are you going to help me?" Charlie put her arms down far enough to poke her head over top, and make eye contact with him. "Please?"

There was no disguising the impatience in her tone. Their gazes clung. She was pretty, even if her face was a little red with windburn. The sparkle in her green eyes complimented the catlike slant of them. They were fringed with the longest, thickest lashes he'd ever seen on a woman. His eyes were drawn to her generous mouth and he wondered if it tasted as sweet as it looked.

It suddenly occurred to Luke that he was going to have to put up with her for the next two months. It would be at least



that long before the snow melted enough for him to take the old logging road down the mountain into town. Then he remembered about his truck and frowned. Maybe he could whittle a sled and send her down the peak on that.

It occurred to him they were still standing there, in stony silence. It was clear she wasn't any happier over the situation than he was. Yet in spite of her piss and vinegar there was something about her that appealed to him, reached him on a purely male level. Just thinking about the size of his cabin and what that was going to mean was enough to make him wish he'd never set out in search of survivors. When he'd seen her plane go down the afternoon before he should have minded his own business and ignored it. There were other people living there in the mountains, one of them could have found her. Now he was stuck with her.

He moved toward her reluctantly, his mouth pressed into a grim line. It took great effort to keep his mind on what he was doing. He reached down and caught the hem to the sweatsuit, conscious that his knuckles grazed her soft skin. It was warm and satiny smooth. He ignored her soft gasp, and the sudden unexpected lust heating his blood. In one smooth motion he brought the outer shirt up and over her head while she held the other one down. As he pulled the top away from her hair the crackle of static electricity could be heard over the logs snapping in the hearth.

"You do have a vehicle, don't you?" she asked.

He tossed the top onto the sofa without looking, wondering how she was going to react to what he had to say. Did she have a temper? No use beating around the bush.

"I have a truck but it's not here."

His words halted the movement of her hands, thank God, which were at the waistband of her pants.

Her eyes went round with mild surprise. "Not here? How do you get to town and back? How do you get around?"

She started to wiggle out of the extra pair of sweat bottoms with enough hip action to give a man heart failure. *Sweet Jesus!* Luke clenched his teeth and quickly turned away from her. His cock was swelling with rapid excitement.

What the hell was the matter with him? All of a sudden he was hot, from the inside out.

"I don't," he said tersely.

He wished he'd purchased the snowmobile Frank Howard had tried to talk him into buying for emergencies when he'd gone into town just before winter. He could have gotten her there on that.

"I don't understand."

Not until he was safely on the other side of the room did Luke dare to face her again. She'd stepped out of the bottoms and tossed them onto the couch. The look in her eyes revealed her confusion as she gathered her hair into a makeshift bun at the back of her neck. She twisted it into a knot with her lips pressed together, exposing a frustration he could relate to.

His gaze moved over her quickly. A big mistake considering his state of arousal. He liked the fact she had a nice shape, full and softly rounded. Curves designed to fit perfectly in the hands of a man. Nevertheless, those thoughts would get him nowhere but into trouble. Luke had made up

his mind a long time ago there'd be no one else for him after Susan. He'd closed the door on relationships and intimacy the day she died.

"I left my truck in town to be serviced. I won't get it back until spring."

"Spring!" Charlie gasped with disbelief. "You mean we're going to have to walk the thirty-one miles to town?"

Luke almost laughed at her naivete.

"Hardly, that would be suicide. There's no way out of here until the snow melts."

He could tell the moment the meaning behind his words sank in. She obviously didn't like it any better than he did.

"But that's..."

Charlie halted abruptly and Luke watched her mouth move as she mumbled beneath her breath, calculating quickly on her fingers.

"Two months away!" she shouted. "I can't stay here for two months!"

Luke shrugged with indifference. "If you can figure a way down the mountain then be my guest."

She stood there staring at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted horns. Then her gaze darted around the cabin again.

"Surely I'm not hearing you right. My family will be frantic with worry."

Luke wondered if she was taking note of how small his cabin seemed all of a sudden. Two months alone with each other, cooped up in his warm and cozy cabin, well, nothing good could possibly come of it. Her eyes shot to the loft, his bedroom, before zeroing in on him again.

"There has to be a way out of here. Once news reaches my family that my plane's gone down, they'll think the worst."

"There's no way out of here until spring," Luke reminded her firmly. "There's nothing you can do about it. We're already snowed in."

There was a scratch at the door and he opened it to let Lady in. She barely spared Charlie a glance before going straight to the fireplace and plopping down on the rug in front of it.

"You choose to live like this?" Charlie questioned after a moment, folding her arms across her chest and walking to the large window on the opposite wall from the fireplace. "Alone? Why would anyone in his or her right mind want to live like this? Don't you get lonely?"

"Lonely isn't the same as being a loner."

It was pitch-black out. Luke knew she couldn't see a thing through the glass, but she could see his reflection and that of the fire behind her because he could see it.

"I have Lady for company."

"So, what about the wolf? How did you come by her?"

He'd been waiting for her to get curious enough to ask about Lady.

"The first winter I was here I found her in a trap half-dead from starvation. I released her. She was too weak to defend herself, so I brought her home and nursed her back to health. It took weeks and by that time she was used to me."

"So she just stuck around?"

"She still has a wild streak in her. She disappears once in a while."

She took a deep breath. "These days if someone disappears on purpose it's most likely because someone with a badge on their chest is hot on their trail."

So they were back to him. Charlie had nerve, he'd give her that.

"Afraid you might be holed up here with a killer or bank robber?"

Luke's mouth twisted as he watched her reflection in the window. He couldn't blame her for thinking something like that. He'd wonder the same thing if the situation were reversed. *Why would anyone in their right mind cut themselves off from the rest of the world if they weren't running away from something?*

He had. He preferred living alone. The only time he saw another soul was when he made his yearly spring trips into town, and then another one in the fall to stock up for the long, cold winter. Once in a while someone, another loner living in the mountains surprised him by showing up at his front door for a meal or the night while en route to their own mountain retreat. But mostly he shared his life with Lady and the wildlife that surrounded his cabin.

In the beginning Luke had done it to forget, to escape into a life where he could survive without his wife. Now he was used to it. He wasn't about to explain his reasons why to Charlie. They were none of her business.

He moved behind her until their gazes met in the glass. She whirled around to face him, almost angry, her eyes snapping with frustration.

"What are you hiding..." Her hand flew to cover her runaway mouth. Only it was too late. They both knew what she'd been about to ask.

In a silent answer to her unfinished question, yes, he was hiding from something. Life in general, but Luke wasn't about to tell her that.

"That's none of your business," he replied, echoing his earlier thoughts.

His gaze narrowed on her until he realized the look in her eyes clouded with fear. She tried to hide it, but it was there nonetheless. Was she wondering what she had to fear from him? For a crazy moment he was half-tempted to feed on her unease by doing something that would really give her something to worry about. Like grab her and taste her mouth. His gut instinct warned him she was going to mean trouble to his peace of mind, and more.

"Okay, we can't leave here and you don't have a phone, but do you have any way of contacting the outside? A radio—"

"Sorry, no."

Luke could tell by the tightening of her pretty mouth that she didn't like his abrupt, uncaring response.

"Well, at least you're sorry about it."

She turned back to the window and crossed her arms. A heavy sigh escaped her. Almost immediately he saw her shoulders bend as though a great weight was upon them, and then they began to shake. The snuffle that followed sounded like a gunshot blast going off in the room.

*Damn!* She was crying. Luke turned and went to the small kitchen, sensing she needed some time alone. The situation

she found herself in was bound to catch up to her. He couldn't help that she was stuck here, but it was sure a hell of a lot better than freezing to death. He thought about how close she'd come to not being found.

He made a pot of fresh coffee. Then opened the small fridge and reached for the bowl of leftover stew he'd made the day before. Not really enough for two, but he could make it stretch with some bread. As he placed it on the counter he heard another snuffle. He glanced up reluctantly.

Charlie swung his way, wiping at her wet cheeks. The deep sadness swimming in her eyes caused him to freeze. There was something more going on there, something far more significant than what she'd been through the last two days.

"I think I'll take you up on your offer of that hot bath now," she said softly. "Is the bathroom through that door?"

Luke nodded. His sharp gaze moved over her missing nothing.

"Sometimes being a survivor can be the worst fate life can hand you." His tone was low. She looked startled for a moment.

"You'll find everything you need in the cabinet behind the door."

She nodded, and then walked quietly to the bathroom.

Releasing a heavy breath, Luke reached for the radio he kept on the counter between the sink and the stove and turned it on. He tried not to think about the woman in the other room, but it was damned hard not to. There was something about Charlie that went beyond being attractive, something that pulled at him from all directions. Hell, he'd

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already had a hard-on because of her. Maybe he'd been out here in the wilderness too long. Denying himself the warmth and comfort that came from sharing life with another living being. Something Luke hadn't realized he missed until now.

As the smooth, flowing twang of the newest country singer came over the radio he picked up the small square picture frame he kept on the window ledge over the sink. It was the only picture he'd kept of Susan and himself. The only memory he dared keep of her, or else completely lose his mind. And he'd come close plenty of times.

He stared down at her pretty face. She looked so young in the picture, hardly the thirty-year-old woman she'd been when her life had been taken. Her smile was the one thing Luke remembered most about her, that and the sound of her sweet, contagious laughter. The way her eyes had lit up and the dimples appeared at the corners of her soft mouth. Susan had been full of life. She had made life worth living.

His finger gently touched the glass over her face as though he was touching her, recalling how soft her skin was. He closed his eyes. The memories were fading with time. Each day became easier to get through without her, but still, Luke was glad he'd kept this one, small picture. He gently replaced it.

Picking up the bowl of stew he dumped it in a pot. He didn't know how long Charlie intended to bathe, but if he didn't hear something from the bathroom soon he would investigate. She was cold, exhausted and could easily give in to the lure of falling asleep in a tub of hot water.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your robe."



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Luke had just filled a bowl of stew for himself when Charlie's voice pulled him from his thoughts. Their gazes met across the room. She'd opened the bathroom door and was framed in the entranceway. Her hand smoothed over her flat belly, touching the robe's belt.

She made an attractive picture, a silhouette of enticing proportions that instantly whet his appetite. She'd washed her hair. The wet tresses clung to her neck and hung to her waist, leaving the thick emerald fabric wet in places. The sleeves were rolled up and exposed her slender wrists. She appeared lost in the thick, heavy folds. Like a little girl playing dress up. The deep rich color suited her looks, bringing out the deeper shade of green in her eyes.

Her face was rosy from her bath and Luke bet the rest of her was too. The V at her throat revealed a deep cleavage and the gentle swell of full breasts. Luke couldn't deny his intense awareness of her, but fought down the instant response of his body determined not to let her get to him, no matter how attractive she was.

When he realized she was still waiting for his answer, he managed to find his voice. "No, I don't mind."

His response was made in a tone he hardly recognized. How was Charlie to know that for a moment, when she'd first opened the bathroom door and appeared on the threshold outlined by the bathroom light behind her, she'd reminded him of another woman and another time? He didn't know where he found the strength to turn away and pretend her presence didn't bother him.

"I know you must be hungry, come have some dinner."

By the time she reached the kitchen area and table, Luke had placed their bowls, two cups of coffee, a loaf of crusty bread on an old wood cutting board and a bottle of cognac down. The first thing he noticed about Charlie was the subtle fragrance that enveloped her. He wondered about it, knowing he didn't keep anything around that smelled half as good as she did to him right then. He yanked his chair out almost angrily and sat down.

She sat down opposite of him and reached for her spoon. "I'm starved."

"The cognac is for after dinner." He indicated the bottle.

"I don't drink. I learned early on that alcohol and I don't mix."

"It's here if you change your mind. It will help you sleep."

Luke broke off a piece of bread and dipped it into his stew, then brought it to his mouth.

Charlie's gaze dropped to his mouth, causing him to hesitate.

*What does she think she's doing, looking at me like that*

A sudden burst of desire settled in the pit of his stomach, hitting him so hard that he sucked in a sharp breath. He decided he'd better do something before giving into it. So he stuffed the stew-soaked bread into his mouth praying he didn't choke on it.

"I was cold and scared bundled up in the tail end of the plane's wreckage last night listening to the sounds in the darkness around me. I let my imagination run wild. Too afraid to let myself fall asleep." She dug into her stew. "I don't think I'll have that trouble tonight."

Luke didn't say anything. He could imagine the hell she'd gone through. First, surviving the plane crash and then spending a night alone to ponder her situation. The unpredictable weather and approaching darkness had kept him from searching for the wreckage earlier.

"This isn't out of a can," Charlie said with mild surprise. "My brothers and I grew up on homemade. It's very good."

"Thanks." He tried not to smile. *Would she like it half as much if she knew it was venison? Some people had an aversion to eating Bambi*

Wisely keeping his mouth shut, he finished off his meal long before Charlie did hers. It allowed him the time to sit back and enjoy his coffee and watch her over the rim of his cup. She helped herself to a second piece of bread, using it as a mop to get every last drop of liquid in her bowl.

"If you're still hungry I can make you something else."

She met his eyes before lowering hers with obvious embarrassment.

"No, thank you." She smiled a little. "I'm afraid I made a pig out of myself."

Luke's eyes remained on her as he sipped his coffee, tracing a path to the deep cleavage revealed when she reached forward for her own cup. He caught a glimpse of the curve of her breasts and recognized the rapid rush of hot emotion surging through his veins as lust. His gaze zeroed in on her full mouth when she brought her cup down. It was too easy imagining those lush lips beneath his, while his hands roamed over her breasts and between her legs.

*Son of a bitch!* He had to get a grip. He didn't need this kind of trouble. Before letting his thoughts continue he rose and began clearing the table. Distance might help. Besides, Charlie didn't seem like the kind of woman who would eagerly jump into a stranger's arms, or his bed.

"Let me help you."

She jumped to her feet with her empty bowl and followed him to the sink.

"It's the least I can do...oh!"

Luke stopped, and turned so abruptly that they collided.

Charlie stepped back with a gasp, her eyes rounding up at him. Was it fear or awareness that caused that little puff of breath and her hand to flutter to her throat above the opening of his robe?

Deciding he didn't want to know, he took a long, uneven breath and released it slowly. He watched the way Charlie's green eyes changed with her varying emotions, the way her pupils dilated as they moved over him. He wondered how deep they would turn when she kissed a man. He had to get rid of her before he found out for himself.

"I can manage." He snatched the bowl from her hand. "Go warm yourself by the fire."

He ignored the sudden hurt filling her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again just as quickly as though weighing the wisdom of his words. She turned and walked away, opting for the sofa instead of the hearth. The smooth leather engulfed her as she sank into it. She curled her legs beneath her, reached for one of the

pillows in the corner, hugged it to her chest and glanced out the large window.

Luke gulped at the enticing picture she made and reached down to adjust his uncomfortably hard cock. God, it had been so long since he'd felt the urge to fuck.

He turned back to the sink. It didn't take him long to clean up. With the exception of the fire snapping in the hearth the cabin was quiet, until the ghostly howl of a wolf outside broke the silence.

Charlie let out a little scream of her own when Lady's piercing response echoed through the cabin. Luke reached Lady just as the wolf left the rug in front of the hearth to run to the door. As soon as he opened it a frigid wind blew in, causing the flames in the fireplace to dance wildly out of control. Luke bent to gather an armful of firewood right outside the door. The snowflakes blowing into the cabin melted before they even hit the floor. He kicked the door shut and placed the logs in an old copper tub next to the hearth.

When Luke turned toward Charlie her head was back and her eyes closed. He knew she wasn't asleep, but the relaxed expression on her face told him it wouldn't be long. His gaze drifted lazily down to her breasts to see them rising and falling slowly. He pulled a quilt over her before going to his own bed.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 4

Luke got out of bed before Charlie woke the next morning. He'd spent a sleepless night, ever conscious of the woman sleeping on his couch, the unwelcome memories she stirred, and the hunger. Maybe he could have ignored her presence had it not been for the muted sounds of moaning and thrashing throughout the night, revealing she'd suffered a troubled night, too.

It had been easy to assume she'd been replaying the plane crash in her dreams, until she cried out the name of someone. The name was too muffled to make out, but it was clear by her low agonizing wail that she was tormented by the memory.

It had been Luke's intention to give her his bed, but once she'd fallen asleep he hadn't wanted to disturb her. He'd more than once gone down to check on her to make sure she stayed covered. Keeping the generator for the lights and small appliances, and using the heater only when he knew the temperature was going to drop drastically meant, once the fire burned out, the cabin would get cold.

A couple times when he'd checked on Charlie, he found the covers on the floor, kicked there by her restlessness no doubt. This time when he rounded the sofa he stopped short, unprepared for the sight of Charlie in the early dawn hours.

Everything in him froze, including his breath. *Shit!*

A mystical aurora seemed to envelop her, but Luke knew his eyes were playing tricks on him. It was nothing more than

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the way the early rays of sunlight filtered through the window, landing on her reclining form. Long black lashes swept against her flawless skin, and her rosy lips were parted. Soft and moist, inviting as she breathed gently in and out. Her high cheekbones were dotted with natural color and surrounded by a waterfall of luxurious, silky hair. He clenched his hands into tight fists, fighting the impulse to run his hands through that mane. He was determined to fight her allure. If only he could make himself glance away, but like a magnet, her presence held him prisoner.

She was lying on her side with one leg thrust out and bent slightly, oblivious to his thorough inspection. The parted robe revealed that graceful limb all the way up to her cream-colored, shapely thigh. An inch higher and he wouldn't have to wonder if her auburn locks were natural. His gaze ran over the bare limb with growing interest, knowing he was inviting trouble. He sucked in a sharp breath, surprised at the surge of heat exploding through his senses, rousing desires left dormant too long. Luke knew he should walk away, instead his eyes continued to travel lazily over her still form, lingering on the curve of perfect breasts revealed through the parted folds.

A Sleeping Beauty, waiting to be awakened by the kiss of her lover. And perhaps more? His mouth went dry, the sight of her leaving him shaken, and hard. Charlie stirred slightly, moaning softly, but he was too mesmerized to move or look away. He wanted to drink in her soft beauty, he wanted to explore it and experience it.

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As she settled onto her back her long hair fell over her breasts, hiding them from his view. Luke had been without female companionship for so long that he hadn't realized how much he missed a woman until now. The closeness, the heat, the tenderness in their touch. Damn Charlie for reminding him of those things. For reminding him of what he'd lost.

Susan's face flashed before his eyes and before Luke realized it he was making comparisons. Charlie wasn't anything like the woman who'd been his wife for seven years. Susan's ambitious passions made her determined to succeed in everything she did. She'd been hell on wheels, knowing what she wanted and going after it. Sophistication had cloaked her from the top of her stylish haircut, tailored suits and pearls to her Yale education, and the lawyer's degree hanging on the wall of her uptown law office.

Everything about Charlie screamed innocence. She seemed soft, sensitive, bringing out his protective instincts. She was more sexy than stylish with that warm look in her eyes and that soft tempting mouth. There was nothing chic about her waist-length hair either, yet it didn't stop Luke from being captivated by it. Imagine it clinging to their sweat-dampened bodies as they made love. She was just far too appealing for his peace of mind.

His full erection pushed strongly against his zipper. With teeth clenched he reached down and tried to adjust it. The impulse to fall upon Charlie and sink his cock inside her soft body was so overwhelming that Luke knew it wouldn't take much to make it a reality. He closed his eyes for a second and let his desire rule his thoughts. But they became so vivid he



groaned and opened his eyes. Charlie had shifted slightly, giving him a view of the curls between her legs.

*Sweet Jesus!* Luke almost fell weakly to his knees.

It occurred to Luke that he could hardly stand there and ogle her until she wakened. With a mild curse he snatched up the discarded quilt and pulled it over her. He felt guilty for making comparisons between her and Susan. Guiltier still for wanting Charlie. Before he changed his mind, he turned and walked to the door in brisk strides. Grabbing up his jacket he went outside. Nothing short of a dip in the icy creek running behind his cabin was going to cool down his suddenly overheated body. Since only a fool would opt for that option, a brisk walk would have to do.

Charlie had no idea what time it was when she opened her eyes, only knowing that it was morning and she'd had a terrible night. She moved slowly into a sitting position and ran her hands over her face before turning toward the warmth of the incoming sun.

The window provided her with the breathtaking view outside Luke's cabin. A forest of pines blanketed with sparkling snow loomed high in the sky as though reaching for the sun. Between their towering peaks, she could make out the white-capped mountains in the distance, and against the clear blue sky she was certain she saw an eagle or hawk.

Shivering, she drew the quilt around her. Where had her host gone? It was too quiet.

A quick survey of the cabin didn't produce him or his wolf. Yet a distant hammering noise coming from outside brought Charlie to her feet, and to the window. She didn't have to

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wonder what the sound was for very long. Her gaze fell on Luke. He was chopping wood. She crossed her arms, enveloping her body within the folds of the blanket and leaned against the frame of the glass to watch him.

His forceful movements indicated he was angry about something. Each piece of wood he placed upon the tree stump was attacked with a vengeance as he brought the ax down, using enough force that one good whack split it neatly in two. His face was flushed, a cloud of white breath rushing through his parted lips revealed how cold it was. He hefted the ax up over his head again and again, bringing to attention the play of muscles on his bare arms. He'd removed his jacket and had rolled the sleeves of his flannel shirt up to his elbows, revealing the dark hair sprinkling his forearms. She certainly didn't have to wonder about the strength in those arms. Luke was a healthy, male specimen.

And she was more than intrigued.

Her curious gaze roamed over the rest of his body, trying to gauge the width of his broad shoulders before continuing down to his belted waist. His faded jeans were old and tight, fitting snugly over his male attributes like a glove and leaving little to the imagination. His long, muscular legs were slightly braced apart for balance, the bottom half of his jeans tucked into knee-high boots that appeared well-worn, the leather soft with age. Charlie slowly began to realize that watching Luke was visually stimulating.

She was reminded of a book cover she'd seen on a romance novel at the airport gift store. Luke was built like the Viking on that cover. Take the clothes off and change the

color of his hair and beard and he could have posed for that picture. He was handsome in a rugged, untamed way. She ran her arm over her taut nipples, trying to alleviate the tingling there.

Memories of her ex-husband surfaced and Charlie couldn't help comparing them. Paul had been a suit-and-tie kind of man. Tall and exceedingly handsome and always well-groomed. He'd been overly obsessed with his looks along with everything else during their short marriage. Paul had been the kind of man who only cared about how things appeared on the surface—a big house, fancy cars, and expensive belongings. A selfish man who'd been so jealous over his own daughter that, in the end, it had destroyed their marriage.

Charlie realized there was no comparison between Luke and Paul. They were as different as night and day in appearances. Moreover, she doubted when Luke made love to a woman he'd be more concerned about messing up his hair than making sure he saw to her needs. She felt herself grow uncomfortably warm with her thoughts. Watching Luke wasn't such a good idea, especially when it dawned on her that she found him extremely attractive.

*You're just horny, Charlie.*

It had been a long time since she'd been even slightly interested in anyone. There just hadn't been time to think about men in the last year. Her failure with Paul had left her feeling insecure and slightly bitter. Still, Charlie couldn't seem to draw her gaze away from the sight of Luke. He'd saved her life but the feelings inside her had nothing to do with gratitude. She was honest enough to admit that.

Her eyes slowly swept back up his superb body to his face. He'd stopped chopping and was standing there, looking directly at her. His chest was heaving from his exertions. Charlie froze. Their gazes locked. She felt her face burning that he'd caught her staring, but she couldn't draw her eyes away. With the window between them she felt safe, ignoring the fact that if Luke chose to he could barge through the door and do whatever he wanted to her.

She doubted he'd gone to the trouble of rescuing her for his own devious means. He didn't strike her as being dangerous, maybe to her peace of mind, but certainly not to her person. And if Luke chose to attack her in some way, she wouldn't have a chance of stopping him. There was nothing she could do but put her trust in him. After a few moments he dropped the ax and disappeared into a small shed she hadn't noticed until now.

Charlie released a breath and relaxed slightly. Now that Luke was out of sight her thoughts turned to her family. She wondered how long it would be before anyone knew she was missing. She couldn't stand the thought of them suffering needlessly through the next two months, not knowing what happened to her, suspecting the worse. They didn't deserve this; they'd suffered enough heartache the last year. They all had.

Just for a moment Charlie let her mind drift. As always, when Robin entered her thoughts the tears soon followed. Her eyes swelled and burned with the memory of her daughter's sweet little face, her bright smile. Her little arms reaching out

for a hug. Only Charlie refused to give in to a sadness that would surely overwhelm her if she let it.

She wiped angrily at the tears before they fell. She had to keep her mind on what was happening now. Her only consolation was that she hadn't told anyone in her family that she was coming. Not exactly the brightest idea she'd ever had. Now it looked like her last-minute decision to fly home and surprise her parents for their thirty-first wedding anniversary was going to end up causing them more grief than happiness.

What she needed was something to take her mind off the things she couldn't change, and having something to do would help. She pulled herself together and left the window, dropping the blanket on the sofa on her way to the kitchen. She needed coffee. And she supposed Luke would welcome something hot when he decided to come back inside. It didn't take her long to locate the filter and grounds. Before long the cabin was filled with the aroma of coffee brewing. She no sooner fixed herself a cup and sat down when Luke burst into the cabin.

Charlie just managed to keep from jumping out of her seat at his abrupt and unexpected entrance. Her gaze followed him to the copper tub next to the cold, black hearth, where he dumped an armload of wood into it. He looked like he'd already put in a good day's work. His shirt was plastered to him with sweat. So was his hair.

"Good morning."

He swung around as she took a sip of her coffee. Charlie watched him over the rim of her mug, enjoying the warmth in

her hands. She was sitting with her feet up on the chair, her knees tucked against her body, her bare, pink-tipped toes peeking out from beneath her borrowed robe.

Luke's eyes raked over her and even from her distance Charlie could tell he was clenching his teeth.

"It's noontime," he corrected her abruptly, striding straight to the coffeepot.

It was obvious he was irritated at something. His movements were brisk, almost angry. But Charlie wasn't about to let him take it out on her.

"I hope you don't mind that I made a pot of coffee. I—"

"Look." Luke turned on her without warning, and then abruptly halted. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. "You're going to be here for awhile. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you." Charlie avoided his eyes by looking down at her toes. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you. You saved my life and..."

She paused when Luke turned from her. He poured himself some coffee, keeping his back to her while taking the first sip. It was as though she wasn't there.

She fought down the hurt. How was she was ever going to make it through the winter with him when it was clear he didn't want her there? To make matters worse, he was stirring certain emotions in her, feelings that had been deeply buried for a long time. The intensity of her awareness of him frightened Charlie. Shocked her at how fast she was reacting to him. *He's a stranger, for goodness sake*

He finished off his coffee before turning back to her. His gaze fell down her body.

"I'll get you some clothes before I leave. You can't go around wearing nothing but my robe all winter."

For the second time that day Charlie couldn't help noticing how well-built Luke was. Couldn't help noticing the tiny gold flecks in his eyes or the way his firm mouth looked framed in his neatly trimmed beard. She wondered what kissing a man with a beard would be like. Her nostrils flared, breathing in his manly scent. The smell of the soap he used, the way it blended with his body heat, and the intoxicating aroma of fresh mountain air and pine clinging to his clothes. She didn't realize she was staring until his expression turned hard, almost frightening as he stood like a bronze statue looking down at her.

Finally his words registered.

"You're leaving?"

She set her cup down and lowered her feet to the floor. She couldn't have heard him correctly. Surely he wasn't leaving her.

"I'm going fishing," Luke clarified, his mouth set in a straight line. "I need to restock the freezer."

Without another word he turned and went to the ladder that led to the loft and deftly climbed it to the top.

Oh, he was just going fishing. Charlie reached for her coffee cup again. She liked fresh fish.

It was almost dark when Luke finally made his way back home. Charlie wondered if he would have stayed away longer if it hadn't been snowing again and blistering cold. The wind

was howling like the wolves in the woods, and she sensed a blizzard heading their way. And when that happened it would mean being snowed in with Luke. Just thinking about it made her melt inside.

If Luke was surprised to find Lady waiting for his return on the porch, he didn't show it. Charlie had heard the wolf outside the door earlier, but ignored her. She wasn't quite ready to trust the wild animal when Luke wasn't around. When the door was opened, Lady scampered into the warmth of the cabin and her favorite spot before her master was even all the way inside.

Charlie stopped stirring the sauce she'd made when Luke's gaze fell on her. She held her breath as his gaze ran down the length of her and back again. Did he regret giving her one of his shirts and a pair of long johns? The thick red and black flannel hung to mid-thigh on her. Yet, in spite of being fully covered, she felt exposed somehow. As if he could see right through them.

He cleared his throat. "You didn't let Lady in."

His eyes moved over her face before dropping down the front of her shirt. He closed the door behind him.

Charlie's gaze darted nervously to the wolf. "I wasn't about to open the door to a half-frozen kitten much less a full-grown wolf."

He'd left her alone all day to fend for herself. If he was angry with her for ignoring Lady that was just too bad. She didn't ask him where the fish was, secretly glad he was back.



"Looks like you've been busy." He motioned with his head toward the steaming pot on the stove. "If my nose isn't playing tricks on me I smell spaghetti."

He removed his jacket and boots before coming further into the room.

Charlie's face split into a wide grin. "I hope you like it."

She didn't know anyone who didn't like spaghetti, but Luke wasn't like anyone she'd ever known.

He nodded briefly. "Do I have time to shower first?"

Not waiting for her response he strode quickly to the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Charlie turned back to the stove to add the spaghetti to the boiling water, trying not to think about Luke. She tried not to visualize the water pelting down his hard, naked body while he lathered up with the woodsy soap he used. Those kinds of thoughts would only land her in trouble and heartache. Lord knew she didn't need any more of that.

Instead, she tried to focus on her singing career, which had taken a serious nosedive the last two years when she hadn't been able to devote as much time to it. Anyone in the business knew when a person was starting out everything else had to take a backseat. At least until they'd made a name for themselves and had a strong following. Once established, a successful artist could take all the time off they wanted and not worry about returning and having to start all over again. Charlie had been close to achieving that status without giving up the things in life that were important to her along the way. Namely her family.

She sighed and stared out the kitchen window at the heavy snowfall. When Robin had gotten sick nothing else had mattered after that. Nothing but getting her well again. She would have gladly given up everything to accomplish that. In the end the illness had won, taking Robin before she'd had a chance to live.

"Smells good."

Charlie started at the unexpected sound of Luke's velvet tone when he moved up behind her. She was glad for the interruption.

"Thanks." Her voice came out cracked and a little husky, revealing she wasn't as in control of her emotions as she thought she was. "Spaghetti happens to be my specialty."

It sounded like a lame comment. *Who couldn't make spaghetti?*

Her gaze shifted to the small framed photo on the windowsill. She hadn't noticed it until now. *Is that Luke?* The man in the picture was beardless and younger, but the mouth and eyes were the same. He was posing with a pretty woman, his arm draped carelessly across her slim shoulders while peering into her eyes with complete adoration. They were both smiling, revealing a close intimacy between them that couldn't be denied. *Is this his wife?* She wanted to ask, but Luke didn't seem like the type who would welcome any prying into his personal life.

She took a steadying breath and wisely strayed away from her curious thoughts. Luke had moved to the table. Charlie filled a plate and brought it to him.

"I hope you like it spicy."

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It was too late if he didn't.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 5

Luke met Charlie's eyes as he accepted the plate from her. Their fingers touched briefly. He would have liked to ignore that, but there was no denying the instant electricity that sparked between them. And it wasn't static electricity either. The current that passed between them had been pleasantly intense. Charlie's soft gasp of acknowledgement revealed she was just as affected.

"Thank you."

For some reason, her innocent comment about liking it spicy sent a flash fire through his blood, making him think of anything but food. He decided the less he said the better. Plus, it was obvious she'd been crying and he'd never been very good at consoling people. So he chose to ignore that, too. He guessed they both had their crosses to bear.

They ate their meal in awkward silence, but Luke was keenly aware of Charlie sitting across from him giving him sidelong glances when she thought he wasn't looking.

*Is she afraid of me?*

He hadn't given her any reason to be, but he couldn't blame her if she was. He concentrated on his dinner, which was damn good. If this was just a sample of Charlie's culinary talents then he had something to look forward to in the coming months, besides having a woman around to disrupt his life.

"You're very quiet." Her soft voice broke into the silence, drawing his gaze upward.

Luke shrugged.

"I'm not used to company," he explained then tried to cushion his indifference. "Besides, I'm enjoying a home-cooked meal for a change."

Her smile seemed natural and, for a moment, Luke was mesmerized by the glitter in her catlike eyes. The softening of her expression.

"When's the last time you had a home-cooked meal?"

He slipped another forkful of spaghetti into his mouth, taking some time to calculate. He realized it had been way too long.

"Two years ago when I went down the mountain for supplies I stopped in at the local diner and had a meatloaf dinner. The menu said it was home-made."

It'd been the worst meat loaf he'd ever eaten. Cardboard would have tasted better.

"I see," she said. With a smile still on her face, she rose to her feet. "I have a surprise for you."

The intimate atmosphere in the warm cabin, the lingering aroma of a homey dinner, and the company of a soft, pretty woman was definitely having an effect on Luke. A feeling he didn't eagerly welcome. It left him feeling confused, guilty, and sexually frustrated. Thoughts of what her surprise could be had nothing to do with food. And everything to do with them, naked in front of the fire, fucking like there was no tomorrow.

"I made dessert."

Her comment brought him back down to earth. He watched as she opened the oven door and reached in for a

baking sheet with something yummy on it. The shirt she was wearing pulled up just high enough to give Luke a tantalizing view of the shapely thighs that were encased in his long johns. He closed his eyes in a moment of unexpected weakness, groaning out loud. He didn't care what was on that baking sheet. Nothing could compare to the sexy fanny staring him in the face.

"It does smell good, doesn't it?" Charlie said, obviously misinterpreting his groan. "I found a box of Bisquick and a can of cherries and made some turnovers."

When Charlie turned back toward him, the first thing Luke noticed was that her nipples were hard against the flannel covering them. The sight sent a jolt of raw lust straight through him to his swelling cock. His mouth began to water, but it wasn't over the thought of any turnovers. Hell, he was never going to survive the winter with her around. The cabin was too damn small, and she was too damn alluring, which made him too damn hot. He had to get out of there.

He thought about the cold dip he'd taken earlier that day, which had been null and void the moment he caught her staring at him through the window. She'd given him a raging hard-on watching him with that innocent interest on her soft face. Eating him up with her eyes. Now in just as little time and without much effort, she had him in the same predicament all over again.

Charlie held the tray out to him long enough to question his hesitation when he didn't take one right away.

A slight frown pulled her well-shaped brows down. "You don't like turnovers?"

Luke blinked, trying to clear his head. What was he going to say? *I like turnovers but I'd rather eat you?* He must be suffering from cabin fever. He reached for one but made the mistake of touching the hot baking sheet. With a hiss, he jerked his hand back and dropped the turnover with a mild swear word.

"Here, let me see that."

Charlie quickly placed the hot tray on top of the stove and turned back to him, automatically reaching for his injured hand.

"I should have warned you the tray was still hot."

If she touched him it would be all over.

"No!"

Overreacting, Luke pulled away from her. His chair went crashing to the floor when he stood up too fast.

Charlie stepped back with a loud gasp, her eyes growing round. "I was just..."

Luke towered over her. "I don't want you touching me, Charlie. I don't need your gentleness or your tenderness. I don't need or want you taking care of me. Do you understand? Try and remember that while you're here and we'll get along fine."

He didn't understand where the anger was coming from, knowing it was unwarranted. She was only trying to be nice. As soon as he saw the wounded look come over her confused face, Luke wished he could take it all back. She stared at him as if he was a monster. Her large eyes swelled with unshed tears.

"But—"

"Charlie."

Luke clenched his hands, and closed his eyes. He willed himself under control by counting to ten, then to twenty.

"I'm sorry." Was all he could manage. He knew it was a lame apology.

She wanted an explanation but he couldn't explain his actions to himself. Who was he fooling? Luke knew what possessed him to overreact at her simple, kind gesture. He wanted her, plain and simple. He wanted her there, on the table, on the floor, on the damn counter. And it frightened him because he was too close to losing control.

He couldn't remember wanting any woman with such intensity. The knowledge that he lusted after Charlie brought feelings of anger. He felt like he was betraying Susan's sweet memory, being unfaithful to her in some way. He closed his eyes as a gamut of raw emotions surged through him. Only it didn't diminish his throbbing erection.

"Luke, what is it? Let me help you."

Before he did something he'd regret, Luke turned and left.

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## Chapter 6

Luke thought his eyes were playing tricks on him as he neared the cabin.

At first he thought the movement was a deer, until he was close enough to make out that it was Charlie. She was layered in clothing and chopping wood. At least she was making a good effort. For the first time in a long time he found himself laughing. He paused to observe, watching her awkward movements yet sensing her determination to succeed. She could hardly lift the heavy ax but she wasn't giving up.

Several times Luke thought he heard her swear. He could relate to her frustration, recalling his first attempt to chop wood. It had taken him a lot of patience and practice before he learned how to control where the ax fell. The breath caught in his throat when he saw Charlie swing wildly. She missed the tree stump completely and lost her balance. The ax went flying in one direction as she fell to the snow in another.

That's when Luke spied the snowman. A little lopsided, it looked more like a scarecrow than a snowman. It was wearing one of his flannel shirts, the sticks Charlie had used for arms filling the sleeves out grotesquely. She'd placed a pot on the head for a hat and its face reminded him more of a Halloween jack-o'-lantern with its crooked smile and small beady eyes.

It was apparent she'd kept busy while he was gone.

The sound of huffing and puffing pulled his gaze back to Charlie in time to see her taking another wild swing. She went flying with the momentum this time, and Luke decided she'd had enough. Besides, he didn't want to see her get hurt. He stepped out from behind the tree.

"If you insist on helping out around here, you can skin and clean these fish." He held up a string supporting half a dozen.

Red-faced and panting, Charlie stopped what she was doing. She eyed the fish with a look of distaste.

"I don't do fish." She shuddered delicately, making a face. "My idea of fish is the frozen square kind you buy at the grocery store. I draw the line at cutting off the heads or tails of any dinner you bring home."

"Is that all?"

"I won't skin or gut anything either."

"Looks like you don't do wood chopping, too," Luke joked.

His gaze moved over her snowman shape. This time he didn't have to guess what lay hidden beneath the layers of clothing.

"Is that snowman, and I use the term lightly, supposed to scare away the critters that venture too close?"

The look that came over Charlie's face was one of mild surprise, and there was no disguising the humor in her sparkling eyes.

"Are you making fun of Mr. Google? There are repercussions for that, you know." She slowly laid the ax down on top of the scarred stump. Then bent and scooped up a handful of loose snow.

Recognizing her playful mood, Luke's frame of mind changed almost instantly. Just for a moment he'd let his guard down. Forgetting he didn't want her there disrupting his life and making him horny. He didn't want to feel the things he was feeling. Didn't want to admit he was beginning to feel human again. He'd purposely stayed away as much as possible since bringing her home. There was something about Charlie that made his blood warm and his gut clench.

If she recognized his mood had changed, she didn't let it stop her.

"It's been a long time since I've made a snowball, longer since I've been in a snowball fight."

"Charlie, I'm not in a playing mood." Luke watched as she deftly rolled the snow until it was a perfect little ball.

"You were a second ago. There was no sign of the quiet, moody mountain man I've been holed up here with the last three days."

The light dancing in her eyes almost pulled him in. He wondered what it would be like playing in the snow with Charlie.

"That was a second ago."

Her hesitation was visible. She narrowed her bright eyes on him, disappointment slowly filling them.

"You've barely said a dozen words to me since you rescued me. And you're way too serious all the time. I wonder, do you ever let yourself go, Luke? Do you ever just enjoy the moment?"

"You don't want to find out."

"Why not? You seemed to enjoy joking around a second ago." Charlie casually tossed the snowball in the air before catching it with her hand. "How long has it been since you've enjoyed life, Luke? Or are you afraid of having a little fun?"

If she'd tossed a glove at his feet, the challenge couldn't have been any clearer. Luke clenched his jaw.

"I'm just not in the mood for playing."

He repeated his earlier statement, hoping she would back off. He didn't want to hurt her any further. And if things kept going the way they were, he was going to, one way or another. He wasn't teasing anymore.

Charlie stared into his eyes as if she couldn't make up her mind about something.

"I think I understand. You're afraid of me!" Her soft voice accused.

"Don't push me, Charlie." His tone was as frosty as the snow around them. "If you continue—"

"You'll what?" Her challenge came out in a husky laugh. "You've already proved your bark is worse than your bite. I'm pretty certain I can handle anything else you dish out."

Without a word Luke pressed his lips together, turned and walked away. If she knew what he wanted to dish out she'd run down the mountain on her own steam. He felt a twitch in his loins but ignored it. Distance was the key to remaining in control, disconnected. If he gave in to her playful mood, no telling where it would lead.

"Is that your answer to everything, Luke? Running away?"

"I'm not running."

"Walking away is the same thing."

He clenched his teeth until his jaw ached, trying to ignore Charlie's taunting words. Only drowning out the truth he heard in them would take a hell of a lot more than simply walking away.

"But you are running away, Luke. What are you afraid of? What will it take to get a human reaction out of you?"

The next thing Luke knew a snowball hit him square between the shoulder blades. He stiffened and halted for a moment and then continued without looking back. He wasn't going to let her get to him.

"Oh, I see. Now you're not even talking to me...again."

Another snowball hit Luke at the back of the neck. He felt it explode before falling down the inside of his coat. Control slowly began to slip away.

"Good, maybe a little ice against your skin will do the trick. Any reaction is better than nothing."

"You won't like the consequences, Charlie," Luke said over his shoulder, still striding toward the cabin door with purpose. He was almost there. "I'd stop pushing if I were you."

"Huh!"

He heard her explode behind him. Her tone revealed she wasn't the least bit afraid.

"I don't know why I'm even bothering. You're obviously made of ice; you're as cold as our surroundings."

Luke detected the frustration in Charlie's tone. Before he had a chance to respond the next snowball hit him on the rump.

"I'm warning you, Charlie."

He was trying like hell not to let her playfulness manipulate him. Wondering why he was fighting it so hard. But he knew the answer to that. Come spring it would be a hell of a lot easier saying goodbye if the situation between them remained the way it was. Just a man and a woman sharing a cabin until the weather permitted them to part ways.

"Well, if that's the best you can do."

The next snowball hit Luke on the back of his uncovered head.

"Only it's not good enough. I know you have it in you, Luke. I want to see a normal reaction out of you. What would that take?"

Luke swung around and her next snowball hit him square in the chest.

"Oh, right where your heart would be, if you had one," she said unwisely, having the nerve to wink.

Her expression all but dared Luke to do something about it. He could have caught the snowball if he'd wanted to, choosing to raise an eyebrow and glare at her instead.

"Well?" she taunted recklessly, crossing her arms.

The defiant sparkle in her eyes was enough to goad a man into a lot of things, but Luke credited himself with having more self-control than that. His eyes narrowed on her as he tried to decipher her reasons for provoking him. Wondered why it was so important she get a reaction out of him. What was she looking for? The longer he stood there, the brighter her smile became. A clear indication she thought she had him all figured out.

"It won't work."

He pivoted toward the door, and was just about to step up the first step when he heard Charlie release a shriek of anger or frustration or both. He grinned, until he realized she was right behind him.

"What won't work? Trying to prove that you're human?"

She cut Luke off at the porch, moving around and in front of him before he could stop her. She walked up the steps backwards.

"What buttons do I have to push, huh, mountain man?"

Her words moved over Luke like warm honey. He tried to swallow but everything about Charlie assailed his senses all at once—the twinkle in her eyes, her spirit, the rosy glow on her pretty cheeks, and that sensuous mouth. Most of all that wild hair, which seemed to have a life of its own.

Luke pictured what she would look like naked, with it draped all about her.

Like some medieval maiden waiting to be conquered by her lord. Covering just what it needed to cover to whet a man's appetite and keep him hungry for more. He sucked in great gulps of crisp mountain air and warm woman. Arousal slammed him in the gut like a fist.

She was too close and exhilarating.

His cock was hard as stone and hungry.

"Well?" Her tone was low and husky. Their eyes met.

"I can see it in your eyes, mountain man. You want to let go. Do it, Luke. It feels good."

She had the gall to wet her lips and smile. As far as Luke was concerned she'd just crossed the line. He dropped his line

of fish, grabbed Charlie by the shoulders, slammed her up against the cabin door, and pinned her there with his hard body. He heard the breath leave her lungs with a loud whoosh, watched her pupils dilate with emotion. He wanted to believe it was fear, but his gut told him Charlie didn't frighten easily. As he closed in she tilted her head, meeting the anger in his eyes. She didn't back down one inch.

The need to taste her was so strong that it frightened Luke. But not enough into letting her go.

"Is this what you want, Charlie? Is this the kind of reaction you're looking for?"

Anger raced through Luke's blood that she'd pushed him into touching her. Something he didn't want to do. The feel of her small, vibrant body against his was weakening his resolve to remain indifferent. His lips thinned as he lowered his face closer.

"Are you happy now?"

"It's a start," she said foolishly, those incredible eyes of hers filling with a glint of satisfaction and something else. Victory? "Doesn't it feel good letting your emotions go for a change?"

Luke didn't like the calm in her voice, the confidence that she knew what she was doing. He wanted her as torn up inside as he was. He wanted her *hot*.

"You have no idea what you're inviting, Charlie."

He had no idea he was going to kiss Charlie until he was doing it. With a hungry groan he slanted his mouth over hers, quickly cutting off any smart remark he sensed was forthcoming. He didn't care that he was stealing the breath



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from her, or that he'd forced his tongue inside her mouth to battle her sweetly responsive one. Sensations he hadn't felt in a long time exploded through his body with the force of a cyclone. It made him hungry and afraid at the same time.

He knew once he'd touched her, he would be hard-pressed to let her go. Since the moment they'd met he'd reacted to her like a man to a woman. Everything seemed to be leading up to this moment of madness, in spite of trying his damndest to deny those feelings and keep his distance. But damn her, she'd made it exceedingly difficult. Well, he hoped she was happy now because he was giving her the human reaction her goading demanded. The sounds of a satisfied purr rumbled low in her throat, giving him the answer to his thoughts. Making Luke realize the situation could easily turn dangerous, and much more intimate, between them.

Her response caused sharp arousal to uncoil from deep inside his gut, shaking him with its intensity. His senses were suddenly alive and throbbing with stimulation, the blood in his veins turning to molten lava. He could feel the heat of Charlie through their clothes, sensed the need flowing through her blood was just as urgent as his. Her soft whimpers became hungry moans, rendering him powerless to stop from grinding his cock against her. Only he knew relief wouldn't come until he was buried deep inside her pussy.

His hand fell to the zipper on her jacket. He pulled it down until he could part the material and cover her breast with his hand. The soft fullness seemed to swell even more in his palm. She cried out beneath his mouth. He ignored it. Every fiber of his being demanded he take what she seemed willing

to give, but when she arched into his intimate act, Luke ended the kiss abruptly. Because, if he didn't find the willpower to stop now he wouldn't.

Out of breath, he rested his forehead against hers for a moment, struggling for control. Charlie was panting too, her breath intermingling with his, their hearts pounding wildly against each other as one. It took superhuman strength not to take her there, standing against the door with all of Mother Nature looking on. Luke wondered if she'd shut up about wanting to see a human response out of him then.

"Do you want me to fuck you right here and now?" His tone held a mixture of desire and self-loathing. "Or are you satisfied?"

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 7

*Satisfied? He has to be kidding.*

Luke's kiss had set her blood on fire, leaving her hot and hungry for so much more. Charlie hadn't known how badly she'd wanted physical contact until now. It had been too long since she'd felt the firm pressure of a man's mouth on hers, felt the rush of desire surge through her blood. How could she be satisfied when his demanding lips had wreaked havoc with her heart and her blood pressure, only to leave her empty and wanting?

She was so weak she could barely remain on her feet. He could lay her down in the cold snow and make love to her and she wouldn't protest. His rock-hard shaft throbbed against her, revealing he was more than ready to fuck her, as he'd so eloquently stated.

"Don't push any more buttons, Charlie," Luke warned her hoarsely, still leaning into her. "Next time you might get more of a human reaction out of me than you can handle."

*Is his threat hollow?* Charlie couldn't tell and she wasn't about to test him. Something her brother Scott had said to her once about waking the sleeping bear flashed through her memory. And one thing was certain, after experiencing Luke's kiss she was certain she'd barely survive anything else he had to offer.

His threat revealed a lot, though. The knowledge that she turned Luke on was a boost to her ego. The knowledge he wanted her frightened her a little. There was no way she

could ignore his pounding hard-on. Recognizing that she reciprocated those feelings terrified Charlie. She couldn't recall ever wanting a man with such fierce need. Had she provoked him on purpose?

"I understand." It was the only thing she could think to say. She was still shaken over her response to his powerful kiss and rough caress. And a little embarrassed she'd goaded him into a reaction she hadn't been able to handle.

Her intentions hadn't been to get him to kiss her, at least not consciously. For a brief second when he'd teased her about her snowman she'd seen a different side of Luke, one that she liked. His relaxed expression and the humor glistening in his eyes had taken years off him. She couldn't help wondering what had shaped his life, turning him into the cold, unfeeling man he seemed determined to be.

No, that wasn't an accurate description.

He was hollow inside, and that saddened her to the core.

"Do you understand? You have no idea how close..."

His voice was hoarse. She watched the play of emotions on his face go from fear to anger and then deep suffering. She recognized the signs because she'd been there too. The difference was Charlie had survived because her family and friends had surrounded her with love. People who wouldn't let her dig a hole to crawl into when she couldn't face the pain anymore, people who wouldn't let her give up. Something told her that whatever happened to Luke, no one had been there for him.

She recalled the words he'd uttered that first day, of not needing anyone. He was wrong. Everyone needed someone,

but he'd have to figure that out for himself. Whatever had happened to him had sent him into isolation because he thought that was the only way to deal with it. Instead, it was slowly destroying him. Making him afraid of human contact, making him fear living. He was obviously punishing himself for something.

"Don't tempt me again," he said.

*Tempt him? Tempt him into what? Is he feeling the attraction, too?* When he released her shoulders and moved away Charlie expelled a breath of relief. As he stooped to retrieve his fish, she quickly opened the door and slipped inside the cabin. He was right behind her and together they wordlessly peeled off their outerwear and boots. The situation between them suddenly seemed awkward and Charlie decided the best thing to do was pretend nothing had happened.

"Would you like some hot cocoa?"

She was barely able to meet Luke's eyes. Removing a layer of outer clothing had done nothing to cool the inner fire that engulfed her. Was it the same way for him?

His gaze dropped to her mouth, which was still swollen and wet from his kiss. Charlie's stomach did a flip-flop. It didn't help that she could still taste him on her lips. The sharp ache of desire had left her weak and slightly confused. The remembrance of his hard cock straining against her had affected all of her senses. And she had nearly begged him to make love to her.

If the fire smoldering in his dark eyes meant anything, he was feeling the same thing, too. Then all at once he gave his

head a shake as if trying to wake from a drug-induced state. His eyes cleared. Hardened. He dropped the fish into the sink.

"Coffee sounds better," he grumbled, moving past Charlie. He went toward the bathroom. "After I shower first."

She watched the door close firmly behind him and stood there for a moment listening to his movements in the bathroom. And then the sound of running water reminded Charlie she was supposed to be making coffee.

Charlie was standing in front of the picture window when Luke opened the bathroom door. He could tell by her profile she was deep in thought, her eyes focused on the falling snow. He wondered what memories softened her lovely face.

He went to the counter where the coffeepot was and fixed a cup of coffee, his movements disrupting her quiet musings.

"It's really very beautiful here," she surprised him by saying. "I can see why you like living here. My brothers and I grew up moving back and forth between Alaska and Canada, so I'm used to the frigid winters. But this is the first time I've truly seen it like this."

Luke hadn't given it much thought when he'd built the cabin. The only thing he knew at the time was that he wanted to be somewhere, anywhere where he could be alone. Where he could grieve in peace and come to terms with living without the woman he loved. Three years later he was still doing that. Only now an angel with deliverance on her mind had fallen from the sky suddenly complicating his life.

Charlie lowered her lashes, running her tongue along her bottom lip. The innocent action reminded Luke what her mouth had felt like beneath his. The visual stimulation and

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memory of her sweet taste acted like a sucker punch to his lower gut, taking his breath away. He gulped a sip of coffee, burning the inside of his mouth. Good, maybe that would take his mind off wanting to kiss her again and again.

He'd taken a shower in the hopes of cooling down the fire in his blood, cleanse his soul from wanting Charlie. Now his goal was the cold hearth where he bent to start a fire. In no time the cabin was filled with the sound of loud snapping as the hungry flames quickly devoured the dry wood he'd placed on the grate. He added some fresh pine which made the room smell like a freshly cut Christmas tree.

"Do you have any children, Luke?" Charlie asked out of the blue.

He shook his head in response. No, he and Susan hadn't been together long enough to have the children they'd talked about. They'd made a list of priorities when they first got married and children had been way down the line. Partly because Susan had come from a large family and had wanted them to have time for each other first.

Luke watched a sad little smile spread across Charlie's face.

"My daughter's name was Robin. The smell of burning pine makes me think about our Christmases together. We always had a real tree. Robin loved to toss the cuttings into the fireplace so the whole house would fill up with the smell."

Her voice broke with a tiny chuckle. It was obvious she was choked with emotion.

"She wanted to make sure the chimney smelled nice for Santa on Christmas Eve."

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She turned away from him and Luke listened quietly, realizing she needed to talk about it. He held back from asking questions, knowing in time she would tell him what she wanted him to know. What *he* wanted to know. He watched her drain her coffee in a mechanical movement.

"We had six years together before leukemia took her from us. I thought I'd die that first year without her. I wanted to die. If it hadn't been for my family and friends I don't know how I would have gotten through it."

Luke fought the urge to go to Charlie and take her into his arms when she turned and aimed her misty eyes on him. He didn't know where the words came from.

"Everyone grieves in their own way. You were lucky to have family and friends around to comfort you. People who didn't hold you responsible—" He cut himself off.

The last thing he wanted was for Charlie to ask questions. He felt her anguish but wasn't sure what she expected from him.

"The pain dims with time," he remarked, only believing half of what he said. The pain did dim with time. But nothing filled the hollow empty shell left behind.

The look in Charlie's eyes revealed he'd said too much. She wasn't going to let his earlier slip go by without a comment. She'd just opened her heart to him. It was only natural she'd expect him to reciprocate. However, Luke wasn't the sharing type when it came to revealing emotions that tore him up inside. As far as he was concerned the less he talked about it, the better off he was.



"Is that what happened to you, Luke? Why you've shut yourself away from the rest of the world? Did something happen and you were blamed for it? Did it have anything to do with the woman in the picture on the windowsill?"

Just what he didn't want. His gut twisted.

"Charlie."

He'd fallen for her trap, and was uncomfortable where their conversation was leading.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said in a firm tone. He couldn't.

"But—"

"No!"

She ignored his fierce response and continued as if they were having a normal run-of-the-mill conversation.

"If I learned anything in the past two years, Luke, it's that talking about it helps."

Charlie began to move closer to him, causing Luke's stomach to clench with dread. He didn't like the sound of sorrow in her soft tone, didn't want her sympathy or offer of comfort. He didn't want her inside his head. In fact, he didn't want anything from her. He'd been down that road and it hadn't helped. He'd accepted that long ago.

"Keeping it inside can make you lose your mind. It chips away at your soul until there's nothing left but a lonely, empty shell."

Luke sensed what she was attempting to do and didn't like it one bit.

Someone To Love Me  
by Tory Richards

"That works with some people but not with me. Don't," he barked when she was within a foot of him, and reached out as though to touch him.

His sharp tone caused Charlie to halt. But the look on her face frightened the hell out of him because it was the look of a woman hell-bent on saving him. She seemed beyond intimidation.

"What happened?" she whispered, her eyes pleading with him to let her in. "It helps talking about it, Luke. I promise."

He clenched his jaw and moved away. "My past and my life are none of your damn business, Charlie. Remember that and we'll get along fine."

*Yeah.* He listened to the foolishness of his words. They were living together in a small cabin where the only room they could escape from each other was the tiny bathroom. How were they going to avoid each other until spring? Did he think they weren't going to talk?

"And what are we going to talk about for the next two months, Luke, the weather?"

He heard the disappointment in her tone.

"All I want to do is help you if you'll let me. It's the least I can do after what you've done for me. Have you ever talked to anyone about it?"

A sound of anger escaped Luke. "You don't even know what *it* is. And you don't owe me a thing."

She wasn't giving up. Luke could see the determination in her eyes.

"It has something to do with the woman in the picture, doesn't it? How long have you lived alone and isolated from the rest of the world?"

Luke's gaze followed Charlie as she turned and walked straight to the kitchen. What was she up to? She snatched up the tiny-framed picture off the window ledge, turning back to him. He felt a fist squeeze around his heart. His gaze flickered back and forth between her and the picture in her hands.

"Put it back." His voice was cold, and void of emotion, seeming to come from far away.

Luke was vaguely aware of her straightening her slender shoulders and taking a long breath. As though drawing courage to defy him.

"Was this your wife?"

The transformation that came over her face told Luke that something in his expression confirmed she'd guessed the truth.

"What happened to her, Luke?"

He closed his eyes tightly in an effort to regain control of his emotions. He felt ready to crack and fall to pieces at the slightest touch or push. Moreover, Charlie had already seen what pushing him produced. She should be scared of him. He grudgingly admired her courage.

"Charlie, please. Don't try that psychological crap on me. Remember what happened the last time you pressed me."

"I'm not afraid of you," she said.

He opened his eyes, pinning her on the spot. "Maybe you should be, Charlie. You don't even know me."

A moment of silence followed. Luke thought he finally had her convinced to leave it alone when she surprised him by laughing softly.

"And you don't know me, Luke. Growing up with two older brothers made me tough. You'll have to do better at scaring me away than that."

"I have nothing to lose."

"Why? Because something horrific happened in your life and you're haunted by the memory of it? Do you think losing my daughter was any less devastating? At least I can talk about it now. I can mention Robin's name, and talk about the good times we had because that's what helps the healing."

"Charlie."

She ignored his hostility, and plowed right on. "Why?"

"Why is it so important that I open up to you?" Damn, she was like a dog with a bone. Luke felt his control slipping away.

"Because I would have given up, too, if it hadn't been for the persistent pushing of my family, Luke. Shutting yourself off from the rest of the world is the worst thing you can do. Grieving people need someone around them."

Her tone softened suddenly, her eyes delving deeply into Luke's and making him uncomfortable. However, he couldn't force himself to look away.

"Have you ever shared it with anyone?"

He refused to answer, remaining tight-lipped.

"Tell me," she coaxed in a soft and caring voice.

Luke glared at her, trying like hell to remain in control. "Leave it alone, Charlie." He barely recognized the savageness of his tone.

"Tell me," she coaxed foolishly.

Without thinking, he slammed his fist down on the counter. The sound rattling their discarded coffee cups. Charlie jumped but held her ground, as he knew she would.

"Because I killed her!" he exploded, his eyes damning her for making him admit it.

It felt like a freight train was running through his head now, his fingers moved to rub the pressure building over his eyes.

"I killed her," he repeated between clenched teeth. "Not exactly what you were expecting now, is it?"

At that moment Luke hated Charlie for making him say the words he'd never had the guts to utter out loud before. For pushing him into remembering something he'd tried from the first day to push to the very recesses of his memory. Why couldn't she have left well enough alone?

It suddenly occurred to Luke he'd become an empty shell, without feelings or wants, moving from one day to the next and not caring about anything. Until *she* came along, proving to him that he did have wants and desires. That he wasn't dead.

He wished to God he hadn't seen her plane go down. That he hadn't gone in search of survivors. They wouldn't be having this conversation now. He didn't want to be reminded of Susan. He didn't want to remember all he'd lost or would never get back.

The emotion swimming in Charlie's eyes hardened his heart. If it weren't for her he wouldn't be feeling the overwhelming ache of loneliness and arousal right now. He'd been doing fine until she came along. He had half a mind to show her the raw emotions she roused in him. Maybe then she'd shut up and leave him alone.

A single tear slipped down Charlie's cheek and she brushed it away. She glanced down at the photo still clutched in her trembling hand before carefully turning away from Luke. He watched her replace it on the sill. He walked to her, anger still simmering in his blood. *Does she think she can open up old wounds and then calmly dismiss it?*

"Are you done now?" Luke's voice was deep with contempt. "Or do you want the details as well?"

He closed in on her. Needing to do something but unsure what. Only knowing if he didn't act he would explode.

Charlie swung around from the window, but Luke blocked her escape with his body. She gasped and tried in vain to push against the unyielding counter at her backside.

"I-I'm done." Her gaze rose to meet his.

"Are you sure?"

Luke crowded her against the counter and moved in so close that his breath brushed against her face. He knew he was asking for trouble, but couldn't stop himself from leaning into her until her breasts were against his chest. Damn, their perfect round shape felt good against him.

"For both our sake, Charlie, I suggest you stop prodding and just stay away from me, please."

He should heed his own warning. The close proximity of her body caused him to think about their kiss and what the shape of her breast felt like in his hand. The heat between them was building again. The anger surrounding them didn't stop his body from responding to her allure. He inhaled her warm, tantalizing scent. An unexpected rush of lust caused his cock to harden. The desire to thrust against Charlie was rapidly weakening his reserve to remain strong.

He slipped an arm around her waist and he jerked her to him. A soft gasp of surprise, or was it desire, escaped her parted lips. Luke's gaze dropped to her mouth and hunger like he'd never known engulfed his senses. His cock pounded behind his zipper, against Charlie's soft belly and her slight response sent him over the edge.

She should never have arched into him. He took it as an invitation and, with the precision of a hawk, he swooped down and took Charlie's mouth. Her soft moan was barely heard over his rough hunger. Luke increased his pressure until she opened her mouth and he was able to slip his tongue inside.

The sweet taste of her warmth and eagerness was his undoing. Luke felt his control slipping away fast. He wanted to bury his cock inside her and fuck her until they were spent. The hunger of his body demanded he do it, but Luke knew if he gave in to the impulse there'd be no going back. Still, he was determined to kiss her as long as he could.

Only when he felt Charlie rub her lower body against his shaft like a hungry cat did he gently push her away.

"No."

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

"Running never solved anything, Luke." Her glistening eyes fell to his mouth.

He swallowed hard, turning away from her. "You call it running, I call it survival."

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 8

Charlie lay there for a moment listening for a repeat of the sound that had roused her from a deep sleep. The cabin was bitterly cold, indicating the fire had finally burned out. She burrowed beneath the mountain of blankets Luke had given her.

It was pitch dark but her position on the sofa and her view outside the window revealed there was a full moon in a star-studded sky. Luke had offered her his bed but she'd insisted on sleeping on the couch. He was too tall to sleep comfortably on it anyway and two months was a long time to put him out of his bed. He'd done enough for her. It had taken some persuasion but in the end he'd finally seen it her way.

Shivering, she tightened the quilt beneath her chin when she heard it again. This time she was certain a noise had wakened her and that it was coming from inside the cabin. She sat up and waited patiently to hear it again, feeling some relief that Lady wasn't sounding an alarm from where she lay next to the hearth. If the wolf wasn't worried, she wasn't worried.

The next time she heard the noise she was able to determine that it was coming from the loft. The sounds indicated Luke was in the throes of a terrible nightmare. His moans were low and agonized as if he was in pain. Several times she was sure she heard him call out someone's name. She didn't know why, but her eyes filled with tears thinking about his admission earlier that evening and recalling the

deep suffering on his face. She'd expected that something horrible had happened to him, but not that.

If he'd killed his wife he certainly wouldn't be there now but in a jail cell somewhere. Yet he believed he'd killed her. And the guilt was slowly destroying him inside. Charlie knew if she could make him talk about it that the healing would start. He might not thank her for it, but she knew she had to try.

She waited a few moments, praying for silence. But when he continued to cry out she decided to go to him. She couldn't just lie there and do nothing. He was obviously tormented by the deep-rooted memories he kept locked up inside. She stumbled her way through the darkness to the crude ladder that led to the loft, stubbing her toe and swearing harshly beneath her breath along the way.

When her fingers touched the wood rung, Charlie hesitated before taking the first step, second thoughts and a reminder that Luke wanted her to leave him alone entered her mind. Only his agonized groan prompted her to brush them aside and pick up speed. It didn't take her long to reach the loft. Her eyes rounded when she pulled herself over the top and saw the small window on the wall above his bed. She was astonished to find it open. No wonder it was so cold!

The second thing Charlie noticed as she made her way to Luke was that there was no way she could reach the window to close it without climbing onto the bed. The moonlight enabled her to clearly see him as he lay twisted in the covers, twitching and moaning deeply. She tried to make out what he was saying, but his words were too low and mumbled. The

thought that she should wake him crossed her mind, prompting her to call out to him.

"Luke?" His lack of response caused her to try again.

"Luke?"

She saw a glimpse of naked arms and legs as he thrashed beneath the quilt. The cold apparently hadn't affected him, but she was shivering so badly her teeth were rattling. Luke began to thrash about even more, and Charlie reached out to lightly touch his arm, gently shaking him.

"Luke."

He moved so fast that a scream of surprise escaped Charlie. She suddenly found herself grabbed and pulled down to the bed. Before she could catch her breath Luke rolled, pinning her beneath his naked weight. It was obvious he was still trapped in the dark nightmare that gripped him and didn't know what he was doing.

"Luke!" Panic raced through Charlie as she realized her helplessness against his strength. "Lu—"

The rest of what she'd been about to say was cut off by the sudden pressure of his unyielding mouth on hers. His kiss was rough, demanding, and frightening in its intensity. She struggled briefly but she was no match for him. He easily forced Charlie more deeply into the bed in an attack that quickly escalated into something sensual and profoundly explosive. Lost in the moment, she ceased her struggling, and began to kiss Luke back with an ardor that bordered on recklessness.

Without thinking she opened her mouth beneath his and accepted his thrusting tongue against hers. Yet when Charlie

felt his hands at the buttons on her shirt she stiffened, suddenly terrified. She didn't want Luke like this, not if he was making love to a ghost. Her fingers flew to his in an effort to keep him from undoing the buttons. She twisted her head to break the kiss, but he followed her every move.

One by one the buttons gave way and then he parted her shirt, curling his callused hand around her naked breast. His firm touch was like fire licking Charlie's skin, causing her to cry out against his mouth with pleasure. She arched wildly with response, in spite of trying to halt his progress. Her hands moved over his naked shoulders, first pushing him away, and then clutching him to her. She cried out in pleasure when his mouth abandoned hers to latch onto a hardened nipple.

*Oh God!*

"Luke!"

Charlie writhed impatiently beneath him, lost in a vortex of spinning, dizzying emotions. She forgot about everything but the moment and arched her back in total abandon. It was surprising and frightening, how fast he turned her on.

"Luke...oh!"

His hand moved between her thighs, causing an explosion of sensation that consumed Charlie. The heat spiraling through her body pooled where his hand covered her. In the next instant his finger was flicking across the swelling bud of her arousal.

"Oh!"

She had to find a way to resist but the feelings he roused were like none she'd experienced before. It wasn't until she

felt his hand move beneath her long johns and slip inside her panties that real panic set in. And desire.

"Luke!"

But it was too late. His finger slipped inside her. Charlie bit down hard on her bottom lip, moaning with desire as her hunger was satisfied by that simple pleasure. She squeezed her eyes shut and moved her hips against his invading finger. As Luke finger fucked her, he paid special attention to her swollen clit.

Charlie's breath caught when a second finger joined the first. His mouth left one breast for the other, before traveling up her chest to her throat, leaving a trail of hot little kisses. But it was what Luke was doing to the lower half of her body that caused Charlie to squirm wildly beneath him. He ground his cock against her thigh and she responded by thrusting faster against his fingers. They both made a sound at the same time. As the passion built and Charlie felt the hot rush of release surge through her body she knew it was just a matter of seconds before she climaxed. It was all happening too fast!

"Luke!"

Her scream echoed through the cabin. Finally the sound of her voice seemed to reach Luke, causing him to react as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped over him. He froze, the breath hissed through his teeth. He removed his cock from her thigh.

"No...God no," he groaned, obviously misinterpreting her cry for one of fear.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Slowly he withdrew his fingers and relaxed his body, which tore a moan of deep disappointment from Charlie. She'd been so close to climaxing that the urge to put her fingers there and finish it was overwhelming. Luke rolled away from her and lay on his back, panting heavily for breath.

Several tense moments passed until his hoarse voice tore into the silence. "I'm trying to make sense of why you're in my bed."

Charlie took a deep breath in an effort to calm her racing pulse.

"You were having a nightmare," she whispered into the darkness.

She prayed the inadequate statement was enough to explain everything. Her heartbeat was still erratic. The air touching her wet nipples reminded her that she was partially naked.

"You woke me. I couldn't just lie there and listen to you suffer." She was painfully aware that her soft, breathless voice sounded much too intimate in the confines of his small, dark bedroom.

"That still doesn't explain how you ended up in my bed."

"I—"

"Do you have any idea how close I came to fucking you right now? If you hadn't cried out and I hadn't come to my senses, you'd be under me right now."

"I was trying to wake you."

Her hands, still shaking from what just transpired between them, did up the buttons on her shirt. She shivered violently.

"It's freezing in here."

Luke moved. The moonlight was shining upon them so it was easy making eye contact. Then his gaze moved over her hair, down her exposed throat, to where her hands were blindly searching for the last button.

"And that's when I grabbed you."

Charlie nodded.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," she said quickly.

"I could have. I haven't been with a woman in a long time, Charlie. I very nearly lost control with you."

"But you didn't."

"Don't count on that next time."

Charlie cringed at the harsh warning in his tone.

"You started it today by pushing buttons," he said. "Well, I hope by now you realize that I'm human and unless you want me to continue what I started a few minutes ago I suggest you go back to your own bed."

Charlie wasn't so certain that she didn't want Luke to continue making love to her. She was torn with indecision, which wasn't like her. She wasn't some teenager experiencing her first taste of sex; she was a grown woman in control of her life. One who usually showed a lot more restraint and wisdom when it came to men and sexual relationships.

What was different about Luke that drew her so quickly and eagerly to him? He wasn't anything like the men who usually interested Charlie. However, being interested didn't always mean going to bed with them, either. She might have been tempted in the past, but there had always been something holding her back.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Robin's father was the last man Charlie had slept with and they'd divorced when Robin was just a baby. Soon after that Robin had been diagnosed with leukemia, so there hadn't been time for anyone but her. Luke made Charlie realize she was missing something vitally important in her life. She was attracted to him and it went a lot deeper than just physical. She wanted more from him. She just wasn't sure what.

"I want you out of my bed now, lady."

Luke's voice was low yet it wasn't any less severe. Charlie could tell he was close to the breaking point. Without another word she scrambled from the bed and hurried down the ladder.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 9

It didn't surprise Charlie when she glanced up at the loft the next morning that Luke was gone. He was light on his feet, never disturbing her when he was moving about the cabin. Never disturbing her as he snuck away to God knows where. Gone for most of the day only to return at dinnertime scowling and tired.

She pulled the covers aside and noticed another blanket had been added to the ever growing pile. Luke must have covered her with it on his way out.

He was certainly a complex man. So determined to remain aloof and unresponsive on the outside, but revealing his softer emotions by doing the unexpected, like making sure she was warm. A cold, indifferent man wouldn't have gone searching for the survivors of a plane crash. Nor would he have covered her with another blanket to fend off the cold. Couldn't Luke see the difference, or was it possible he just didn't want to acknowledge that he cared?

She got to her feet and walked to the window, expecting to see him at his usual morning routine of chopping wood. Except the only thing that greeted Charlie was a one-eyed Mr. Google, his crooked grin looking more like an accusing grimace. Luke was nowhere in sight, and neither was Lady.

With a sigh she returned to the couch, not for the first time wondering how she was going to get through the rest of the winter in such an impossible situation. She was going to go crazy if the last few days were any indication of what the rest

of the weeks had in store for her. She led an active life, dividing it equally between family and career. She purposely kept busy because it kept her mind off the past, off things she couldn't change.

*Maybe Luke will take me fishing with him one day.*

She went back to the sofa, reached for the top quilt and was in the process of folding it when the door opened unexpectedly. Only it wasn't Luke who stepped into the cabin. For a moment Charlie stood there in quiet shock, her eyes widening on the stranger who'd just casually walked into the cabin as if he owned it.

It didn't calm her fears that he looked just as taken aback. He paused in mid stride, his eyes rapidly assessing her. Charlie felt at an immediate disadvantage, especially when he decided to close the door firmly behind him. She suspected the grimace that replaced the serious expression on his face was supposed to be a smile and set her at ease.

It didn't work.

"Luke Remington around?"

He looked like a fur trapper straight out of the 1800s with his long hair and heavy fur coat. His craggy tone suited his gruff, overall appearance.

"Somewhere," Charlie responded nervously. "Fishing I think."

Since the stranger was between her and the door she knew she was trapped. Her only avenue of escape was a window, but she doubted she'd get very far before he caught up to her.

Someone To Love Me  
by Tory Richards

"You belong to him?" His eyes moved over her thoroughly, making Charlie wish she had on a lot more than a pair of Luke's long johns and shirt.

Did she belong to Luke?

She stiffened at the old-fashioned statement, about to remind him what year, no, *century* they were living in. Then it occurred to her she'd better weigh her options first. The man knew Luke, but knowing his name didn't exactly mean they were friends. The way Charlie figured it she had two choices, tell the truth or lie. She wasn't very good at lying. Yet she was alone with a man she didn't know. He was as big as Luke and looked just as unfriendly.

Charlie didn't like fibbing, but it wouldn't hurt to mislead him into believing she and Luke were more than just cabin buddies. At least until she felt she could trust him.

"I'm Luke's girlfriend, Charlie. And you are?" She was thankful he wasn't one of her brothers. They would know immediately that she was lying.

The more he moved further into the room, the more she made sure the sofa remained between them. His shrewd eyes noted the blankets she'd been folding earlier, a clear indication that someone had slept there the night before. If he suspected she wasn't being truthful his expression didn't reveal anything.

"Swanson," he said curtly. "Luke must have met you in town last summer. How'd he talk you into coming up here to spend the winter in this God-awful wilderness?" Bushy brows drew together, his gaze going to the cold hearth. "It's damn cold in this place."

His unexpected bark caused Charlie to jump. When he strode to the fireplace she dashed around the couch to the other side, praying he wouldn't notice. If he was a friend of Luke's she certainly didn't want to insult him by showing him she was afraid of him.

She decided to ignore his question. The less she fibbed the better.

"What about you, Mr. Swanson, what brings you here? Just happen to be in the neighborhood?"

She forced a smile, watching as he quickly and efficiently made a fire. All the while wishing Luke would come through the door.

When Swanson was done he didn't move from his crouched position right away. He cocked his head to look at Charlie, holding his hands toward the flames.

"It's just Swanson," he said curtly. "I have a cabin a few miles up the mountain. Just came down to check out the plane crash I saw a few nights ago. No sign of anyone though."

Under the circumstances she could hardly tell him she was the survivor. She doubted he'd followed her footsteps there. The snow had wiped those out a long time ago.

"So, you live further up the mountain, alone?"

Her gaze kept returning to the closed door. She prayed Luke would walk through it any moment. Knowing he probably wouldn't. Then an awful thought crossed her mind. What if something had happened to him? What if this man had done something to him?

The door burst open with a force that sent it crashing against the wall. Charlie was so relieved at seeing Luke that she rushed to him without hesitation and nearly threw herself into his arms. However, his gaze was on Swanson, zeroing in on the man with the quickness of a hawk swooping down on a rabbit.

"Luke, we have company!"

The dark expression on his face didn't keep her from reaching up and pulling his head down. She ignored his resistance, managing to bring his face close enough to kiss him quickly on the mouth. His lips were as cool and unresponsive as a cube of ice against hers, probably due to the fact she'd caught him off-guard. Well, at least he wasn't pushing her away.

When it was over she stepped back and reached up, working the zipper down his parka.

"Let me help you get out of this so you can go warm yourself by the fire. You didn't tell me when you invited me to spend the winter with you that it would be so frigid up here. Thank goodness your friend happened along to build a fire."

She rolled his jacket over his shoulders and down his arms. Charlie knew she was babbling but couldn't help herself. She was trying desperately to get a message across to him without being obvious to Swanson. Only Luke's piercing gaze was focused on where the other man was kneeling by the fire. He barely gave her a second notice. Her gaze shot back to Swanson, relieved to see him absorbed with watching the fire and not particularly interested in what they were doing.

She leaned in close, and lowered her voice. "I told him I was your girlfriend."

Luke jerked back. Not because of what Charlie had confessed, but because her lips had brushed against his ear as she uttered the words. A shudder rippled over his body that had nothing to do with being chilled to the bone. Her warm breath in his ear, her soft lips caressing his lobe, had produced instant results to his already fragile condition. He'd relived the image of them in his bed a hundred times during the day, only in his mind they'd gone all the way. Satisfying their lust until they were both too exhausted to move.

It occurred to him that Charlie was waiting for some kind of response.

"Why the hell did you do that? Did he try—"

"No!" she assured him a little too loudly.

Luke followed her gaze to Swanson, realizing they now had his full attention.

She gave him a quick smile before adding for his ears only, "I told him that, ah, just in case."

Luke took in the delicate pink filling her cheeks. "Just in case what?"

He pulled his coat from her nervous fingers and reached back without looking to hang it on the hook on the door.

She shrugged and glanced away. It didn't matter. Luke already had a good idea what she was thinking.

"Not a very trusting soul, are you?"

He cupped Charlie's cheeks and pulled her to him for a hard breath-stealing kiss. He'd meant it to be brief, just for show to back up her lie to Swanson, but as soon as he

touched his lips to hers his mind went blank. And he forgot why he was kissing her.

All he knew was that her mouth was soft and sweet, opening beneath his just enough so his tongue could slip inside. It was a heart-stopping, gut-wrenching kiss, made a thousand times more intoxicating when Charlie melted against him with a little sound of surrender in her throat.

Did she realize what she was doing?

Then he realized what *he* was doing when he rolled his hips into her softness. He took a moment to enjoy the feel of her breasts against his chest before setting her away from him.

He looked down into her slightly dazed eyes. "Why don't you make some coffee?"

Her mouth, wet and swollen by his kiss, finally turned up at the corners in a slow, heart-stopping smile.

"It won't take me a minute to fix a pot." She turned and strolled away.

Luke picked up the slight tremor in Charlie's voice, recalling the sweet taste of surprise on her soft mouth when he'd first kissed her. He shouldn't have kissed her because now he was paying the price. All it had accomplished was to make him hungry for her again. As she made her way to the kitchen, his gaze landed briefly on the swing of her hips and long hair, before narrowing on Swanson.

He'd removed his coat and had pulled a chair closer to the fire, making himself at home. That alone told Luke he wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon. That was okay with Luke.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Maybe having someone else around would take his mind off the shapely little songbird in his kitchen.

He wondered if Charlie was even aware that she was singing along with the music on the radio. It wasn't the first time he'd caught her singing either. She had a pretty voice too, low and sultry, the kind that teased a man's senses and raked over his soul without mercy.

For a moment he lost himself in the captivating sound. There was something about her voice that struck a cord of familiarity, yet no matter how hard he tried he couldn't place it.

Swanson cleared his throat to capture Luke's attention as he'd meant it to. Luke had met the other man in town one spring when they'd gone in to stock up on the supplies they'd depleted during the winter. Having stopped at the local tavern for a beer, they'd struck up a conversation. It hadn't taken long to discover that they only lived a few miles apart and a friendship had evolved. Luke had only ventured up the mountain to visit him once. It helped break up the monotony of the long winters. A strong hunch told him that this time Swanson hadn't come down the mountain for a social visit.

"Hello, Remington."

"Swanson." Luke gave a curt nod. "What brings you here?"

"I saw a plane going down the other day."

Luke nodded as they shook hands. "Yes, I already checked it out."

"Find anything?"



Luke hesitated for a moment, aware that Charlie had stopped singing and had turned the radio down low. *Is she listening?*

"Nothing worth keeping," he responded after awhile.

"What about survivors? I couldn't tell anything by the time I got there. Too much snowfall since the crash."

The question Luke had been dreading because Charlie had already indicated he'd invited her there. He glanced toward the fire.

"Didn't find anyone at the crash site."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Charlie had been a mile away by the time he'd caught up to her. Luke hoped Swanson would let it go at that.

"Guess whoever they were they made it out on their own steam. With a little luck maybe it was someone who knew the area and they're halfway down the mountain by now."

Luke didn't comment. Swanson wasn't the kind to beat around the bush. If he suspected anything he'd come right out and say it. Either he was satisfied with his and Charlie's story or he didn't care one way or another.

"You're a damn good cook, Charlie." Swanson pushed his empty plate away and reached for his coffee cup.

"Thank you Mr., ah, Swanson."

Charlie avoided Luke's quiet gaze as she started to clear the dinner dishes away. Anything to keep busy around there. She'd practically spent the whole afternoon in the kitchen between baking and cooking a pot roast she found buried in the back of Luke's freezer. She'd kept her fingers crossed it didn't have freezer burn.

"There's coffee cake left over from breakfast if you want something sweet."

Her gaze automatically shot to Luke, feeling a little more than nervous after hearing him invite Swanson to stay the night. *Did that mean that he'd be sleeping on the couch*

*So, where will I be sleeping*

In an attempt to change the direction of her thoughts, she asked Swanson, "Why do you live in these mountains?"

The guarded look that passed between him and Luke caused her smile to fade away.

"I guess that's not a question you ask anyone around these parts," she said.

"I'm sorry, Charlie. I don't mean to be rude."

She met his eyes, her movements halting as she waited for him to continue.

"Not all of us who live in these mountains are dangerous or running from something, in spite of what the locals in town think."

He shot Luke a grin before shrugging. "Most of us just value a simpler way of life and our privacy so don't take to answering questions very well."

Charlie didn't bother denying she'd thought as much about him at first. He looked like an unkempt mountain man, but his speech and knowledge revealed he was well educated. There was an intelligent sharpness in his eyes that made her uncomfortable because she sensed he'd guessed the truth about her. She wondered what his story was. How he and Luke had become friends.

Listening to their interaction didn't reveal anything. There were times when a long silence stretched between their conversations. They seemed more like polite strangers than actual friends. Yet it was obvious they were comfortable with each other. Charlie wondered if Swanson had a wife or someone he cared about living with him, but refrained from asking any more personal questions.

Her gaze returned to Luke, who sat silently watching the brief exchange between her and Swanson. She couldn't help noticing the gleam of interest in his eyes before he quickly masked it with indifference. She'd heard his hurtful remark earlier about not finding anything worth keeping at the crash site, wondering if he'd guessed she was listening and had said it on purpose.

"Would either of you like more coffee?"

"I think something stronger is called for tonight."

Luke's reason wasn't lost on Charlie or the dark look in his bottomless eyes. She already knew him well enough to recognize the smoky desire building there. And it caused a wild flutter in her belly. It was obvious they were going to have to share his bed. *Is he regretting his impromptu invitation to Swanson*

"Sounds good to me, Remington. I have a bottle of scotch in my bag." Swanson moved away from the table to retrieve it from where he'd left it by the hearth. "Nothing like a good stiff drink to keep a body warm on a night like this."

Luke continued to hold Charlie's eyes captive. She felt a warm heat flush her cheeks, wondering if he was feeling the same electrical pull that she was. His interested gaze slid

slowly down the front of her flannel shirt. Amusement softened his face when she reached up to see if she'd left any buttons undone. She dropped her gaze beneath his steady gaze. The spell was broken when Swanson came back to the table.

"Got a couple glasses, Charlie?"

She turned quickly to the cupboard to get them, thankful for the interruption.

"Why don't you both go sit by the fire so I can clean up in here?" She set the glasses down in front of Swanson, turning her back on them again.

"After that I'm going to take a bath."

Maybe that would help her relax enough to fall asleep before Luke came to bed.

Neither man said anything, silently taking their glasses and the bottle with them as they moved away from the table into the other room. Relief flooded her when she was no longer under Luke's quiet, watchful eyes. She vaguely listened to their low murmurs as she cleaned up.

Before long she made her way to the bathroom. She closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, facing the tiny room. Her gaze took in an old-fashioned sink with a mirror on the wall above it. A tall corner cabinet with glass doors was filled with towels and other toiletries. She moved to it to help herself, pausing to turn on the faucets in the tub on her way past. In no time she had the antique claw foot bathtub filled with hot water and the room cloudy with a soothing, misty steam.

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Stripping her clothes off, Charlie sank gratefully into the hot depths and laid her head back against the edge, closing her eyes with a heavy sigh.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 10

Visions of Charlie in her bath plagued Luke as he sat with Swanson in front of the fire. It was going to be hell having her in his bed tonight, smelling all fresh and sweet and teasing his senses. And that glorious mane of hers. He wanted to bury his hands in her hair while he pulled her to him. He envisioned the long silky strands wrapped around their bodies as they rolled in the blankets making love. Yet, even if he wanted to do anything about it he wouldn't. Not with Swanson sleeping directly below them. The bottle of scotch might be the only thing to help him get through the night, but he doubted it.

"Pretty lady," Swanson said, as if knowing exactly what Luke was thinking about.

Luke gave a curt nod and reached for the glass of scotch Swanson had poured for him.

"Yep."

He took a long swallow, hoping his friend didn't get too curious about Charlie. Until now they hadn't delved too deeply into each other's pasts, respecting each other's privacy.

However, just to make certain Swanson knew where he stood on the subject, he added, "Charlie's off limits, friend."

Swanson's eyes narrowed on Luke over the rim of his glass, his brief nod indicating he'd respect Luke's wishes. Breathing a silent sigh of relief Luke's gaze went back to the fire. That had been easy enough. In the silence that followed sounds coming from the bathroom reminded him Charlie was

in there taking her bath. When she began singing in that sexy lilt of hers he felt a definite stirring below his belt. And something in his heart that he quickly brushed away.

*Damn.* He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the sound of the logs crackling in the hearth, the sound of the wind howling outside. Anything that would take his mind off Charlie and the thought of what she looked like naked in her bath.

He brought his glass to his lips and drained it. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. Maybe he could drink himself into a drunken stupor and not be able to climb the loft ladder.

"You have it bad, my friend."

Luke's eyes shot open and fixed narrowly on Swanson. The other man was only guessing. Without speaking he held out his empty glass and waited for a refill. He wasn't about to acknowledge Swanson's remark by giving him more fuel.

"This is good scotch."

Luke held his glass up pretending interest in the deep color of the liquid Swanson had just poured.

"I'm in the mood to get a little drunk tonight."

Swanson laughed out loud and leaned back in his chair until it creaked beneath his weight.

"Yes, women have that effect on men." His deep voice was heavy with amusement. "Or the lack of one."

Luke met the other man's eyes over his glass, acknowledging his statement with a twist on his lips. Swanson had his own demons to chase. He'd divulged bits and pieces of his story and Luke supposed that some day he'd know the whole thing. However, it would be on Swanson's terms. That seemed to be the law of the land for anyone living the way

they chose to live. You didn't pry. And you accepted people for the way they were.

For now Luke raised his glass higher in a silent toast before bringing it to his lips and draining it. Swanson followed suit without speaking. For a few moments they continued to sit there in silence, staring into the flames of the fire and enjoying their drinks in the quiet surrounding them. Only the crackling of the logs and an occasional sound outside the cabin disturbed the tranquility.

"Would either of you like anything before I turn in?"

Luke hadn't heard Charlie approach. His gaze moved over her when she stepped within eyeshot. She was clutching his robe over her breasts. Her soft hair flowed like a waterfall around her, catching the light of the fire as she swayed closer.

His body tightened instantly, envying the robe hugging and caressing her sensuous curves. He wanted to be wrapped around her. He wanted to be *in* her. He gritted his teeth and swallowed the last of his drink, doubting she was aware of the soft invitation in her tone—a lethal mixture of wicked seductress and innocent angel. Only Luke knew it was probably caused from the combination of sleepiness and the relaxing effects of her long soak in the tub.

"Come give me a kiss before you go up to bed, sweetheart."

The husky, alcohol-induced command fell from Luke's lips before he could rein it in. It caught him by surprise. Until he remembered he could get away with it because after all, they had to keep up appearances.



Charlie's eyes became soft and her gaze moved to Swanson before coming back to Luke. The confusion on her face was quickly covered by mild amusement. Luke wondered what the hell she found so humorous, when he was teetering on a constant state of arousal whenever she was near. The gleam in her eyes unnerved him in a deeply sensual way, especially the way they were traveling over him. Like he was something covered in chocolate and she couldn't wait to get a taste. Her visual caress was so palpable that she might as well have touched him.

*What the hell does she think she's doing*

If this was for Swanson's benefit Charlie was a good actress. As she moved within inches of him, Luke could see the flames of the fire dancing in the pupils of her eyes, causing the feeling below his gut to intensify. He was sure she could sense his response to her. His lips parted in anticipation of the goodnight kiss. He was half-afraid she would change her mind. However, Luke didn't have to worry because in the next instant Charlie was bending over him.

If she thought she was going to get away with a lousy peck she was in for a surprise. He took control of the moment by grabbing the lapels of her robe and pulling her down on his lap. Before she could protest, if she was going to, he stole the breath from her in a sensuous, scotch-laced kiss.

He tried to curtail the low groan of pleasure rising up his throat, but kissing Charlie had a powerful effect on him. In that moment he forgot about everything but her—her taste, her softness, how she made him feel inside. The womanly fragrance that surrounded her was a mixture of innocence

and wildfire and caused his cock to swell and throb beneath her bottom.

Their kiss turned steamy, hot, erotic, and tender. And it was over before he wanted it to be over. He wanted to kiss her all night. Until morning came and with it the dawning of a new day, and more.

Aware of Swanson's quiet presence, Luke reluctantly set her away from him. The soft haze of hunger in Charlie's eyes satisfied him. The effect she had on him was no less devastating, rendering him incapable of thought or movement.

If Swanson wasn't there he had no doubt he'd be following Charlie up to his bed where he could satisfy the lust eating him up inside. He wanted to fuck her—long and hard.

"Good night."

"I'll be up shortly."

His words were a gentle reminder that they'd be sharing his bed that night. He hoped she had no misunderstandings about that. If she did she kept it to herself.

"Good night, Charlie. I'll be gone before you're up in the morning."

She pivoted toward Swanson and smiled.

"It was nice meeting you, Swanson." She offered him her hand. "Maybe our paths will cross again some day."

His only response was a brief nod as he squeezed her hand. Then Charlie walked away. Luke's eyes followed her as she made her way to the ladder. She lifted her robe, exposing those drop-dead eye-catching legs and climbed to the loft without glancing back.

She had to know he'd be watching her.

He took a deep breath and then glanced at the bottle of scotch. It was almost empty. Swanson's low chuckle was audible, but Luke ignored it and him before swinging his gaze back up to the loft. A person would have thought he was a virgin the way his stomach was twisted up in a knot inside.

It had been a long time since he'd had a woman in his bed. Every one of his senses was alive, hungry, and pulsing with anticipation. Luke convinced himself that he didn't want Charlie, but his body did. It would be interesting to see who would celebrate victory.

Luke stood quietly, staring down at his bed.

He didn't believe in fairy tales, yet there she was, Sleeping Beauty all rolled up in his blankets. And snoring softly.

Charlie was on her side, all but her head hidden beneath the quilt, her nose turned up toward the opening. His mouth curved into a smile.

He was crazy crawling beneath the covers with her. He'd probably survive the night better sleeping out in a snowdrift in the buff. His attraction for her bordered on the edge of what he should do and what he wanted to do. For the hundredth time that evening, he berated himself for not stopping to think where she'd have to sleep when he'd invited Swanson to stay.

Luke knew either way he was going to pay the price. He didn't want to feel anything for Charlie, but she'd managed to get under his skin without even half-trying. They were two tormented souls reaching out to one another, and Charlie was providing an easy way out of the dark void he'd built around

himself. And she reminded him that he was a man of flesh-and-blood and wants.

He'd waited as long as he could before excusing himself and coming to bed, and not because he'd wanted to give Charlie enough time to fall asleep. Luke knew it was going to be a long night, realized, too, that he couldn't put off the inevitable.

A heavy sigh escaped him as he reached for the edge of the covers and pulled them back. Charlie stirred slightly and moaned when the cold touched her warm body, reaching out blindly for the quilt in Luke's hand. He quickly slid in next to her and brought the covers with him, clenching his teeth in agony when Charlie burrowed against him like a lazy cat seeking the warmth of his body.

Alarm bells went off when she tucked her fanny into the hollow of his body. He groaned low and counted to ten, then to twenty before deciding he could count to a million and it wouldn't make any difference. He cursed his stupidity for even thinking he could lie next to Charlie and remain in control. It didn't take long before his body began to respond to her.

An eternity slipped by as he lay there barely taking in air, listening to her soft breathing. His nose was in her hair and nothing could stop him from inhaling deeply. Her delicate fragrance sent his senses into overdrive. Everything about her captivated him and made him want her.

Why wasn't she snoring loudly? Why didn't she look like an old hag when she was sleeping?

He closed his eyes and relaxed as much as he could with a tempting woman snuggled against him. His cock was as hard as a steel rod, but Charlie's steady breathing convinced Luke she was sleeping soundly and unaware of his state. However, in the next instant he cursed the devil. She was sleeping, but her body seemed very much aware of his presence pressing against him in all the right places. A silent invitation that encouraged his excitement to grow to unbearable degrees.

Before he thought about the wisdom of what he was doing he thrust against her. She thrust back. He groaned low and clenched his teeth. Luke realized he was growing weak. A man could only take so much. And he was a hungry man. A soft whimper escaped her; his body shuddered at the sound of her hunger.

Hell, he was painfully conscious of the fact that all he had to do to slip inside the warmth of her body was to push her robe aside. The way Charlie was thrusting her buttocks against his hard-on was proof enough she was just as turned on as he was. Even if she was unconscious.

Where was his self-control?

He wasn't made of stone. Before he could weigh his actions he wrapped an arm around Charlie and slipped his hand inside the opening of her robe. *Oh God!* Her satiny breast fit like it was made for his palm and Luke wasted no time in running his thumb over the engorged nipple. Charlie surprised him by pushing her swollen breast further into his caress, her sigh of pleasure followed by the gentle arch of her body. Her muscles quivered, warning Luke she wasn't sleeping as soundly as she had been a moment ago.

She started to roll slowly and Luke sensed she was about to change positions. Panic set in. If she turned into him and that tempting pussy got anywhere near his cock it would be over. He moved his mouth to her ear, reaching for what little control he had left.

"I'm not going to fuck you tonight, Charlie," he whispered hoarsely.

The implications behind his words caused her to quiver. He was amazed at his own strength when all he wanted to do was turn her on her backside, climb on top and part her silken thighs. Just like he'd been doing in his dreams every night since she'd come into his life. The desire to be inside her body, caressed by her warmth and tight pussy was so overwhelming he stopped breathing and willed his pulsing flesh to calm down.

Luke didn't expect Charlie to say anything, but she did nod slightly in acknowledgement. She attempted to draw away. He easily held her in place, wanting to feel her length against him all night. It was a sweet pleasure that fired his blood and would be sure to keep him warm during the night—even as it tested his willpower and his sanity to the limit.

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## **Chapter 11**

Charlie knew it was early. It didn't take her long to realize the soft clicking sound she'd heard had been the door closing below, telling her that Swanson had left. She burrowed deeper into the delicious warmth of the covers, not yet ready to wake completely. Enjoying the feel of Luke's presence beside her and how safe he made her feel.

They'd spent the night against each other in spoon-like fashion, aware of the other even in sleep. Charlie had lost count of the times she'd roused to find his cock hard and pressing against her bottom. She'd held her breath, waiting, yet he'd only lain there, breathing deeply until he gained control again. Other than the first time he'd caressed her breast, he hadn't touched her again.

She was just about to drift off again, wondering what it would take to make him lose control, when Luke's hand moved over her breast in a gentle caress. Her nipple tingled with sensation and hardened instantly. Her sigh of surrender was rewarded with the forceful thrust of his hips. Before she could guess his intentions, Luke reached down and pulled the robe aside so that there was nothing between their hot, hungry flesh. Her body exploded with pleasure from the contact of her buttocks against his smooth, throbbing shaft. A steel rod encased in soft velvet.

Gone was her blissful sigh. The heat of Luke's shaft produced a throaty groan that grew with intensity and echoed throughout the cabin. His cock was as hot as a poker, setting

Charlie on fire from the inside out. The knowledge of where this morning would end caused her to tremble with desire. Years of abstinence came crashing down around her, making her painfully aware of what she wanted now more than anything. And it wasn't just any man Charlie wanted, it was Luke.

Only Luke.

That knowledge caused her to curve more forcefully into him, reveling in his deep growl of satisfaction when he realized her surrender. He shuddered against her as if already in the throes of a climax, thrusting forcefully between her thighs. When Charlie felt the rounded head of his cock brush against her clit, she released a small cry and closed her eyes. She'd never felt anything half as heavenly and tried to part her legs enough to allow him total entry. Only Luke seemed to have other plans.

Charlie unexpectedly found herself flipped over so he could reach her breast with his searching mouth. She arched wildly, crying out in pleasure and offered her flesh eagerly to Luke's mouth as he thoroughly loved one swollen breast before moving on to the other. The sound of her blissful satisfaction became a deep purr in her throat, signaling her pleasure. The whole time she twisted and arched beneath him, silently encouraging him to fuck her.

*Damn, I want him.*

She reveled in the feel of his roughened hands as they glided over her, impatiently brushing the robe aside when it got in his way. Luke's mission became perfectly clear as he explored every curve and valley of Charlie's writhing body. He



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soon followed his roaming hands with the heat of his open mouth. He feasted on her quivering flesh, quickly making his way down her body, never lingering too long in one spot. His kisses were like little brushes of fire against her sensitive skin and left her tingling and gasping for more. She turned wild.

As though following a map, Luke's mouth found its way to the indented curve of her waist before exploring the roundness of her hip. He continued to the most private part of Charlie, kissing the soft curls between her legs and teasing her with a quick, deep stab of his tongue. She cried out then, her hips leaving the bed, and her body convulsed from the all-too-brief pleasure of his intimate act. Her hands clutched his shoulders in an effort to keep him there. Only he was far stronger than her, continuing to move over her body and loving it with his mouth and hands in an ardor that revealed he intended to discover her every secret.

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through her like a thousand tiny explosions. Her soft cries filled the cabin, mingling with Luke's deeper, huskier groans. Their breathing was labored. Charlie's hands touched his muscular body wherever she could, learning and memorizing the hard planes that made up the hard man.

She boldly traveled from his broad shoulders down the rippling muscles of his smooth back and over his tight buttocks, smoothing his pajama bottoms down as she went. She clenched her fingers into his taut flesh and provoked him to heights of passion that released her own.

She turned wild beneath him, wanting and needing to give pleasure as she was being pleased. Hoping to heal the

exposed wounds of their dispirited souls with a reawakening of new life and new memories. And something in the way Luke moved told Charlie he was striving for the same thing.

"Luke!"

She shuddered, her impassioned plea revealed the raw emotions racing through her blood. He completed his erotic journey and lowered his weight over her twisting body, kissing her long and hard.

When the kiss ended Luke pulled back far enough to meet her eyes. His were glazed and churning with emotion, mirroring hers, she was certain. Where their damp, naked flesh meshed a fire had ignited, moving swiftly and deeply through them until it was spiraling rapidly out of control. Charlie felt restraint slipping away, knew a moment of panic when it dawned on her that it would take very little effort to send her over the edge. The involuntary tremors of release were spiraling through her body. Warning her before long there would be no turning back.

It had been too long.

"Oh God, Luke, I'm going to—"

He pulled her beneath him and settled his weight upon her glistening, gyrating body. Charlie could feel his powerful, heavy erection against her, but he didn't enter her right away. The wait nearly killed her and she arched in an attempt to force the issue. His low grumble sounded like an animal in the wild, taking his mate in an act of primitive domination.

"Tell me what you want."

Luke's hoarse demand fired the need in Charlie's blood even higher. Her hands kneaded the flesh of his buttocks,

forcing him ever closer to his prize. She could feel the rounded head of his cock lightly brush her throbbing clit. But she couldn't overpower his strength to control the moment.

*Why isn't he fucking me? Doesn't he want me as much as I want him?*

"Luke, please!"

His cock throbbed in the hot, nesting place between her legs, as if waiting for an invitation to sink into the soft, wet folds. Charlie could actually feel her pussy lips swelling with desire. She couldn't ever remember being so hot.

"I want to make certain you want this as much as I do, Charlie. I want to make sure you fully understand that if you give me any sign to continue there will be no turning back." He mouthed the words against her aching breasts.

The sensation of his beard scraping her ultrasensitive nipples made the decision for her. As far as Charlie was concerned there was nothing to think about. She met the flames of desire simmering in Luke's eyes.

"Can't you tell?"

"I'm not in the mood for guessing games, lady." His mouth trailed a path of fire up to Charlie's throat. "I want the words. Clear and simple."

She gasped, unable to respond and shuddered when his teeth tugged at her ear.

"Charlie?" The grit in his tone revealed his impatience.

"I want you, Luke."

She couldn't take anymore. The sound of him sucking in his breath was audible in the room. His big body shuddered.

Backing up her demand, Charlie closed her legs against his seeking shaft, lovingly capturing it between her silken thighs.

"Luke!" she demanded desperately. "Please fuck me."

Where did he find the willpower to resist? Hadn't she told him what he wanted to hear?

Charlie arched into his weight and parted her legs, moving her hips in wild abandon. They kissed as if it were their first and their last time, pulling deeply on each other's tongues. She caught Luke's bottom lip with her teeth and nipped at it seductively before letting him pull away.

His counterattack left her quivering. He moved down her body until he reached Charlie's aching breasts, swirling his tongue around her sensitive nipples before taking them into his warm mouth. His strong hands traveled over her, learning the hollows of her body. She nearly exploded when his fingers glided over her clit, and tested her willingness.

"Luke!"

Charlie's nails clenched into the muscles of his arms in sexual frustration. The power of his physique flexed beneath her sensual attack, reminding Charlie how solid he was. Powerful yet in control.

Too controlled.

In frustration she scraped her nails down his chest, raking over his nipples as she went. He attacked back. He pulled her knees up and thrust forward at the same time, smoothly gliding through the glistening hair guarding her pussy lips. Past the soft gateway into her welcoming body until he was all the way home, as though he belonged there. Reaching to the deepest core of her and beyond, to where her heart beat.

Charlie cried out in wild abandon. Her hands returned to his buttocks forcing him deeper still. Luke's body shuddered uncontrollably, stiffening in an obvious attempt to hold off.

"Charlie, wait."

It was too late. She was out of control. Her body jerked as the spasms of a powerful climax gripped her. She clenched her thighs around Luke as sweet ecstasy claimed her in the ultimate pleasure. Her convulsive movements proved too much for Luke and he thrust into her with a groan. His mouth locked onto hers as he lost control. He swallowed her cry of pleasure, gripping her by the hips as he finished the ride with her. Hard and fast, again and again, he thrust into her until one final time, succumbing to a powerful release.

It seemed an eternity before either one moved.

When their breathing returned to normal and their hearts stopped racing, Charlie welcomed Luke's weight on her. When he moved, she sensed it was out of consideration for her and not because he wanted to. As he carefully rolled away he surprised her by pulling her with him. He kept her close to his side. Then, all without words, he reached for the quilt and pulled it over their cooling bodies as they drifted off into an exhausted slumber.

Luke lay there quietly, trying to make sense of what he was feeling. Fucking Charlie only complicated things between them. But one thing was certain, it had been a long time since he'd felt the presence of a warm body next to him in the morning. And it felt damn good after all his years of loneliness. Their intense lovemaking left a vivid enough picture in his head that his body began to stir with memories

that were only hours old. Charlie was soft and warm against his length, her long hair binding them together.

He felt her breasts beneath his arm, her nipples hard little berries digging into his flesh. He ignored his body's stirring as it occurred to him there were things about Charlie he didn't know.

Sensing she was awake now was a good time to let her know so was he. Luke decided not to beat around the bush.

"Who did I fuck this morning, Charlie?"

He was greeted with a tiny, almost embarrassed little smile when she turned just enough to meet his gaze.

"Isn't that usually the woman's line?" she asked in that silky voice of hers.

Luke was willing to bet Charlie had never used it on anyone before. Her hand moved over his in an unconscious caress, making him aware how close he was to cupping her satiny breast. He felt a tightening in his loins, a clenching in his gut and a dull ache in his heart.

He couldn't remember lust ever feeling like that before.

"Are you being vague on purpose?"

He didn't like the secrets dancing in the depths of her laughing eyes. In addition, he was certain the sexy come hither look on her face only meant more trouble. She quickly shook her head, her smile remaining firmly in place.

"Not at all. What do you want to know?"

"Call me old-fashioned, but for starters I'd like to know your name. Your real name."

Somehow Luke doubted her parents had looked down at her in the nursery and declared she looked like a Charlie.

"My name is Charlene Benton."

Luke wondered at her slight hesitation and again at the odd look filling her eyes. As though she were looking for some kind of reaction from him.

"Where did the Charlie come from?"

"Compliments of my brothers. When I was born they wanted a baby brother so badly that they refused to believe I was a girl. They started calling me Charlie and it just stuck." After a brief hesitation she added, "Personally, I think they couldn't pronounce Charlene. It's been a family argument for years."

Fondness for her brothers was apparent in Charlie's eyes and the soft tone of her voice. "Sounds like they were in denial. How many brothers do you have?"

"Two, Scott's a lawyer and Steven's in between jobs, as usual." Anticipating his next question she went on. "They're a few years older than I am."

Taking in the information, Luke nodded.

"What about you, Luke? Do you have family somewhere?"

Luke blamed himself for opening the door.

"The only family I ever had is gone." His voice was hard with a bitterness he didn't try to hide. "My parents died years ago in a fire. The only living relative I can claim is an uncle who's been in prison for the last twenty years for murder, not something to brag about."

"Is that supposed to scare me away?"

"People without connections can't get hurt."

Luke meant what he said. He didn't like the softness that came over Charlie's face. The last thing he wanted was her sympathy.

"And for you it's become a way of survival."

Charlie was too smart for her own good. Luke didn't bother denying it. He'd gotten used to the quiet life. He'd gotten used to being alone. Now this little mite was digging deep under his skin, leading a pathway directly to his heart if he didn't watch it. Fucking her had been a mistake, but strangely enough Luke discovered it had somehow cleansed his heart of some of the hardness surrounding it. He wasn't sorry about that.

He became aware of the silence and of her thoughtful scrutiny. If she offered him pity he'd throw it right back in her pretty face. The compassion that filled her eyes was the last straw.

"I don't want your pity, Charlie, is that understood?"

"Then what do you want from me?" There was a catch in her voice.

His eyes dropped to her mouth, narrowing on the small pink tongue that darted out to moisten that tempting bottom lip. It was full and smooth and he knew it tasted like a bit of heaven.

Deep down Luke knew what they both wanted, but instincts warned him it was for two totally different reasons. He could answer her question easily but maybe he should just show her instead. It would certainly prevent her from asking any further questions. He slanted his mouth over hers, the force of his kiss pushing her deeper into the pillows.



Luke rolled, following Charlie with his body. Her soft mouth and the sweetness within, the kitten sounds of her eager response quickly pushed him to the edge. As Charlie arched her hips against Luke in reaction, her hungry purr against his mouth set his loins on fire. If she didn't know by now what he wanted she never would. He pulled away before he couldn't. But not before he thrust his hips against her.

"I want you again, Charlie." Luke heard the regret in his tone. "Damn, lady."

"Damn us both, then," she said just as passionately and offered him her trembling mouth.

It was an invitation he accepted eagerly, swallowing her low moan. An explosion of need raced through Luke like a speeding locomotive. He couldn't believe he wanted her again so soon and with such intensity. And Charlie didn't seem to have any qualms about making love with him again. She trembled beneath him, kissing him back with just as much ardor, matching the thrust of his tongue with her own. There was nothing shy or reserved about Charlie when passion heated her blood.

Luke pulled away when his empty lungs demanded he take in air. Panting above her, his gaze captured hers when he moved the head of his cock over her distended clit. He watched for her reaction carefully, satisfied when her eyes clouded over and her swollen lips parted.

"Do you like this, baby?"

"Oh yes!"

Charlie closed her eyes and quivered beneath him. Without warning she reached beneath the covers. Her fingers found

and closed around his hardness in an effort to guide him into her. Luke's hand quickly covered hers, preventing Charlie from bringing them both that simple pleasure. When her eyes flew open they were filled with disappointment. He gently removed her hand from his body and from beneath the covers, pinning her wrist to the bed. He repeated the action with her other arm.

Her eyes were half-closed and glazed with a savage hunger and Luke couldn't tear his gaze away as he lowered his face. His tongue snaked out to run over the outline of her parted mouth before delving inside to drink the sweet nectar there. All the while the lower half of his body teased and tortured Charlie with tight restraint. He refused to enter her and appease the needs of his body. Instead, he moved deliberately against the rounded protuberance that would bring her the greatest ecstasy.

She began to squirm against him, straining to reach orgasm as he teased her without mercy. Her wild movements indicated release wasn't far behind. Tiny whimpers escaped her throat to mingle with his lips as they brushed against hers in a series of butterfly kisses.

Kisses meant to tempt her over the edge.

And did.

"Damn you. Damn you," Charlie cried, her hips moving wildly.

Suddenly she tensed, catching her breath and her eyes closed. "Oh God."

Just as a rolling climax claimed her, Luke entered her convulsing body, slamming his mouth over hers to swallow

her scream of fulfillment. He'd almost waited too late, not realizing until the instant he entered her how close he was to his own climax. Her muscles clenched around him and squeezed, holding Luke prisoner in her body, loving his hard cock in the most exquisite way. It didn't take him long to join her on the final ride of their journey.

Pleasure rendered him helpless as he slammed into her time and time again before collapsing upon Charlie as her body milked his until he had nothing left to give. He gasped for breath in the following minutes. In spite of the cold, Luke could feel the sweat rolling down his body and their combined heat was almost more than he could endure. He'd long ago released her wrists and her arms were holding him tightly against her.

He was filled with remorse that he might have caused her pain. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"You didn't."

There was no hesitation in her response. She took a deep breath, her body quivering with mild tremors that gradually diminished.

Luke raised his head to search for the truth in her eyes. In the end he'd lost control. He hadn't meant to, but Charlie had made it all too easy for him with her hungry sounds of encouragement and the sensuous enticement of her body.

"You should have stopped me."

"Could I have?"

Luke wasn't sure he could answer her honestly. He wanted to believe he would have stopped, but the truth was he'd wanted Charlie too much. To prove to himself that he didn't

need her he carefully rolled away. And that's when a shot rang out, the sound ricocheting through the trees and echoing down the snow-capped mountains. The startling noise interrupted the normal tranquility that surrounded the cabin and Luke was galvanized into action.

He sat up and yanked back the covers, pulling his pajama bottoms up at the same time.

"Was that close?"

Walking to where his clothes were Luke cast a glance over his shoulders in time to see Charlie's eyes moving over his backside, her brows furrowing with concern. A brief glance in the mirror over his dresser explained the reason why. Her nails had left their mark upon his back. He grinned in spite of her expression.

"Close enough."

He pulled his jeans on over his pajamas and didn't turn back to Charlie until he was slipping on his socks. Lady started whining and barking with distress. Charlie grabbed the quilt in front of her, and moved into a kneeling position. She glanced over the rail.

"Lady's clawing at the door to get out. Do you think it's Swanson?"

"Could be."

"Or maybe it's a search and rescue team," she whispered hopefully, her eyes filled with an optimistic gleam.

"It isn't."

Luke knew before they ever saw a search and rescue team they'd probably hear them first and it wouldn't be in the way

of a gunshot blast. Besides, a plane might find them, but only a helicopter would be able to land in these mountains.

He was about to ask Charlie if she knew how to use a gun, but didn't want to frighten her. He wasn't the only one who lived in the mountains. Once in awhile he had an unexpected visitor. A stranger, usually a loner like himself, who just stumbled onto his place by accident. Looking for a warm shelter for a night before moving on, never to be seen again. Or acquaintances like Swanson, wanting a place to hole up for a day or two.

"Luke?"

He heard the worry in Charlie's soft tone and went to her. His eyes moved over her missing nothing. Not the way she was clutching the covers against her body, nor the way her hair fell like a veil over her shoulders and down to her hips, enticing him to tangle his fingers into it. He did. He pulled her head back and lost himself in a kiss he hadn't planned. He could taste her eagerness mingled with unease.

He forced himself to break contact, ignoring the urge to push Charlie back against the bed. Lady's snarls reminded him he'd better check out what was going on outside. That shot could mean a lot of things.

"I want you to stay here and pull the ladder up after I'm gone."

He saw the flare of concern in her bright green eyes and added quickly, "It's just a precaution. I've never had any trouble but there's always a first."

"Maybe I can help."

"Charlie, doing what I ask will help."

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She pressed her lips together and he turned before he changed his mind. It wasn't giving in to Charlie that frightened Luke, he'd like nothing better than to forget about the world outside his cabin and stay with her in the loft for the rest of winter. That's what frightened him.

Another shot rang out.

Without words Luke turned and left.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 12

Charlie didn't know how long she remained in the loft hiding like a frightened rabbit before lowering the ladder to the floor below. She hadn't heard a third shot and hoped that meant good news. Besides, what could Luke do to her for disobeying him, toss her over his knee?

As she made her way down to the living room her thoughts drifted back to earlier. She'd never been with a man she'd known on such short acquaintance. Sex with Luke had seemed surreal while at the same time being the most real thing she'd ever experienced.

Her ex-husband had never made the earth shake like that. She smiled to herself. Not that she was making a comparison. But making love with Paul had always left her feeling as if something had been lacking in the experience. While Luke left Charlie feeling totally and thoroughly loved, and in a kind of sensual haze that remained with her long after her climax.

She went to the kitchen, turned on the radio, and proceeded to make some coffee.

"You don't listen very well."

Charlie hadn't heard Luke return. The unexpected sound of his voice caused her to spin around in reaction. He stood in the open doorway with Lady at his side, staring at her with a look on his face that was hard to read. She didn't know whether to be relieved or apprehensive.

"I thought I told you to stay in the loft."

The water began to run over the side of the coffeepot prompting Charlie to turn off the tap.

"I got tired of cowering in the loft. I didn't hear anymore shooting and figured it was safe to come down."

The way Luke's eyes moved over her reminded Charlie she'd helped herself to more of his clothes. She tugged at the heavy blue flannel covering her.

"I hope you don't mind my borrowing another shirt."

"I don't mind."

Charlie got the impression by his troubled expression there was something on his mind. It was only natural that she wondered if he was sorry they'd been intimate. *Would he revert back to the moody indifferent man he was before? Once a man got what he wanted...* She quickly dismissed the thought. Luke wasn't like most men. And besides, he had no reason to use her.

"Did you find out what the trouble was?"

She decided to pretend she didn't notice the gleam of purpose reflected in his serious brown eyes. She poured two cups of coffee.

"Swanson was using a rabid fox for target practice."

Luke finally walked the rest of the way into the cabin, closing the door behind him.

"He wounded him the first time so he had to track him down for the kill."

So, that was why they'd heard two shots. Charlie's eyes went to Lady as she settled on the rug before the hearth.

"Don't worry about Lady, she's okay."

She smiled. "How did he know the fox was rabid?"



"The signs. Foxes are normally skittish and stay away from humans. This one was stalking Swanson and making threatening noises. He decided not to take any chances."

"He didn't get very far. I take it he's okay?"

Their fingers brushed briefly as Luke took the coffee she handed him. The innocent touch ignited a spark that caused them both to draw back with surprise.

"Swanson can take care of himself. He's spent most of his adult life in these mountains."

"Oh."

They stared into each other's eyes as the moments slipped by, filled with an awkward silence except for the music on the radio. The song that was playing was a slow love song, the singer crooning out the lyrics in a deep, husky voice that left the listeners thinking about clinging bodies swaying on the dance floor. It finally ended and the announcer came on, breaking the intimate mood of the moment as he divulged the singer's name. Charlie turned the radio off, not liking the way Luke was staring at her.

"Would you like something to eat?"

He shook his head. "I can wait until dinner." He hesitated, as if trying to make up his mind about something. "I've decided to go back to the crash site, Charlie."

Her jaw dropped in surprise. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. "Why?"

"I should have done it earlier. I saw a search and rescue plane the day before and if they spotted the crash it won't be long before they send in a team. I don't want you to miss your chance at being rescued."

Was he that eager to be rid of her? Charlie wondered if that was all there was to it. Luke seemed to be having trouble making eye contact with her.

"I don't understand."

"I'm going to leave a marker of some kind so that when they discover the crash site they'll know you survived."

"When did you decide to do this, Luke, before or after we made love?" Charlie set her cup down and crossed her arms.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Doesn't it?"

Charlie felt control slipping away and worse, tears burning in her eyes. She calmed herself by taking a deep breath and decided to change the subject.

"Will they be able to land somewhere if they do find it?"

"Not likely. They'd have to go back for a chopper and even then it will be hazardous. The trees are too close in some areas and the weather is unpredictable up here this time of year. If they know you survived they might attempt it."

Charlie made a choking laugh, and presented her back to him.

"You want to get rid of me that badly?" She bit down on her bottom lip, cursing the hurt reflected in her tone.

Making love to him had been a little like dying, and coming back to life again, a feeling she wanted to experience for a second time. Without warning his hands dropped to her shoulders. He whirled her around to face him. Charlie met the steel in his eyes without flinching, her gaze softening a little. She sensed his inner turmoil.

"You think it's that simple, Charlie? No matter what else happens now, I'll never be completely rid of you."

"But—"

"It goes deeper than that. I'm not ready for the complications having you in my life will bring. There can be no future for us. I've lived alone in these mountains far too long. I've lost certain wants in life."

Who was he trying to kid?

"Well, you certainly haven't lost your desire to screw." Charlie jerked away from him, embittered by his discouraging words. "Do you honestly believe that crap, Luke?"

She faced the kitchen window, her spine straight as an arrow.

"It's how I feel," he said in a firm tone.

Charlie's gaze dropped to the small picture of him and Susan on the sill.

"You need to get on with your life Luke. You've punished yourself long enough. Susan wouldn't want you to continue living in the past, it's not healthy. Do you think if the situation were reversed she would have waited this long? Or exiled herself from civilization?"

As the seconds stretched between them intuition told Charlie he wasn't going to respond to her comments. She turned back to face him.

"When are you going?"

"I'll leave at first light in the morning. It'll take a few hours to get there and back." He bent to remove his boots.

Charlie thought about her family and the relief they'd feel when they discovered she was still alive and well.

"I'd like to go with you."

"No." He pivoted to hang up his coat.

She took in his set jaw and the glare in his eyes when he turned back around to face her. His mind was clearly made up. She knew what she was up against and felt her temper rising in spite of it.

"Just like that, Luke? In case you've forgotten I'm an adult, capable of making my own decisions."

"You like pushing buttons," he acknowledged. He ran his hands through his hair. "I'm going to grab a shower."

Charlie responded with a silent nod. If she said what was on her mind they'd probably end up fighting and she wasn't up to that.

As soon as Luke disappeared into the bathroom she put on her coat and went outside. She'd heard about people getting cabin fever, but hadn't fully understood the meaning until now. Being cooped up in the small cabin was beginning to take a toll on her nerves.

She was used to exercise and activity. The small chores she'd managed to come up with to keep busy weren't enough to satisfy her inactivity. Being sexually attracted to Luke wasn't helping either. Especially when he made it clear he wasn't interested in a future with her. He was attracted to her and wanted her but that was all. Their lovemaking had been intense, satisfying a need in both of them that went deeper than any wound, but it wasn't the cure all to their heartache. Lust was a far cry from love.

Her eyes fell on Mr. Google, who was looking sickly and more lopsided than ever. Charlie bent and picked up the

brown button that had fallen off his face and replaced his eye. She straightened his hat, noticing his nose looked a little chewed on. He looked lonely and she wondered if she should build him a friend.

A woman, then he could have a playmate, too. No, that wasn't right. Charlie knew she wasn't being fair. She'd wanted Luke just as much. Accusing him of taking advantage of her would be unfair and a lie. She slipped her hands into her pockets and started to walk. The temperature was freezing but at least it wasn't snowing. The ground was hard and crisp. Before long she broke out into a slow jog, making a mental note not to stray too far from the cabin. Getting lost was the last thing she needed.

It felt great exercising again. When Charlie was home she went out every morning for a short jog, something she'd started soon after Robin's death. In the beginning she'd run until she was so exhausted she couldn't think or remember. Until the only pain she felt was the physical. What had started out as therapy had turned into a necessity for survival. Now she just enjoyed it.

Realizing she was pushing herself, she stopped to catch her breath. She bent at the waist and braced her hands against her thighs. The cold air burned her lungs but she ignored it, scanning the area around her. The cabin was out of sight and it gradually began to dawn on her that she'd gone too far. She spun around and tried to get her bearings.

*Damn!* She straightened slowly and refused to panic. Everywhere her gaze fell it all looked the same. Monstrous, snow-dusted pines surrounded her like silent guardians

offering protection, yet they didn't block out the rapidly descending sun. How could she have been so careless? Her only chance was to follow her footsteps back the way she came, but that only worked until the snow began to fall again.

The howl of a wolf cut through the trees and Charlie almost jumped out of her skin. She jerked to an abrupt halt. The animal was close, too close. She was suddenly reminded her of the rabid fox Swanson had killed earlier that day. Answering cries soon echoed on the wind as the rest of the pack joined in and she let out a scream of pure panic. She took off in a mindless run.

*Oh, God! Which way is home*

The growls of the wolves seemed to be getting closer, spurring Charlie on. She ducked low-hanging branches, crashed through others. The falling snow was blinding her. And she let out a scream for the one person who could be her salvation.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 13

Luke wasn't very far away when he heard Charlie cry out his name. The alarm he detected in her voice was clear and sharp and sent a ripple of fear down his spine. He'd heard the howls of the wolves, too and knew there were packs that roamed the woods close by his home.

"Luke, help!"

"Charlie!" he shouted and ran in the direction he'd heard her call out. The adrenaline was pumping through his blood like fuel. *If anything happens to her—*

"Luke, I'm here!"

"Stay put and keep talking so I can find you!" he shouted back, sprinting through the trees in the direction of her voice. It was snowing hard now, the white powdery stuff covered Luke's footsteps as fast as he made them.

"I'm over here!"

She barely got the words out when Luke broke through a cluster of pines to where Charlie had stopped. He halted when he saw her, ready to blast her for being so foolish when a loud cracking sound split the air.

It became extremely silent.

Their eyes met.

Another, louder crack followed the first one.

Charlie's eyes narrowed with confusion and surprise. She glanced down at her feet and then back at Luke.

"What is it?"

The sound became louder. And for the first time Luke realized she wasn't standing on solid ground.

"Charlie, God don't move."

Charlie froze, obviously realizing it, too. He watched in horror as the ice beneath her feet continued to break outward in the pattern of a spider's legs, the snow turning darker where the water came through.

"Luke..."

For as long as he lived he'd never forget the frightened softness in Charlie's voice. Her gaze clung to his as though just doing that made her safe. Helplessness held him immobile, and knowledge of the inevitable. Before either of them had a chance to do anything the ice gave way and Charlie went under.

"Charlie!"

She came up gasping for air, her arms flailing in a wild attempt to stay above the freezing water, but her water-laden clothes weighed her down and made it difficult.

"Luke!" she screamed, gagging at the water rushing down her throat. Her head went under again.

Panic raced through Luke. He quickly sprinted as close as he could to her before dropping down onto the ice. He inched his way toward her.

"Luke."

It was a struggle to keep his tone from showing the fear he felt.

"I'm here, sweetheart."

He was flat on his stomach, crawling toward her until he was as close to the edge of the jagged ice as he dared go.



Unfortunately, it wasn't close enough to reach her. And he knew if he went in too their chances of survival were slim to none.

"Luke, I ca-can't get o-out," Charlie stammered.

She tried desperately to claw her way out on top of the ice. But every time she grabbed the ragged edge it just broke away in her hands, tossing her back into the icy water.

Luke could see she was shivering violently and knew he had only minutes to get her out before hypothermia set in. Each time Charlie sank beneath the surface, fear that she wouldn't resurface nearly paralyzed him. His hand went to his belt and he quickly undid it and then slipped it through the loops. Snapping it free he tossed it to her.

"Grab it, Charlie, I'll pull you out."

She missed it the first time. "I can't."

"Yes you can."

He was forced to throw it to her again. Luke knew she was numb with cold. She would be dead in a matter of minutes if he didn't get her out of there. Valuable time was slipping away and he knew if Charlie didn't grab the belt soon he'd have to take a chance and go in after her.

"Charlie, grab the belt."

He watched her struggle.

"You can do it, honey."

Luke knew he'd have to make a decision. If he went in it was possible he'd be able to hoist her out of the water far enough for her to reach firmer ground, but that didn't leave him with very good odds. It was a risk he was willing to take. Finally, on the third toss Charlie caught the belt. More

precious seconds followed as she struggled to wrap it securely around her wrist.

"I'm re-ready," she said, attempting to hold on to it as he began to slowly drag her out.

By the time Luke pulled her to safety she was blue and shivering uncontrollably. In a matter of seconds ice had formed on her wet clothes and hair.

"God, Lu-Luke...I'm so-so co-cold," she stammered, struggling weakly to get to her feet.

"You little fool," he chastised harshly, aware the crisis was far from over.

He quickly scooped Charlie into his arms and turned in the direction of his cabin.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Fear made his words come out short and rushed.

"I-I wa-was jogg-ing and g-got lost." She shivered violently. "I th-think I'm frozen cl-clear through, Luke. I-I can't fe-feel anyth-thing."

"You nearly got yourself killed."

His tone was harsh because he couldn't get the image of her falling through the ice out of his head. If he hadn't gone looking for her...he quickly dismissed the thought starting to take form.

Thank God the cabin wasn't far. In spite of her soaked clothes he carried Charlie easily, glancing down at her often. She was mumbling incoherently. When the cabin came into view he noticed the smoke curling from the chimney and muttered a prayer. He'd lit a fire before heading out. He kicked the door open, shoved it closed with his elbow and

continued straight into the bathroom. Charlie couldn't feel anything now, but he knew in a few minutes she would be feeling more than she could bear.

She was almost unconscious, but Luke placed her on her feet, holding her upright against the wall with an arm across her chest. He reached down with his other and turned on the taps, carefully adjusting the temperature so that she would be able to stand it. As the tiny room filled with hot steam, he began to peel the frozen clothes off her icy body. She murmured a weak protest, but was powerless to stop him. Before he removed her shirt and long johns he picked her up and deposited her squarely in the rapidly filling tub.

Her scream echoed through the cabin and Luke was certain it could be heard all the way down the mountain. She trashed violently against his hold, cursing him as the hot water penetrated her cold, numb flesh. He held her easily under the water, willing the heat to invade her limbs and bring life back into them.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but this is the only way."

Maybe it wasn't the only way, but it was the only way he knew.

Charlie kept her eyes closed, but Luke knew she heard him. After a while she ceased her struggling and relaxed against the tub. As her body gradually submitted to the warmth she moaned deeply.

"Don't move."

He left the bathroom without waiting for her response. It only took him a few minutes to reach the kitchen and pour

her a drink before he returned and sat on the edge of the tub. He brought the glass to her colorless, trembling lips.

Charlie's gaze shot up to his. Her voice was fragile and shaky.

"What's this?"

"Brandy," he said. "I know you don't drink but trust me, this will help warm you up."

She opened her mouth and let him pour a generous amount down her throat. She was shaking so badly he could hear her teeth clattering together. When he pulled away she wrapped her hands around his in an attempt to guide the glass back to her lips.

"Easy, sweetheart."

He let Charlie have another small sip before setting the glass on the edge of the sink.

"How are you feeling?"

He picked up her limp wrist and took her pulse, not surprised to find it was slow. His gaze remained on her pale face and quivering mouth. Her attempt to smile was more like a grimace.

"Still cold, but better," she said weakly, lowering her lashes when Luke's gaze returned to hers. "That's twice you've saved my life. I'm sure in some country it means we're married now."

Luke's hand was gentle beneath her chin, forcing Charlie to look him in the eyes. "I think it means you're my slave," he said with a twist of humor on his mouth.

"Same thing," Charlie shot back with growing spunk, a knowing smile spread across her face. "You get the same, ah, wifely privileges," she pointed out.

"I'm sure one of those privileges includes a sound beating for disobedience," he teased, reaching forward and running the back of his hand over her cold cheek. She closed her eyes with a small sound of contentment.

"What, no argument from you?" he inquired after awhile.

"You didn't exactly forbid me to go for a walk," she pointed out in her defense. "But I do realize what I did was stupid, wandering off like that."

In spite of being cold her eyes were alive with a mysterious light that played havoc with Luke's heart. He reached forward and brushed her hair back from her face, capturing her eyes with his and holding her gaze for a long moment. He wondered if she knew how close she'd come to dying out there today. Her slight tremor brought him back to the present.

"Are you still cold?"

Charlie nodded. "I don't think I'll ever thaw out completely," she said seriously.

Luke reached in and pulled the plug. "Get out of those wet things, I'll be right back."

When he'd left the room earlier to get the brandy he'd taken the time to place another log on the fire and to hang a fleece blanket over a chair in front of it to warm. By the time he returned with the blanket, Charlie had peeled off the soggy long johns but was having trouble undoing the buttons to her shirt.

"Fingers not working yet?"

She nodded, her mouth turning down with obvious frustration. "Numb."

"No doubt. Here, let me."

He dropped the warm blanket on top of the clothes hamper and reached for the first button, deftly slipping it through the hole. Their eyes met and held while he quickly undid the rest, ever conscious of the coldness of her skin against his warm knuckles. Her unexpected shiver caused Luke's hands to falter before opening the shirt and exposing her.

"I think I can do the rest," Charlie said in a voice turned hoarse with emotion.

Luke wasn't about to let her sudden shyness keep him from getting her out of her wet clothes and into something dry and warm. Ignoring her comment, he quickly slipped the soaked flannel over her shoulders and arms and let it drop to the floor.

He drew in a hiss, sure the erratic pounding of his heart meant he was experiencing heart failure. His gaze dropped down Charlie's lovely body, drinking in her nudity with a visual caress that missed nothing.

Up close and personal.

He wasn't prepared for the impact of seeing a totally naked Charlie for the first time. He almost swallowed his tongue. She was stunning, with a wild beauty he'd only guessed at before. With an hourglass shape of jutting breasts and a narrow waist his hands could easily span. His gaze continued to travel south, skimming over the graceful curve of her hips and shapely thighs, down her legs before moving back up to

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the soft tuff of hair between her legs. They'd fucked twice, but Luke hadn't seen her like this. She bewitched him with her womanly form.

"So beautiful," he commented quietly, as if under a spell.

His stiffening cock thought so, too. He couldn't help himself. She was a very desirable woman.

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## Chapter 14

Charlie caught her breath at the look of desire on Luke's face and suddenly felt raw and vulnerable. Standing naked before him, she shivered and was thankful when he finally grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around her. Before she could prepare herself he picked her up and carried her into the other room to the fireplace. She did a double-take when her eyes fell on the black pelt on the floor before the roaring fire.

"A bear rug?" she asked in awe, a soft giggle escaping her when all the cliches she'd ever heard about making love in front of a fire on a bear rug came to mind. "Is that for real?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I was forced to kill one my second summer here. Swanson was around to show me what to do with the pelt."

Luke carefully laid her down, then surprised Charlie by opening the blanket and taking hold of one of her bare legs.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, wide-eyed.

He chuckled, running his hands over her roughly, beginning with her feet. "Relax. I'll have the blood running through your limbs again in no time."

Luke's hands moved swiftly up to Charlie's knees, his strong fingers promoting circulation that soon had her feeling much more than just warmth. He repeated the process on her other leg.

She leaned weakly against the stack of pillows he'd been thoughtful enough to provide, praying he intended on



stopping with her legs. If he were to touch the rest of her body in that rough and stimulating way she might as well return to the pond for another dip. She closed her eyes so Luke wouldn't see the desire filling them, recalling the pleasure his hands and mouth had on her body when he was fucking her. He was careful to keep his touch impersonal, but Charlie couldn't keep her thoughts from the exact opposite.

She wanted to tell him how she felt but didn't want him thinking she was confusing gratitude with love. Knowing how Luke felt, she wasn't strong enough to endure his rejection right now.

"Turn over," he commanded softly, just when Charlie had begun to let her imagination run a little wild.

"Do you think that's wise?"

For the second time Luke chuckled. "I was just wondering where my common sense had disappeared to."

He obviously wasn't showing any by giving her a thorough rub down, but he knew her cold body needed it. And she knew it. His hands were restoring the warmth to her muscles and invigorating the blood flow in her veins. Deciding no good could come out of dwelling on what else his hands were capable of, Charlie relaxed and let her mind drift. If Luke could stand it so could she.

"Turn over, Charlie."

Her eyes bolted open. She'd been half-asleep. "Huh?"

"Turn on your stomach and I'll do your back."

"Oh."

Charlie pushed the pillows aside and turned over, careful to keep the blanket wrapped around her. However, Luke had

other plans and peeled it away from her. She gasped but he ignored it, leaving just enough material to cover her buttocks. Then Charlie felt his hands brush aside her wet hair, before falling to her shoulders. His hands and fingers curled into the delicate bones there and began to massage her. She sighed blissfully against her arm where she rested her head.

"Oh, that feels wonderful."

"You'll be asleep in no time."

Luke's hands slowly made their way down her smooth back, working and kneading at her muscles, rubbing his palms deeply into her cold skin until it felt alive again. He moved in a swirling motion, going lower and lower each time until he came to where the blanket was draped carelessly across her waist. Charlie's breath caught when he dipped his fingers beneath it.

She heard his breath quicken, but he remained silent. Charlie could feel his eyes on her, warming her more than any fire could. Soft sighs escaped before she could stop them. She closed her eyes, feeling the change in his hands as they moved over her. He was caressing her now. The blanket shifted and she knew the only thing keeping her from being totally naked was a strip of fleece barely wide enough to conceal her bottom.

In spite of the desire uncoiling through her body, Charlie felt overwhelmed with fatigue. She kept her eyes closed and enjoyed his administrations before sleep slowly claimed her into gradual unconsciousness.

Luke stared down at Charlie for a moment, making sure she wasn't too close to the fire. He wanted her again.

With a curse, he swung around and headed for the kitchen. Charlie was right about one thing; Susan would want him to get on with his life. Still, he wasn't sure he was ready for that. For now all he knew was that he was going to fix some hot soup.

By the time he returned to the living room, Charlie was sleeping deeply, curled up into the fleece blanket, looking comfortable and warm as toast. Lady had claimed her place in front of the hearth, lying on her side with her back against Charlie's. Luke grinned, she'd probably scream like a banshee when she woke up and realized she was sleeping with a wolf. Then unexpectedly Lady jumped to her feet and went straight to the door. She turned her head and focused her keen gaze on him. Luke knew what that particular look meant.

He strode to the door and opened it. In a flash Lady disappeared into the snow-blanketed forest. Luke's gaze followed her until she was out of sight. It was that precise moment when something snagged his attention, a movement in the distance. He shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun on the snow, searching the horizon and beyond.

It was an airplane.

Luke's heart fell. As it moved closer, he recognized the logo on the side, which identified it as the one and only search and rescue plane from Tall Pines. He was pretty sure he'd seen the same plane the other day, only it had been a little too far away to make a positive identification.

He swore beneath his breath, wishing he'd made the decision to return to the crash site earlier to leave a marker of some kind. Tomorrow might be too late.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Leaning his tall form against the frame of the open doorway, he glanced back at Charlie. She appeared to be sleeping soundly, a curious little smile upon her soft mouth, making him curious as to what her dreams were about. Her face was relaxed and serene, as though she didn't have a care in the world. Incredibly long lashes fluttered against the rosy glow of her cheeks as she moved into a new position, seeking comfort.

The blanket slipped, revealing ivory shoulders that Luke knew were soft as silk to the touch.

She made him hungry.

She made him forget.

Could she make him love again?

Luke had never thought of himself as living in the past. The night he'd lost Susan his life had changed forever. He'd simply walked away from civilization at a time when he thought he couldn't go on without her.

Suicide had never entered his mind; he'd simply been looking for a place of peace and quiet, a place without people and commitments and the possibilities of being close enough to another human being to ever get hurt again.

Only, he hadn't counted on an angel falling from the sky, either.

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## Chapter 15

The low whistle of the wind outside and the sound of a country song playing low on the radio were a pleasant mixture to relax to. Luke stared out the window until night fell while sipping at the second bottle of scotch Swanson had left behind. He was deep in thought as Charlie slept peacefully by the fire.

What was he going to do about her?

Going to the crash site in the morning was a start at getting her out of his life. With a little luck and a prayer, the search and rescue plane he'd spotted would come back.

*Do I really want her gone?*

Charlie made him feel, no *want* things he'd stopped caring about a long time ago. She'd claimed his body, but there was no way in hell he was going to let her claim his heart. Her near miss experience with death that afternoon showed him he'd never survive another devastating loss. He couldn't afford to give his heart away again.

Yes, he wanted her gone, before he didn't have the strength to let her go.

Movement caused Luke's eyes to shift to Charlie, thankful to see her stirring after sleeping for hours. She stretched with a low moan and pushed against Lady, who pushed right back. The sight brought a smile to Luke's face. Beauty and the beast.

Charlie glanced up, meeting his eyes.

"You're in her spot. Lady doesn't like sharing her bed." He rose from the chair he'd been sitting in.

Charlie sat up keeping the blanket around her.

"What about her master?" she inquired softly, not realizing how alluring she appeared to Luke at that very moment.

A seductress who knew she was being observed by her lover, patiently waiting for him to come to her. *To claim her.* Her hair was everywhere. It cloaked her naked shoulders and fell to the floor. Luke's gaze moved over the graceful line of Charlie's throat and delicate collarbone, before traveling down to the visible swelling of her breasts, just above the blanket. His cock stirred to life.

He finished his drink in one swallow and placed the glass on the mantel.

"I haven't shared my bed in a long time, Charlie. I don't want to hurt you," he said carefully.

What he really meant to say was that he was afraid of being hurt again. Of loving someone so much that he couldn't go on without her when she was gone. He knew it was just a matter of time before she left and he would return to his life of isolation.

"Physically or mentally?" Charlie said, watching him carefully.

The warmth of her eyes entrapped his, warming Luke better than any fire.

"Both," he replied, after a few moments of giving it careful thought.

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"Luke, you might not believe this but you could never hurt me," she insisted with the confidence of a woman who loved a man and trusted him.

He could and he would. It was inevitable. Only he didn't say the words. He took a resigned breath and turned his back to Charlie. He walked to the window. It was pitch-black out but for the stars. Nothing to see really, but in the reflection of the glass he could see Charlie getting to her feet behind him. She looked like some regal Indian princess, the scarlet blanket cloaked around her slender shoulders like a royal cape. Her graceful movements held him bewitched and before he knew it she was touching him on the shoulder. He didn't turn around, but their gazes made contact in the smoky glass.

"Tell me about Susan."

Her soft whisper moved over him like warm honey, drawing him toward her.

"Please, Luke. I need to know in order to understand."

He clenched his teeth until a muscle twitched in his jaw and it started to ache. His eyes burned with an emotion he refused to reveal. His body tensed beneath the softness of Charlie's palm. He hadn't talked about it to anyone.

"Maybe I don't want you to understand."

"Please," she pleaded with him.

Luke reached up and ran his hands over his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as he dug into the center of his soul for strength. He had no intention of telling Charlie anything, but before he knew it he was doing just that.

"Susan died almost four years ago." He took a breath. "For awhile I thought I was getting along okay, trying to get on with my life without her. I soon realized I was only going through the motions. I'd become an empty shell, shutting down and closing everyone out. After about six months I felt as if the world was closing in on me and I realized I had to get out."

"And that's when you came here," she said. "How did she die, Luke?"

He hesitated not sure he could go on. Charlie was asking him to bare his soul, though Luke suspected she was aware of that. His gaze remained focused on the blackness outside the window, but the vision of Susan the night she died was a vivid picture in his mind he'd never forget. Always lurking just beneath the surface where guilt kept it from completely going away.

"It was Christmas Eve. I'd decided to stay late at the office to finish up on a case I was working on. Susan had decided to attend the office party going on in her building."

He took a deep breath. His gaze was focused beyond the darkness as it all played out in front of him again. The intersection, the lights and the sound of the crash. Then later, the sound of the approaching ambulance.

"It was a car accident."

Charlie's hand lightly moved along the back of his neck beneath his hair in a warm and caring caress. "You were driving?"



Her tender touch was distracting; the soothing tone of her voice pulled the information from Luke as easy as any truth serum.

"We both were."

He'd never forget the horror of seeing Susan's car plow through the stop sign, cutting directly in front of him. Nor the terror he felt when he knew there was nothing he could do to stop from hitting her. They'd both been traveling at a high rate of speed, within the limits, but the results had still been the same. One dead at the scene, one sent to the hospital near death. He'd spent months in that damn hospital. They'd put his body back together, but not his life.

"Two cars? But how was that possible?" Charlie asked with confusion.

"Susan wasn't a drinker, but she'd had a couple glasses of wine that evening. She was also taking cold medicine which didn't mix well with alcohol."

Luke finally turned and looked down into her eyes, seeing the moisture glistening in their green depths and mesmerized by it. Charlie was sharing his pain, and understanding it.

"We neared an intersection at the same time. I had a green light and Susan didn't. She ran right through it. Her car was the one I hit, Charlie. She died instantly."

Luke could tell his words shocked Charlie. She turned pale.

"Oh, Luke..." A tear slipped down her cheek, then another and another. "It was an accident. A freak accident."

"That won't bring her back," he said bitterly, his mouth a thin line as he tried to hold onto his control.

"No," Charlie agreed. "But what will bring you back?"

Her words sounded almost desperate.

"You died that night too, Luke. You've been living in a nonexistent shell all these years, punishing yourself. But I've seen the man you can be. When you make love to me, you're filled with life and passion."

Their gazes clung in the gloominess of the room. Charlie started to reach up, but changed her mind at the last second. She was smart to realize he wouldn't welcome her sympathy.

"Dance with me," she said instead.

Luke's brows furrowed with confusion until the soft music playing in the background finally penetrated the dull ache surrounding his senses.

"Dance with me," she insisted again, softly.

She held on to the blanket with one hand, reaching up to curl her fingers around Luke's neck with the other. He took her in his arms hesitantly, unsure of what she wanted from him. He was locked in a memory that left him dazed and slightly disoriented.

Charlie couldn't believe the song on the radio was the same love song they'd heard earlier that day, *Someone to Love Me* was a song made for lovers, a sweetly haunting melody of dreams and fantasy that touched the inner soul.

They started out slow, swaying gently to the music, their feet barely moving against the floor. Charlie laid her head against Luke's shoulder and snuggled into his embrace while encouraging him to hold her tighter, which he did without protest. After a few heartbeats he rested his chin on her head and continued to move to the beat. He was big and warm and all Charlie wanted to do was get closer somehow. Closer to

the hot skin she felt beneath his shirt where his pulsing heartbeat pounded strong and steady.

She turned her face into him, inhaling his warm and masculine scent and burrowing her cold nose into the hair on his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. An unwilling laugh vibrated through Luke's chest and Charlie could hear the smile in his voice.

"You're not blowing your nose on me, are you?"

She laughed softly, burrowing closer. "Just trying to get my nose warm," she said.

Her lips brushed against his flesh. He smelled earthy, of fresh outdoors and pine, which teased her senses into arousal. She began to hum softly, keeping in tune with the music on the radio until finally giving in to the urge to sing the words to her favorite song.

*Someone to Love Me* was Charlie's song and by far the best work she'd turned out to date. Furthermore, it seemed appropriate at the moment.

Luke shivered in response as she mouthed the words against him. She kept her tone low and throaty. Sexy, like she was singing it on the radio until she was actually imitating the seductive tone. The low and intimate words invited lovers to explore their feelings in the most raw and basic way. When the song ended, Charlie continued to croon softly. She didn't show any surprise when Luke jerked back to peer deeply into her eyes with a light of dawning in his.

"You're her," he said in mild amazement.

Charlie smiled and confirmed it with a nod. "I wrote and recorded that song six months ago," she admitted. "I'm

surprised you didn't figure it out the other morning when I told you my full name."

"It doesn't surprise me. Half the time I turn the radio on for the noise, hardly listening to what's playing. I haven't heard any announcements that the famous Charlene Benton is missing and presumed dead," he said.

"That's because no one knew I was flying that day and Charlene Benton is my stage name. The rest of the time I go by my married name, Charlie Wayne. I was taking a last-minute trip home to surprise my parents on their anniversary. I didn't tell them I was coming."

"Still, you filed a flight plan, I assume. Your family has probably already been notified that your plane went down."

"I don't want to think about the pain I'm causing my family right now, Luke, they've been through enough."

They were still swaying slightly, their bodies clinging in a loose embrace. Charlie attempted to lay her head back against Luke's shoulder, but he stopped her by wrapping his hand in her unbound hair. It wasn't a painful hold, but it was effective in keeping her far enough away from him so that he could hold her eyes captive.

"Who, Charlie?" he demanded, his voice a little gruff. "Who did you write that song for?"

Charlie's eyes flared in response to the passion in his voice. Her answer was heartfelt and said with deep feeling.

She held his burning gaze. "For someone I hadn't met yet. For someone I've been waiting my whole life to find."

Her voice turned huskier with every word. Because at that moment she was certain Luke was that someone.

"What will you do once you meet that someone?" With each murmured word Luke's face moved closer until he was a breath away from actually kissing her.

Charlie's lips parted in shameless anticipation. The hand in her hair clenched into a fist and their dancing ceased. Suddenly nothing else in the world mattered as much as having Luke's mouth on her at that very moment. She raised her face to him, an eager invitation in her half-closed eyes.

"Kiss me, Luke."

"No."

Then he was doing that very thing, closing the distance between them to take Charlie's waiting lips. Her head snapped back from the force as she was crushed in his passionate embrace. It was solid, real and filled a void she'd lived with for way too long.

Forgetting about the blanket she wound her arms around Luke's neck, kissing him back with all the passion and desire that was in her. She opened her mouth to his probing tongue and let him explore the secrets of her mouth before bringing her tongue into play. She stroked it against his, tasting his warmth and the hint of coffee. As his mouth moved against hers, Charlie could no longer deny the fact that she was falling in love with him. She pulled away, stark realization producing a sob of surprise and sadness from her.

"Luke!"

His hands moved down her backside to the soft fleece covering her buttocks. He took the rounded flesh in his hands and pulled her sharply against him. Her cry of pleasure was swallowed with a responding guttural sound of raw need.

"Charlie," he rasped when the kiss ended.

"Luke," she mimicked, just as wild and breathless.

"I don't think—"

"Then don't," she said, standing on tiptoe to reach his mouth again.

Luke shook his head and leaned back. "I can't promise you more than today." His steady gaze held hers for a long moment. "I'm not going to use you."

"I'm not asking for more than today." Charlie was aware her tone was a little too eager to be believed. "I'm a big girl, Luke. Maybe I need this as much as you do. Women have needs, too."

Before he could call her a liar Charlie's hands moved between them to his belt buckle. She worked blindly. As though she had years of experience, she undid the buckle, unsnapped his jeans, and slowly lowered his zipper before she lost her nerve. Never in her life had she ever taken the initiative with a man. But with Luke, it was easy. She captured his smoldering gaze, and caught her breath when he reached down and covered her nervous hand with his. His hand curled over hers, holding her against the hard length of his cock, letting her feel his fullness and strength.

"Feel what you do to me." He closed his eyes and groaned deeply.

"Luke." Charlie reached up on tiptoe to kiss him.

He opened his eyes and Charlie let the blanket fall to the floor between them. The breath hissed through his teeth and his gaze fell to her breasts. They were grazing his chest, her nipples hard against the material of his shirt. After the

briefest hesitation, his hands came up to cup them, his thumbs moving back and forth over the taut crowns.

A fire ignited, entrapping them both. Luke knew he had to have her. And it appeared Charlie felt the same way. She gasped sharply and swayed on her feet. Her hand slowly slipped inside the opening of Luke's jeans and he sucked in his breath, drawing Charlie roughly into his embrace for a steamy kiss. Their mouths barely fused when he tore away, panting as if he'd just run a marathon.

"Do you know what you're doing? Do you know how much I want to fuck you right now?"

"I hope I know what I'm doing." She grinned, making him tremble from her tender stroking. "And I give you permission to fuck me, Luke."

A grunt of laughter escaped him. Then Charlie was forced to let go of him because his mouth began trailing kisses down her body, starting with her throat and traveling to her aching breasts. He took the time to love each one thoroughly before falling to his knees to her belly button. His tongue swirled around it; his hot breath teased the fine hairs on Charlie's stomach before continuing the erotic journey.

When Luke reached the damp curls between her legs, he didn't hesitate in parting her pussy lips with his exploring tongue. It glided over her sensitive clit and further, tasting the moisture within. Charlie shook violently and clutched his shoulders for support, moaning weakly. He recognized the passionate hunger in her gaze when she glanced down at him. And knew it mirrored his own feelings.

"Oh!" she cried out again breathlessly.

She swayed with obvious pleasure when Luke's tongue continued to slowly glide over her clit, penetrating the swollen petals to her very soul. Her head rolled back and she closed her eyes. Her thighs trembled wildly and Charlie knew she was about to collapse.

Luke must have sensed it too and helped her down to her knees. All the while his tongue worshiped her sweet flesh in a path that took him up her flat belly, between her breasts, and up the slim column of her arched throat until he could reclaim her parted lips, if he wanted to. The subtle caress of his tongue left her nerves exposed and her senses screaming.

"Luke."

He responded with a low growl, taking her lips in a kiss as tender as it was savage. They became caught up in the firestorm sweeping over them. Hearts pounding, breaths catching, they turned wild in their hunger and exploration of each other's bodies. Luke tried to slow down and pulled back. Charlie demanded what she sensed he was afraid to give.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't stop."

Her hands went to the opening of his shirt and curled tightly in the soft material. Bright eyes sought his and without hesitation she ripped his shirt open. She hastily brushed it from his shoulders and down his arms. Charlie was the one who initiated the next heated kiss, bringing her glistening body up against his and fueling the fire between them.

"Luke," she whispered, the lower half of her body instinctively arched toward his, seeking, wanting, needing.



She moved her mouth over his nipples, teased and tortured the hardened nubs with her teeth and tongue, driving him crazy. Luke's hands cupped her buttocks and he pulled her up, holding her against his thick cock. He let her feel what she did to him and how much he wanted to fuck her.

The cabin was filled with the noise of heavy breathing and the sounds of mutual pleasure. There was no turning back for either of them. He tangled a hand in her unbound hair, and forced her head up so he could capture her gaze.

"Tell me, Charlie. Tell me what you want," he murmured the words against her trembling mouth. His tongue delved deeply between her lips as she panted for air.

There was no denying she was trembling with a need as strong as his. Instead of telling him what he wanted to hear, she proceeded to show him. Her hands moved to his pants and she rolled them down to mid-thigh, since he was on his knees. In whimpered frustration, she arched her pussy closer, teasing him with fire and ice. Rotating her hips against the rounded head of his hot cock as it teased her clit.

Charlie couldn't take much more without climaxing. The hot need uncurling in her belly was a clear signal that she was at her limit. She parted her thighs and opened her body further to Luke, in silent invitation for him to take her. He thrust his cock between her pussy lips. The friction was her undoing.

"Fuck me, Luke! I need your cock inside me now!"

Her bold demand was Luke's undoing and he fell to his back, dragging Charlie down with him as he went. In one fluid

motion he lifted her, positioned and brought her down, sheathing his throbbing shaft inside the smooth, slick honey of her alluring body.

He groaned with pleasure, not pain. Charlie didn't need his hands on her to show her what to do; she was moving on her own. They began to move as one, their movements slow and sinuous at first. His hands reached for her bare breasts, caressing them as she rode him toward heaven. He opened his eyes so he could look into hers, his heartbeat skyrocketing with what he saw. There was no denying the smoky desire clouding her eyes, nor the passion stamped on her beautiful face.

"I'm coming," she cried.

The involuntary tremors of fulfillment began to rush through Luke's body. A guttural cry escaped him as he accepted his fate. Charlie released a small series of breathless screams, her body began to convulse.

"Charlie—"

There was no holding back the rolling blast of fire surging through his body. He didn't want to. The tightening of her pussy sent him over the top. Jets of cum exploded from his cock, filling her sweet cavern. Together they soared to an awesome, shuddering ecstasy.

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## Chapter 16

Charlie glanced down at the note Luke had been thoughtful enough to leave on the kitchen counter explaining that he'd gone back to the crash site and would likely be back late afternoon. Like a thief in the night, he'd tiptoed out of the cabin, knowing she'd wanted to go with him. He was running again, determined not to let her get close. Every time they made love he pulled further away, until renewed desire overrode his willpower.

The wall Luke kept in place around his heart was invisible, yet just as impregnable as any wall made out of brick or stone. Charlie couldn't help but wonder what it would take to chip away at it and reach his heart.

But did she want to?

Was she up to being hurt again?

She sighed heavily, already knowing the answer to that. Her failed marriage and two protective brothers had taught Charlie to look out for number one.

She thought about Steven and Scott, sure by now that her family knew what had happened to her. Her brothers would be the ones to hold their parents together. Especially Scott, he was the practical one. And he had Allison to keep him from falling apart. He would be the one to make all the necessary phone calls, including the one to her agent, Tom Rivers.

A soft chuckle escaped Charlie thinking about Tom and what his reaction would be when he learned she was missing. His first thought would be the recording date she'd miss. A

workaholic, he was always harping about deadlines. Tom cared for Charlie, but with him business always came first. He couldn't help it. He lived and breathed work. Once he got over his initial reaction to her not making the Breast Cancer Awareness benefit, he'd be hard to console.

Steven, on the other hand, would put himself right in the thick of things, including any ongoing investigations. Never one to just sit around patiently and wait, he was too vocal for that. Too authoritative, which probably came from his many years in the Marines. Steven liked action, liked to be on the move. Another reason he didn't hold down a job for any length of time. Come to think of it, Charlie didn't know what her brother did for a living. He lived a here today, gone tomorrow kind of lifestyle. It suited him.

Sighing, she plugged in the coffeepot and made her way to the bathroom for a quick shower. Her eyes moved around the room as she walked through it. It could use a little dusting. Luke had saved her life. Keeping his home clean was the least she could do.

Luke opened the door, unprepared for the sight that greeted him. He stood in the entranceway for a moment, mindless of the snow blowing in from behind him. His sharp gaze landed on Charlie and Lady instantly.

They presented a warm, homey sight that made him strangely uncomfortable. Charlie had lit a fire, leaving the interior warm and illuminated by the flames. It was much too intimate. She was snuggled up in a quilt at the end of the sofa, reading an article in a magazine he knew had to be at

least two years old. Lady was lying next to her with her head upon Charlie's thigh.

Luke came to his senses, and closed the door when he realized they'd both looked up and were both staring at him. There was concern, and relief in Charlie's eyes. He forced a smile. He would have returned earlier but had spent some time at the crash site, checking out the plane's engine to see if there was anything he could make use of.

"What smells so good?" he asked, as though he hadn't been gone for the last ten hours and just returned home.

"I found some kind of meat in the freezer and made a stew. I was waiting for you to come home."

Luke held back a grin, sensing she wouldn't appreciate his reason for it. The meat she was talking about was probably the rabbit he'd killed last spring. If there was anything worse than eating Bambi, it was eating Thumper.

"Did you find anything to indicate search and rescue had been there?"

"No. Too much snow has fallen and most of the plane was covered. I left a marker they should be able to spot from the air if they fly over again."

She pulled the blanket off and rose to her feet, just as Luke began to remove his outerwear. By the time he turned from hanging his coat up, she was less than a foot away from him. He could easily go around her, but chose not to. His gaze met hers before dropping to her soft mouth. Instant hunger rolled through him, but he quickly forced it down.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

The look in her eyes was unreadable, yet sent a current of alarm down his spine. When she reached out, he jerked back as if afraid of her.

She laughed huskily. "Nothing's wrong. You have ice in your beard," she explained, plucking several pieces out.

She was too close. Luke had spent all day convincing himself it was better for both of them to go back to the way things were, before he completely lost his heart and soul in her arms. Had the door not been at his back he would have stepped away.

"Do you ever shave this off?"

There was a teasing quality in Charlie's eyes that kept him from taking a breath. Her tone was soft and appealing, caressing his senses and reminding him of how good they were together. When the meaning of her innocent words finally registered, his blood turned cold as ice.

"No."

Luke could tell the steel in his voice caught her by surprise. He'd divulged enough of his secrets.

"Let's have dinner, I'm hungry." He pivoted sharply and walked away.

"I'm sorry if I hit a nerve."

Luke stopped at the stove and peered into the steaming pot, hoping Charlie was smart enough not to follow him. He should have known better. She moved in close, and leaned against the counter, oblivious to the turmoil twisting in his gut. Their gazes met and clung.

"Luke, is something wrong?"

"Can't you tell when I want to be left alone?"

"I've never been good at interpreting body language."

He stiffened at that. "I've been waiting for your curiosity to get the better of you." He stopped stirring the stew and turned it off. "Do us both a favor and just let it go, Charlie."

He didn't want questions.

"Don't you think too much has happened between us for us not to be honest with each other?"

She touched his arm. Luke clenched his jaw.

"You're as stiff and unyielding as a hundred-year-old oak tree," she observed softly.

"You think the only scars I have from the accident are the ones inside?" In spite of his admission Charlie's eyes didn't waver.

"A less than perfect man? Do you think I'm that shallow?" She slapped her hands on her hips. The fire in her eyes was hot enough to melt the snow outside.

"I'm not vain, Charlie. But do you think I want to look in the mirror every morning and see those scars and be reminded of how I acquired them? Do you think I want to go through the rest of my life reliving that accident?"

The words no sooner left Luke's mouth than he realized the awful truth. He didn't need to see any scars to be reminded about the accident. He was doing a good enough job of that all by himself.

Charlie's eyes turned darker, impaling him like shards of jagged glass. The heavy silence between them grew until it became uncomfortable. Luke could tell she wanted to blast him. Say something she would probably regret.

In the end all she said was, "I'm sorry."

The compassion in her tone reached Luke, touching him in a place he thought had died a long time ago. There was no doubt that he was drawn to Charlie. Her good looks, her passionate nature, the way she gave everything to him and held nothing back. Her eyes were resting on him, warm and alive with that very passion. He found it damn hard to ignore the invitation in those green pools, knowing if he let it himself he could very easily drown in the vortex of complex emotions he saw churning there.

"Are you going to feed me or not?" she teased, surprising Luke by changing the subject.

She crossed her arms, the action outlining the fullness of her breasts. Her expression reminded Luke of a hungry cat. A sly cat that knew a little too much, or thought she did. It occurred to him that Charlie seemed overly confident where he was concerned. Like she'd already made up her mind and had him all figured out, drawing the conclusion she had nothing to fear from him. Luke didn't like that. The final straw came when he saw her lips twitch with the need to smile.

With nothing on his mind but thoughts of showing Charlie that he was the one in control he moved swiftly, entrapping her against the unyielding counter and wiping that sassy expression right off her face.

Satisfied with her reaction he said, "You think you have me pegged, don't you?" He leaned in close, close enough to tease her lips with his. "If you're so smart, Charlie, tell me, what's going to happen next?"

She didn't hesitate with a sassy response.



"You kiss me?" Her tongue traced the outline of his mouth, dipping inside to explore the soft underside of his bottom lip.

His knees buckled for a second. Her actions caught him by surprise. He thought about pulling back, but found himself doing the opposite instead. Slowly, he closed the distance between them and tenderly joined his mouth to hers. Her soft moan filled the kitchen as she melded against him, eagerly giving him access to the inside of her mouth. All at once it didn't seem to matter who was in control of the situation, or that this was the last thing he wanted. Charlie's allure was more powerful than he'd realized.

He ignored her sound of protest when he finally found the strength to draw back.

"And next?"

His hands began to stroke her through the heavy sweats she was wearing, until she was gasping with need. She was barely able to get the words out.

"I get something to eat?"

She arched her hips against him in a natural reaction to get closer. Luke grinned lazily, his lids half closing with desire. Now who had who pegged? He knew exactly where to touch Charlie to get a response.

His hands unhurriedly roamed up to her breasts, cupping them in his palms, testing their weight. Her eyes widened with surprise and something else when his caress slid beneath the material to her warm, naked flesh. His eyes fell to the cream-colored globes with their rosy-tipped crowns and he knew he had to have a taste. Bending his head, he put his

mouth on her, ignoring her sigh and the violent reaction of her body.

"How hungry are you, Charlie?" Luke moved away from her breast just long enough to ask the question, his gaze darted up to hers. She had to know he wasn't talking about food now.

"Very!"

Her lips trembled with the need to smile but it was there, evident in the crystal clarity of her green eyes. She was enjoying the cat-and-mouse game they were playing. She *wanted* him to continue.

"There's some stew on the stove," he commented huskily, igniting a spark of excitement in Charlie's eyes that said more than words.

"I was thinking along the lines of something hotter," she breathed softly, brazenly moving her hand to the growing bulge in his pants.

Her fingers teasingly ran up and down the length of his zipper, teasing his cock and surprising Luke with her willingness to take the initiative. He sucked in a harsh breath, her words enflamed him.

"How hot?"

He wanted nothing more than to have Charlie's hot little hands on him. He wanted her to undo his pants, reach inside and caress his aching shaft. He arched into her palm with a need so powerful that he shook with it.

"You must be getting very uncomfortable," she said.

Her hands moved to his belt buckle. She deftly undid it and lowered the zipper with deliberate slowness. Slow enough

to drive Luke mad. She caught him off-guard and dropped down on her knees. Their gazes remained glued to each other as she reached inside his pants. His instincts kicked in when he realized what her intentions were.

"Charlie." His voice was low and hoarse, revealing his heightened state of arousal.

Lord, his determination to go back to the way things were flew right out the window the second he felt her hot breath against his throbbing, dripping cock. He braced himself for whatever reaction having her mouth on him might produce.

"Luke," she responded in a seductive whisper.

Her tongue came out, catching a drop of pre-cum as it slipped from the head of his cock. Then she closed her mouth over him and he shuddered, clutching the counter for support. He closed his eyes tightly and let out a tortured groan. Charlie had the warmest, sweetest mouth and it was doing things to him that was slowly giving him heart failure. Her tongue licked the full length like she had a tasty Popsicle in her hands, before she closed her lips over him with agonizing slowness. Soft hands cupped his balls. Luke's head fell back and his hips began to move of their own accord. He couldn't help it.

As he fucked her mouth, her hands moved over him. She explored his quivering thighs, and moved around to squeeze his ass before forcing him deeper. The head of his cock brushed against the back of her throat and she swallowed, sucking him hard.

God, he was going to explode when the time came.

And when Charlie's teeth teasingly raked his blood-filled cock, he lost control and did just that.

"That hit the spot," Charlie announced sometime later, and laid her napkin down once her bowl was empty.

They both smiled, their gazes reaching each other from across the table. A low whine from the other room reached them and Luke pushed his chair back. For a moment he stood looking down at her.

Charlie wondered what was going on behind those intense eyes of his, as the silence lengthened between them. Sometimes she wished she could read his mind, like now, the way he was looking at her. Not with lust or desire but as though he'd just discovered something vitally important and he wanted to share it with her. Only he didn't seem to know how, or he was too afraid. Maybe he was afraid of divulging too much. Finally she couldn't take the silence any longer.

"I'll clean up here and make coffee while you let Lady out."

It was an evening ritual after dinner. She rose to her feet and reached for his plate, aware Luke was leaving without saying a word. Charlie didn't mind playing homemaker. During her short marriage to Paul, she had enjoyed being a housewife and mother. In fact her career had come in third during those days, much to Tom's dismay. The less appearances and albums she made, the less money he made. These days their pockets were a little fuller. And Tom was a lot happier.

Later, when Charlie entered the living room it was to find Luke sitting by the fire. She brought him a cup of steaming coffee and placed it on the small table next to his chair. His

expression was closed, his eyes unblinking as he stared into the flames. His blank stare told her he was miles away.

Not wanting to disturb him she turned quietly to slip away, but the small movement broke the deep thoughts imprisoning Luke and his hand shot out to catch her by the wrist. She watched his eyes gradually fill with life again, becoming dark and powerful as the murky waters of a churning river. They entrapped Charlie and held her mesmerized.

"Thank you for the coffee."

Luke didn't release his grip on her wrist. Charlie sensed he wanted to say something else.

"You're welcome." She smiled, waiting, but he remained silent. "Do you want to talk about it?"

His brows furrowed. "Talk about what?"

He released her wrist and Charlie knew it was because she had suddenly got too close.

"About what's on your mind. You've been quiet and distant since..."

She couldn't bring herself to continue. She'd never loved a man like that before.

"Later, Charlie. Right now I have some things to work out in my head."

He glanced up at her. She suspected the softening in his eyes was to put her at ease.

"Okay." She nodded and turned away.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 17

Charlie turned the radio on low, not wanting to disturb Luke. She reached into the cupboard for a clean cup when her sleep blurry eyes automatically went to where the picture of him and Susan usually was on the windowsill. Seeing it gone caused her to freeze.

*That has to be a good sign, doesn't it? Meaning he'd put it away because he was ready to get on with his life.*

*Or had he taken it to slip beneath his pillow while he slept that night*

Charlie chose to believe her first assumption because Luke didn't strike her as the kind of man who would give into something so depressing, especially when so much time had already gone by.

She took a deep breath, half-listening to the weatherman on the radio. He discussed the climate and was predicting more snow. Then the news came on and Charlie heard what she and Luke had been waiting for. A report that she'd never made her scheduled landing at the Tall Pines Airfield and was presumed missing.

The news broadcaster went on to say a search and rescue was underway to find her and that they focused their search efforts in the mountains surrounding Tall Pines. Well, at least they were looking in the right area, even if they had a lot of ground to cover. With it snowing every day Charlie knew there was probably nothing left of the wreckage to see from the air. Thank goodness Luke had placed a marker.

"It was just a matter of time."

Charlie jumped at the sound of Luke's voice, and spun around to face him. Their eyes met briefly before his gaze moved over her face with growing amusement. For a moment she was mesmerized by the look in his chocolate eyes. They made her think of the cocoa she was making, dark and rich, welcoming for a change.

"What?"

The back of his hand came up and brushed over her cheek with a tenderness that tugged at her heartstrings. "You have creased sleep lines on your cheek."

His response brought a smile on her face. "Oh, I'm not a very pretty sight in the mornings." She reached up and tried to do something with her russet hair, which crackled with static electricity.

Luke pulled back slightly, his gaze moving over Charlie's sweatsuit, which she knew was rumpled. Then, as if just realizing what she'd said his eyes sobered and his hand fell away.

"You're a damned desirable sight first thing in the morning."

Oh, she didn't know what to say to that, feeling suddenly shy. Luke was close. She could smell his earthy scent, feel the warmth radiating off his body. His thick hair was mussed from sleep and before Charlie reached up to run her fingers through it, she turned for another cup.

"My family must be devastated."

"Maybe they won't have long to wait. I saw another plane fly over yesterday. I wasn't going to say anything because I

didn't want to get your hopes up since they weren't anywhere near where you crashed. But they'll be out again and when they come across the crash site they'll know you survived."

Charlie digested the information with mixed emotions. "If they find the site and manage to land somewhere, how will they know where to find me?"

"I nailed a note to a spike in the snow, with a flag on top. It tells them where you are. Most people around these parts, who know me, know where to find me."

"Oh." Charlie hoped Luke didn't question her less-than-enthusiastic tone. "I thought we'd have hot cocoa this morning."

She turned to get another package from the box in the cupboard. She couldn't explain the moisture filling her eyes. It was silly. They both knew she had to leave eventually. The deep breath she took sounded more like a broken sob.

"Charlie, we both know it's for the best." The determination in Luke's words was obvious. He'd already made up his mind.

She turned on him, anger rising as fast as an erupting volcano. "You've just decided this on your own? What happened all of a sudden, Luke? I thought..."

*What, that we'd been falling in love?*

She wiped furiously at her cheeks, hating the show of weepy emotion. What they'd been doing was falling in lust, that was all.

"You got too close, Charlie." He took the cup she offered him.



"Too close? Yes, I guess I did. I'm sorry if you can't handle that." Charlie heard the sound of hysteria in her forced laugh. She trembled with hurt.

"What are you afraid of, Luke? Are you afraid of getting too close to another living, breathing being, of being alive again, of loving again? Or what, am I only good enough to sleep with and that's all?"

He took a threatening step toward her, but she was just angry enough not to appreciate the protection the counter offered. The raw look in his blazing eyes warned Charlie she'd gone too far. But she couldn't seem to stop the flow of words once they started and exasperation urged her on. She was determined to make him see the truth that was right there in front of his eyes. She loved him too much to let him spend the rest of his life running away.

"Maybe you like things the way they are. Maybe you like living this isolated godforsaken life you've chosen. Being a martyr is easy, Luke, I've had some experience in that department. The difference between you and me is that I chose to get on with my life and you've chosen to live yours in the past."

He put his cup down, his action was very deliberate.

The savage expression on his face warned Charlie she'd pushed him past the brink. Only he couldn't hurt her any more than he already had. Pushing her away and shutting her out was a lot harder pill to swallow than anything else he could dish out.

His eyes darkened like polished stones of onyx, the hands at his sides curling into tight fists. Luke ground his teeth, his chest heaving with emotions he was obviously holding at bay.

"You're way off base, lady,"

Charlie had never seen Luke look so angry, but she wasn't about to back down from the look in his eyes.

"Then prove it," she said.

Challenged recklessly, trying for nonchalance. However she couldn't quite pull it off with her hands shaking so badly. She leaned back against the sink and calmly took a sip of her cocoa, her insides churning wildly. She'd make Luke realize the truth, even if it pushed him away.

Luke's stony gaze raked over her with irritation. "I don't have to prove anything to you. I told you once already that I couldn't promise you more than today."

Yes, he had.

He turned and calmly walked away. Charlie's eyes followed him until she couldn't see him any longer. She remained where she was, her heart racing from their heated confrontation. Movements from the other room indicated he was putting on his coat and boots and then she heard the door open and close.

Quietly.

Charlie didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until that moment. She had to give Luke credit, he'd been mad enough to slam that door behind him. His control only proved that maybe he was more immune to her than she first thought. She hadn't set out to anger him or make him loose

control, but it was a lot healthier emotion than shutting down with cold indifference.

As soon as she knew she was alone, she fell to pieces. She set her cup down and buried her face in her palms, giving in to the deep anguish tearing her apart. Her legs trembled but she managed to make it to the chair. She sank down, drew her legs up and placed her feet on the chair seat. Tears fell down her cheeks like a river out of control, washing out her tortured soul with promises of what could have been.

Of what suddenly seemed lost.

Luke quietly backed out the cabin and closed the door when he heard Charlie's loud, uncontrollable weeping. He'd returned when he remembered he'd forgotten his gloves, but on opening the door he knew he couldn't take her crying. Anything but that. A muscle twitched in his hardened jaw and he took a deep breath once the door was shut again.

*I am a bastard.*

He should have told her the truth instead of letting her think he wanted to continue living the way he had the last few years.

He thought about Susan's picture in the bottom dresser drawer where he'd placed it the night before. It was time he put it away. Staring at it every day wasn't doing him any good, and Luke realized he'd been unconsciously using it as a tool to keep reminding him of what he'd lost. Maybe he wasn't ready to rejoin the civilized world, but putting the picture away was a small step in the right direction.

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*by Tory Richards*

And he had Charlie to thank for that. If a woman could lose a child and find the strength to go on, he could draw from that reserve. He was just as strong.

His gaze landed on Charlie's pitiful snowman, taking in the layer of fresh snow that covered his flannel shirt. One arm was hanging loosely where the stick had finally fallen. He'd seen a doe run off with the nose early that morning. Without thinking Luke went over and repaired the arm. He stood back and breathed in deeply, expelling a cloud of white breath.

His gaze scanned the area, taking in the dusting of new snow that blanketed everything. The surrounding area looked clean and untouched. The silence was eerie, broken occasionally by the cry of a wolf, the screech of an owl or any other number of animals that roamed close by. Luke welcomed those sounds. This was his home and for the first time he thought of it as such, finding that he liked it.

Hearing the news report about Charlie brought back all too clearly that a future together seemed impossible. She had a life of her own somewhere else and a family. Luke had lived this way long enough to know he didn't want to go back. He preferred the solitude and simplicity that came with living in the mountains. He enjoyed living in an environment that didn't include power lines and the noise and air pollutants of vehicles on overcrowded highways. People paid a fortune to live like he lived.

He allowed himself the luxury of thinking about Charlie and what life would be like with her there with him. He was falling for her more and more every minute they were together and his gut told him she felt the same way. It had happened so

fast he hadn't seen it coming. He needed time to think things through before sharing them with her.

Would it be fair to ask her to give up everything to stay there with him in the mountains?

Was he ready to let another woman move into his heart?

He released a disbelieving grunt. Who was he kidding? She'd locked herself in and tossed away the key.

Luke's eyes drifted over the horizon unconsciously looking for a plane in the sky. He knew that when the time came he'd be forced to make a decision.

Could he let Charlie go?

Once Charlie pulled herself together, she decided she had to do something to keep busy or go insane. She retrieved the cleaning supplies from beneath the kitchen sink and proceeded to clean house again. But it didn't take her long to whip through the small cabin, and by early afternoon she'd dusted, polished, washed, and straightened everything she could get her hands on.

She'd even ventured into the lion's den to change his bed. But that had been a mistake. Luke's earthy scent appeared to be everywhere—in his sheets, his blankets, and the pillows. It was arousing. And caused her senses to awaken full-force, reminding her how making love with him filled the emptiness inside her soul.

Charlie had no idea where he'd disappeared to and could only guess he was off on one of his many fishing trips. Except, for a man who liked to fish, he wasn't very good at it if the amount of fish he brought home was any indication. She couldn't help wondering if Luke just used that as an

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excuse to stay away. Maybe next time she'd insist on going with him. That would certainly put a crimp in his style.

When she was finished with her domestic duties, she grabbed the quilt that kept her warm at night and headed outside. Then, seeing Mr. Google's poor condition dropped the quilt on the porch chair and went to him. He looked sad and lonely. A couple of hours later Charlie stood back with satisfaction, thoroughly pleased with herself. Mr. Google had a playmate now. Someone to share his sunny days with, and the dark of night until they gradually melted away...together.

Everyone needed someone.

She was sitting on the front porch bundled up like an Eskimo when Luke finally made his way home. Charlie watched him as he walked closer to the cabin, her eyes drinking him in. He appeared like something out of a misty dream, his large bulk covered with a layer of fallen snow. Her heart swelled with a feeling she had long thought dead as he approached the cabin, tall and silent. She looked through the clothes to the man she knew beneath, the thought of his hard muscles and warm skin igniting a winter fire in her.

She wanted Luke, but the look on his chiseled face hardly reciprocated those thoughts. It didn't matter anyway. Rejection twisted like a knife in her heart. She couldn't make Luke want her. Love her.

"I see you've made your snowman a friend."

Charlie followed his gaze to Mrs. Google, which was a smaller replica of Mr. Google. Their stick fingers were linked. At the time she hadn't thought anything of it, but now, seeing

it as Luke was seeing it, made her wonder if he thought there was significance behind it.

"Everyone needs someone," she said quietly, echoing her earlier thoughts. "Even Mr. Google."

He ignored her comment. "You're going to catch your death of cold," he said, stopping to peer down at her when he reached the porch. His eyes skimmed over her shapeless form with mild concern.

"I needed some fresh air," Charlie explained, her eyes narrowing on the string of fish dangling at his side. "I hope you're not planning on those for dinner, I already put a chicken in the oven."

"Tomorrow, then," he said matter-of-factly, before he continued around the side of the cabin.

Charlie sat there, staring through the break in the trees. It was late afternoon and just starting to turn gloomy. The snow was coming down in heavy flurries, which made seeing more than a few feet in front of her difficult. She could hear the wind whistling through the branches in the trees and realized they were in for a storm that night. With a violent shiver she rose to her feet and headed inside.

The warmth of the cabin was like walking into the warm embrace of a waiting lover, engulfing Charlie in a feeling of protection. She dropped the quilt over the back of the couch on her way to the kitchen.

Luke sucked in a deep, appreciative breath when he entered the cabin. He stripped off his snow-encrusted outer garments before going toward the kitchen to drop off his skinned and cleaned fish. He noticed a subtle difference as he

strode through the room. The place looked cleaner, more organized. Charlie had apparently kept herself busy all day.

The sight that met him when he finally reached the kitchen caused his steps to falter and his mouth to go dry. It was all he could do to lay the packaged fish on the counter. Charlie was bent over the oven, humming, oblivious to anything but the chicken she was basting.

Gone was the baggy sweatsuit. She'd apparently done the wash and was attired in her own clothes, the ones she'd been wearing the day of the crash. Luke had only seen them on her once. They'd been clinging to the womanly assets then, too.

The skintight black stretch pants did a hell of a lot more for her figure than his long johns ever did. The formfitting cashmere sweater fell to mid-thigh and Luke could see she'd pulled the sleeves up to her elbows so they'd be out of the way. The neckline appeared to be rounded. It was hard to tell with her back to him.

Her glorious mountain of hair had been pulled up in a haphazard bun, leaving tendrils to fall freely against the graceful column of her neck. Luke gulped nervously, wondering if he should just back out the way he'd come and lock himself in the bathroom for the rest of the night.

How was he going to ignore her allure?

She closed the oven door and stood up, unaware of his silent scrutiny. A radiant smile spread across her flushed face when she turned and met his eyes.

"Just in time for dinner. Are you hungry?"

Yeah, only Luke wanted to feast on *her*. He gulped. The neckline of her sweater was rounded, exposing a deep



cleavage that drew his gaze there instantly. The soft cashmere flowed over her breasts, shaping their fullness. His gaze slid lazily down her body, touching intimately on all his favorite parts. His palms itched with the sudden desire to reach out and touch her.

As he neared the dining table he watched her place the food on it, knowing he'd never be able to get through the meal in his current turned-on state. The atmosphere was suddenly way too intimate for his peace of mind. He sat down reluctantly, his mouth turned down into a grim line. His cock was already swelling behind his zipper and throbbed with the remembered taste of Charlie's tight, welcoming body.

Hell, couldn't he even be in the same room with her anymore and not feel the rush of sweet lust overtake his senses?

Luke wondered if God was punishing him for something and decided the only way he was going to get through dinner was to keep his eyes on his plate. Something told him that Charlie knew exactly what she was doing to him. An emotion he'd caught reflected in her eyes earlier warned him she was up to something.

Once in a while she tossed him a smile, but otherwise they ate in silence. Luke only hoped for her sake she hadn't bitten off more than she could chew, because he was about to explode. He took a forkful of potato and jammed it into his mouth.

He was going to fight her attraction if it killed him. He had to remain in control. It was the only way he was going to be able to say goodbye when the time came, the only way to

keep from being hurt again, no matter how much he wanted to lay her down upon the table and fuck her until they both passed out in exhaustion.

He was going to ignore her.

Charlie's soft moan of pleasure echoed through the cabin like a shotgun blast. Luke was forced to glance up and almost choked on his food. He watched her lips close over the succulent meat she was stuffing into her mouth. To make matters worse she licked the juice off her glistening fingers with the enthusiasm of a kid eating a candy bar.

He shot out of his chair.

*What the hell does she think she is doing*

He scowled at her but she kept her eyes downcast, ignoring him completely. As if it didn't matter he was there. The sounds coming from her side of the table made him think of satin sheets, hot nights and sweaty bodies.

*Their* sweaty bodies, naked and writhing.

He couldn't take any more. He was within an inch of jumping across the table and making his fantasy come true.

"I think I hear Lady whining." He almost knocked his chair over in an effort to leave.

"I have something special for you for dessert."

Dessert? He hadn't even eaten his dinner. Luke made a fatal error in glancing back at Charlie. She seemed oblivious to his presence and was calmly eating her dinner. Though when her gaze shot up to his, there was no denying the invitation he saw in those smoky depths.

She was just as aroused as he was. They wanted each other. So why was he fighting it?

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Maybe because he sensed what Charlie was attempting to do.

Trying to prove that he needed someone, that he needed *her*. Well, his body needed her, there was no denying that.

He hurried from the kitchen before giving himself away, tossing some lame excuse over his shoulder about needing to take care of something.

He'd go to bed hungry that night, but that was the least of his problems.

He was going to bed hungry, but it wasn't for food.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 18

Charlie could hear Luke moving about in the other room, encouraging Lady to get to her feet. Soon after she heard the door open and close. Her suspicions were confirmed when she went into the living room and found it empty of man and beast. The only light in the room was provided by the fire blazing in the hearth. She inhaled the fresh scent of pine in the air. After her admission about what the scent reminded her of, Luke seemed to go out of his way to make sure to add some to the fire every night.

Several candles had also been lit, leaving the atmosphere cozy and welcoming. Intimate, if she hadn't known better. She was almost glad he'd left when he had. It gave her time to calm down and come to her senses. She'd set out to seduce him, tease him to the point that he'd take her into his arms and claim her again. To prove to him that he didn't have to be afraid. That he could stop running.

Halfway through her little seduction routine, she started to feel guilty and ashamed when she realized she was trying to control Luke with sex. She wasn't being fair to him, thankful when she'd finally begun to act with some sort of normalcy. Charlie had never been good at playing games. Besides, he'd never denied he wanted her body. His reservations were with an emotional attachment.

She grabbed the quilt off the back of the sofa and sank down into the soft folds, wondering what time Luke would return.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

Luke sat on the porch, his eyes searching the darkness for Lady's return. The snow was coming down hard and the winter wind was blistering cold. He glanced toward the black, star-studded sky wondering how long the approaching storm would last.

The year before a blizzard had hit so hard that he'd been cooped up in his cabin for a week, unable to even get through the front door. He supposed he could have dug himself out, but there hadn't been any reason. Now he wondered how long it would take because Luke knew one thing, he'd never survive being caged in with Charlie for any length of time.

His thoughts returned to the woman inside his cabin. He knew that the search for the downed plane would become more intense now, especially with the weather worsening. Even with the snow covering most of her plane from the sky, it would be obvious what had occurred there. Once the crash site was discovered and his marker seen, it would be just a matter of time before someone showed up on his doorstep to take Charlie away.

It wouldn't take much for a skilled helicopter pilot, especially one of the locals, to locate his cabin and rescue Charlie. There was a small clearing a couple miles from his cabin, so landing would be easy as long as the weather cooperated. Luke wondered how he'd feel when that day came, because it dawned on him that he liked having Charlie around. Or maybe it was just the presence of another person around.

No, it was more than that and Luke was honest enough to admit it. Charlie filled a void in his life that had become so

dark and deep that he hadn't even been aware of it until now. He supposed any woman who'd been lucky enough to survive that plane crash would have done the same thing.

*Liar*

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the side of the house. An unwilling picture of Charlie entered in his mind. She was beautiful to look at but Luke knew it went deeper than that. She was made up of a range of complex moods that were hard to deal with at times, making it hard to keep her at arm's length.

Images of Susan tried to materialize, but for the first time in years Luke was unable to picture her clearly. Since Charlie had come into his life he found it increasingly harder to see Susan's pretty face. Memories of them together had faded until nothing remained but a distant dream he couldn't quite grasp. She was gone and Luke vowed from that moment on he'd do everything within his power to resist dragging her memory into his daily existence. Strangely the decision didn't leave him feeling guilty like he thought it would. Charlie was right when she'd said that Susan would have wanted him to go on. He would have wanted the same thing for her had she been the one to survive.

The cry of a lone wolf in the distance reached Luke, and he got to his feet, instantly on alert. The howl was soon followed by the answering wails of the rest of the pack. They were too far away to be of any danger, yet he gave a shrill whistle for Lady to return. Like always he was surprised when she did. He supposed the day would come when the call of her own kind would be too strong to ignore.

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By the time he opened the cabin door the fire had burned low, leaving behind comfortable warmth. Through the dimness of the room his eyes sought out Charlie, finding her curled up on the couch beneath a quilt. As he removed his outerwear and his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could tell she'd fallen asleep. He should have insisted she use his bed, even though she was probably more comfortable on the couch than he would ever be.

He released a low breath of relief, glad he wouldn't have to face her again that night. As he made to pass the sofa, he halted to look down at her, giving in to the impulse to kiss her forehead. She moaned softly, tilting her face in sleep as she offered her lips up for a more satisfying kiss. His heart swelled and he hesitated only briefly before kissing her tenderly. The tiny smile that appeared on her mouth when he pulled back made Luke realize that he'd been fooling himself for believing he wasn't falling in love Charlie.

He was deeply in love with her.

The problem was, what was he going to do about it?

Charlie curled herself into a tight little ball, seeking warmth. Yet no matter what she did she couldn't seem to find any. She couldn't recall ever feeling so cold before. The generator along with the combined heat from the hearth usually kept the temperature cozy long after the fire had burned out. Now she found herself burrowing beneath the quilt for warmth, wishing she had more on top of her. She was frozen from her nose to her toes. And shivering so badly she was sure Luke could hear her teeth clatter.

From her hiding place she could hear the whistling of the wind outside. The eerie howling sound it made as it danced through the trees and reached the cabin door, almost demanding entry into the cabin to suck out any heat still hiding in the corners. She willed herself back to sleep, listening to the branches of the trees as they scraped against the side of the cabin in wild fury. The storm had apparently arrived.

"Charlie?"

She was too cold to move and still half asleep.

"Yes?" she mumbled beneath the covers.

"Come with me." Luke peeled the quilt away from her chilled body.

"I don't want to. It's too cold."

Her numb fingers curled into the quilt, refusing to let him pull it completely away from her. It at least offered her a little warmth.

"The generator's out, I won't be able to check it until morning. It's freezing in here. I've stoked the fire and made us a bed in front of it to keep warm." He gently but insistently took the blanket from her. "Come with me, sweetheart."

*Sweetheart.* The tender endearment caused a flutter of reaction in her belly. Too cold and too sleepy to argue, Charlie didn't care where Luke took her as long as it meant warmth. She moved into a sitting position, but before he let her leave the couch he slipped a pair of thick wool socks over her other ones. As he helped her to her feet she found a heavy flannel shirt placed around her shoulders.

"Slip your arms into this."



She did as she was told, focusing her blurry gaze on him. He'd built a roaring fire and she could see the flames dancing in the reflection of his eyes as he silently assisted her with the buttons.

"Thank you," she breathed softly, but all she received in response was the tightening of his jaw.

When Luke was done he turned and pointed her in the direction of the fireplace. Charlie had time to notice their bed as she made her way to it. Lady had been moved from her normal spot, which had now been converted into a bed with a thick, downy comforter followed by several layers of blankets, quilts and pillows. She could feel the welcoming heat of the fire as she moved closer to it. And eagerly sank down onto the nesting of blankets. Luke sank down next to her, and pulled the covers over them.

"The fire and our body heat will keep us warm."

*Body heat.* Charlie smiled and turned on her side, burrowing closer to him. At first Luke seemed stiff, but soon he relaxed until she was as close as she could get. She closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered before sleep claimed her was Luke's arm pulling her into the hollow provided by his body.

Charlie was warm as toast, caught between the fire and a source of intense heat. Gradually understanding became clear as the fog lifted. She recalled the reasons for waking on the floor in front of the fireplace, with a mountain of blankets on top of her and Luke's warm unyielding form behind her. A dreamy sigh escaped her. There was no denying the generous bulge of his cock where it was nestled against her bottom.

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She forced her eyes open and looked into the fire, wondering what time it was. She sensed it was still early. The cabin was cloaked in quiet darkness. The only noise Charlie heard was Luke's shallow breathing against her ear and the gentle snores coming from Lady. The howling wind she'd heard earlier had ceased, possibly indicating the storm had moved on, or was in a lull.

She closed her eyes again and willed herself back to sleep, too warm and comfortable against Luke in their makeshift bed. She didn't want to move, but sleep eluded her. Strangely enough Charlie found peace listening to his quiet breathing, but it was the steady beating of his strong heart that held her captivated. In his arms she felt safe and protected. *Loved.*

Images of their passionate lovemaking filled Charlie's mind, and she began to tingle in places Luke had made special. In spite of his rough, moody exterior he was a tender and thorough lover, convincing her that there was hope for him.

*For us*

She moved slightly. Was he conscious of their intimate position? Charlie decided to test his awareness by stretching against him. She'd felt his desire several times during the night, but so far he hadn't given any signs that he was weakening. *Was that a twitch?* Her body responded to the memory of being filled by him, and suddenly the material covering her pussy was drenched. She bit down on her lip to keep from groaning. But nothing could stop the desire speeding through her body, demanding to be satisfied in some way.

Someone To Love Me  
*by Tory Richards*

She couldn't stop the gentle teasing of her body, moving her buttocks up and down the front of his body. The rapid swelling she felt against her bottom warned Charlie that Luke's cock was stirring. A rush of excitement flooded her. She wanted him. And he wanted her.

Would that be enough?

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 19

"Are you awake?"

Luke's nostrils flared, taking in a faint yet pleasing fragrance. "I am now."

He was lying, he'd been awake most of the night and aware of the woman cuddled against him. He sucked in a deeper breath struggling to open his eyes, realizing his nose was pressed against the side of Charlie's neck. Soft, fragrant hair and the silken warmth of her skin was an arousing mixture that hit his senses full on.

His arm around her waist held her against him. Luke couldn't fool himself into thinking it was a natural reaction he'd had in his sleep, because he'd pulled her against him as soon as he'd crawled in next to her.

He clenched his teeth when she shifted slightly, but she only settled herself more fully against him. Rubbing her sexy ass against his cock until he couldn't pretend he was sleeping anymore. He was hard as stone now and Luke would like nothing better than to flip Charlie over and drag her beneath him.

"Stop wiggling, woman!" It was the exact opposite of what he wanted, but he could only stand so much of her teasing before he lost his patience.

"I'm sorry, are you uncomfortable?" Her voice was slightly throaty and a lot sexy, raking mercilessly over Luke's nerve endings. It warmed him more than any fire.

He swallowed a groan, praying for inner control. She'd done everything in her power to entice him during dinner the night before and he'd resisted by running away. But having Charlie in his arms now was testing his control.

*Why is it so difficult to ignore her*

That answer was easy. He knew it was a battle between mind and body. And right now his body was reminding him how good it felt fucking her. How alive and complete she made him feel.

The thought was never very far from Luke's tortured mind. When he lost himself in Charlie's warmth he felt renewed again. It wasn't just lust between two people fulfilling a need in each other. It was more complex than that.

She moved again, producing a surge of excitement through Luke's body which settled heavily in his gut. The breath hissed through his teeth in an effort to control the need to thrust his hips against her, but the fire racing through his blood demanded the opposite. If this was a continuation of her little seduction act from the night before, he knew he was in trouble.

Without warning Charlie sat up and started to unbutton the flannel shirt she was wearing. Luke's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"I'm roasting!" she whispered, not looking at him.

Luke didn't doubt it; he was fairly on fire, too.

She slipped off the shirt and tossed it aside. He quietly watched her movements, his gaze moving over the outline of her profile in the long johns she'd changed into before going to bed. Her nipples were hard against the clinging material,

poking out like little pebbles begging for attention beneath the knit top. When Charlie lay back down, the action gave Luke a tantalizing view of her breasts where the material parted. The rolling blast of heat enveloping his highly aroused body almost suffocated him.

"Aren't you hot?"

She surprised him by turning to face him, her sugar and spice tone anything but innocent. At that moment Luke knew by the brazen fire in her eyes that Charlie was in the same aroused state he was.

He refused to respond to her loaded question.

Charlie peered at him with bold desire in her soft, smoky eyes and a naivete on her face that touched him, bringing out his protective instincts. It dawned on Luke that she was scared too, as frightened of rejection, as he was of commitment.

As her long lashes swept over her eyes hiding them from his view, something untamed uncurled in Luke's gut, a need so strong that he was afraid for the first time. Afraid of what it meant and where it would take them.

"Aren't you?" she asked him again, in a voice laced with the means to bring a man to his knees.

Was he hot?

Hell yes, he was so hot that if she accidentally touched him in any way he was going to pounce on her like an animal in heat. His gaze fell to her breasts. His breath quickened. It took every ounce of strength he possessed not to reach forward and let his fingers dip into the deep cleavage to explore the satin-soft flesh.

When she finally touched him it was anything but accidentally. She reached up slowly, with uncharacteristic shyness and put her smooth palm against his cheek while gazing deeply into his eyes. When she wet her lips his hungry gaze fell to her mouth, unconsciously wetting his own in response. He was suddenly thirsty, his nostrils flared with excitement. He'd like nothing better than to taste Charlie's soft, inviting mouth and drink from the sweetness within. Knowing that she would quench his thirst as well as drain every essence from him. Contradicting his feelings he reached up and gently pulled her hand away from him.

"Charlie." His tone exposed the raw depths of his emotions. He wanted her so badly he was hurting with it. He didn't know how long he could continue to deny her or himself.

A long silence grew between them. Charlie waited patiently for Luke to make up his mind. His gaze traveled over her face, searching her eyes deeply, looking for answers to unasked questions. The sexual magnetism deepened between them until it was almost tangible. He surprised them both by turning her hand over and tenderly kissing the palm.

"What am I going to do about you?"

"What do you want to do about me?"

Charlie's soft whisper rolled over Luke like the softness of a woman's hands. A warm sensation rushed through him making him think about erotic fantasies that only she could fulfill.

"Why does this have to be so hard, Luke?" She stretched up until she could reach his mouth. "Can't we just enjoy each other and not be concerned with the future?"

Her kiss was light, almost chaste and just skimmed over Luke's open mouth like the flutter of a butterfly's wings. As she slowly pulled back his eyes followed her, noting the hunger simmering in those green depths. He leaned in to kiss her more deeply, however, Charlie escaped his searching mouth, and moved just out of reach. In spite of her words and actions of the evening before, it was clear she wasn't going to make it easy for him. She wanted him hungry.

"Damn you!" Frustration made his tone come out harsh. "You make it hard to resist you, Charlie. What do you want from me?"

"Nothing more than you're willing to give."

Their eyes held for a moment before Luke groaned low in his throat and lowered his head. He took that teasing little mouth of hers in a kiss that answered the growing need in his tightly coiled body. His arms crushed Charlie to him as she opened her mouth eagerly, inviting his tongue to mate with hers. And when he pulled her easily on top of his body, his mouth devoured her softness while his hands seared a pleasure-giving path down her back and buttocks. And further still, to her quivering thighs before coming back up again.

She arched her hips against his cock, unable to disguise her body's obvious reaction when he slipped his hands under the waistband of her long johns. He began kneading the pliant flesh until she was gasping and twisting impatiently. Luke felt like a rocket getting ready to launch, drowning in the volley of



sensations exploding through his body. His control snapped when her hands began to roam over his body with bold abandon, bringing the animal in him to the surface.

His heart hammered fiercely, the blood surged in his veins like a river out of control. Luke continued to knead and caress Charlie through her clothes, but he yearned for her naked flesh. The lust firing his blood caused him to twist his hand in her hair. He pulled her head back and arched her throat to his attacking mouth. His tongue traced a long, sweeping path down to the swell of her breast, dipping snake like into the deep cleavage there.

Charlie whimpered softly, her movements encouraging Luke to find other avenues of pleasure. His hand moved between her legs, finding her damp and hot.

"Luke!"

Her body opened to him like a flower blossoming beneath the sun, allowing his finger to flick over the cloth covering her clit. She trembled violently. Her eyes bolted open, she gazed hungrily into his. He smiled down at her and continued his administrations until she was wild. Before long her hips were thrusting against his finger.

"Luke!"

She released a small scream and clutched him to her. The sound of rushed excitement in her voice and the way her body bowed told him she was climaxing.

The degree to which Charlie responded to his touch stunned Luke and turned him mad with desire. Her body was still clenched in the throes of ecstasy when he reached forward. He hooked his index finger between her breasts and

swept it downward in one violent movement. The snaps gave way and her breasts spilled free, dangling like prized trophies before his glazed eyes. It didn't take much effort to lean forward and latch his mouth around a rose-colored crown.

Like heaven, it was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, prompting him to suckle until it was as hard as sweet candy in his mouth. When he moved to the other one, Charlie reached between their bodies and gently caressed his cock. Her fingers searched for and found the opening, slipping inside to release him. Luke's hips shot off the floor, arching the lower half of his body against her pleasure-giving hand.

In a split second he reversed their positions and followed Charlie down until she was nestled deeply into the blankets that made up their love nest. His hands moved to the waistband of her bottoms. He rolled them down her hips and thighs until she was able to raise her legs enough for him to slip them all the way off. Her aroused body blossomed beneath Luke. He slanted his mouth over hers for a passionate kiss and slipped his finger into her wet pussy. She cried out against his mouth in a feverish pitch, her hands moving over his body with an impatient eagerness to expose the explosive currents racing through her.

"Not enough," she gasped against his lips. "Please...it's not enough. Love me, Luke."

Her impassioned plea penetrated the heavy fog of desire ruling Luke's overcharged senses. Rearing back he met her eyes, finally understanding what she was saying. A brief moment of panic and doubt at what he was doing held him frozen, so brief that he convinced himself he imagined it.

Suddenly nothing mattered but the woman twisting beneath him. Luke knew at that moment that he wanted Charlie more than he would ever want anything else in his life.

He entered her body in one smooth plunge, groaning weakly with the sheer pleasure that engulfed him when her inner heat sheathed him tightly. Trapped inside her body Charlie arched wildly beneath him, clenching her muscles around his cock like a hungry beast. Gasping, she reached forward and slipped her hands under his shirt, and ran them over the hard contours of his chest.

Luke struggled to hold back, but Charlie's nails raked his flesh in a gentle sharpening that sent a new rush of lust through his blood. A rolling firestorm began low in his gut, warning him he was releasing his control. Before he knew it he was pulling back and slamming into her in rapid succession.

"Oh, God...Charlie..."

He wanted to prolong the final moment as long as he could, but it was hard ignoring the sweet tempo that bound their bodies together. They were in exquisite harmony with one another. When Charlie trailed teasing fingers over his ultrasensitive nipples, the pleasure that gripped Luke was pure and explosive, ending their tempestuous ride.

As a powerful orgasm rocked his body Charlie clung to him like a woman about to lose her life preserver, gasping for breath as she rode out the wave. Their hearts pounded as one, matching rhythms as currents of pleasure washed over them again and again.

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When the spasms gradually calmed Luke slowly relaxed against Charlie. She released a deep satisfied sigh and flung her arms outward in what he could only assume was total, blissful exhaustion.

Luke carefully slid off her, kicking the covers from his overheated body. He welcomed the cold air that rushed over him, willing his body under control. As he sucked in gulps of air, his mind raced with the ramifications of what had just happened. Honest enough to admit that if he had a chance to live the last half-hour over again he wouldn't change a damn thing.

He was worn out trying to fight Charlie. Tired of fighting the chemistry between them. He was tired of lying to himself and to her that he didn't need anyone. He was tired of ignoring the truth that she'd managed to get under his skin and into his heart.

Most of all, he was tired of pushing her away.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 20

Contentment such as she'd never known gripped Charlie in the wake of making love with Luke. Happiness because she sensed something significant had taken place between them, something much more intimate than the sharing of their bodies. Their relationship had reached a turning point. There was an acceptance in Luke that hadn't been there before.

*Does he love me like I love him?*

She knew it was too soon to tell. Instinct warned her that he'd pull away if she pressed him too soon.

She lay listening to their labored breathing until it gradually slowed and the cabin became quiet again. Luke's arm was curled around Charlie, still trapped beneath her waist and a small gasp escaped her when he effortlessly pulled her back on top of him. She didn't resist when he closed his mouth over hers and kissed her hard and deeply. Their eyes met and clung after the passionate kiss ended. It had been much too brief to suit Charlie.

"Again?" she teased in a husky whisper, her words brushing against his parted mouth.

Luke's hands tenderly brushed the hair out of her face, his gaze moving with interest over her until the one-word question finally penetrated his thoughts. He realized what she was implying. There was no denying the teasing light in her eyes.

"Are you trying to kill me?" In spite of his inquiry he kissed the tip of Charlie's nose, at the same time running his hands

down her back. "I need a little more downtime," he admitted in a sexy, bedroom drawl.

Charlie kissed his chin. "How much downtime?" She was curious, that was all.

"I've never had to think about it before." His grin was endearing. "Half-hour?"

Charlie smiled with wicked intentions until his warm palms cupped her naked buttocks. She closed her eyes and moaned loudly with pleasure.

"Pity," she whispered shamelessly.

Luke's body shook with an inward laugh. His long fingers tickled up and down her thighs until she was squirming with something more than desire.

"I'll see what I can do about your, ah, disappointment in a few minutes. If I can't get the generator back up, we might have to produce our own heat." His meaning was obvious.

Charlie leaned back so she could meet his smiling eyes. "How would we do that, rub two sticks together?"

Luke didn't miss a beat. "I was thinking more about rubbing two bodies together."

This time Charlie kissed him, ending it by tugging his bottom lip inside her mouth and pulling on it. She ran her tongue behind it, gently nibbling like a hungry cat.

"I think we have that covered." Luke's hands were still caressing the backs of her legs. She shivered with renewed desire and laid her head down. His heartbeat was strong and calming beneath her ear.

"Are you cold?"

How quickly his tone went from playful to concern. His hand automatically reached for the discarded blanket to pull it over them, even though Charlie shook her head no.

"Are you kidding? If I were any hotter I'd set the blankets on fire," she mumbled against his chest. "That was a shudder of lust rippling over me," she said, her lips twitching with amusement at her brazenness.

"Really?" he asked in mock amazement. "Can you do that again?"

His fingers had been teasing Charlie's flesh earlier, but now his hands were smoothing over her with definite purpose. Slow and lingering sweeps that became more intense as the seconds passed, designed to ignite the fire simmering between them.

"I'll try but I'm not making any promises." She closed her eyes and fought for a serious tone. "I'll have to concentrate really hard."

Who was she kidding? As soon as she felt Luke's exploring fingers dip into the sensitive spot pulsing between her thighs a volcano erupted inside her. In spite of her inner turmoil, she forced her hand to travel slowly up Luke's body before coming to rest against the defined muscles of his chest. Her finger absentmindedly toyed with a nipple. When her nail raked across it she felt the smallest flicker of movement against her, smiling with confidence over her power to turn him on. She continued to torture his nipple by leaning over and giving it a quick, hard flick of her tongue.

Without warning Luke's hand curled in her hair and he forced her up to meet his invading lips. His kiss sent the pit of

her stomach into a whirlwind of desire. Her growing hunger for him reached mammoth proportions in record time catching Charlie by surprise. The blood in her veins began to boil, driving her to push her lover in the same aggressive direction.

Her body was alive against him, every movement designed to give pleasure as well as receive. Their kiss turned hot and lusty. Charlie's hands moved over Luke's body, reaching him wherever she could while trying to convey a silent message that she wanted him again. *Needed him*

He ended the passionate kiss by putting his hands against her waist and lifting her slightly until he could reach one of her swaying breasts. She shuddered delicately against him when his hot mouth closed over her nipple, humming like a contented feline when his teeth gently raked the hard crown in loving worship.

Her hips unconsciously rotated against his as he went on to lavish attention to her other nipple until she was trembling with uncontrollable desire. When he was done he brought her down so he could reach her lips for another soul-searching kiss. His hands roamed up and down the silken flesh of her backside, the calluses on his palms adding extra stimulation and heat to her already overloaded senses. His caresses lingered where they needed to, dipped and explored between her buttocks and thighs. Fingers flicked across the swollen bud of her desire, fueling her actions to reciprocate the pleasures.

Her hands loved him by smoothing down his sides and over his lean hips to his hard, muscular thighs and back up



again. Her fingertips tantalized his flesh until it rippled beneath her touch. She reached between them and tangled her fingers in the pajama bottoms Luke was wearing, pulling away in frustration.

"I want you naked!" Charlie gasped impatiently. It occurred to her that she'd never seen him completely naked.

Luke growled something low and rough, but before she could move he reached up and took hold of the open folds of her top. He smoothed it over her shoulders before tossing it aside. Only then did he allow Charlie to slip off him. He lay there, panting, his smoldering eyes focused on her as she moved to his waist. He watched her carefully as she brazenly rolled his pajama bottoms down his long legs.

For a breathless moment they were both frozen. Charlie's eyes moved over Luke's nakedness with slow deliberation, taking in what until now she'd only been able to touch with her hands in blind worship. Her gaze took in the scars that marred his left leg, how they twisted along his powerful thigh like a coiling snake before stopping at his hip. Puckered flesh that would forever be a reminder of what he'd endured and lost. In Charlie's mind the scars only made him more attractive, more dangerous.

There was no denying the hard power of his magnificent form, some of that strength she'd already experienced. Nor the well-defined muscles that drew her eyes over him with awe, appreciation, and not the least bit disappointment. And right now Charlie wanted to appreciate Luke with her hands and mouth. The first thing she did was touch his thigh, using inquisitive fingertips that were tender and caring.

"You're magnificent." Her tone revealed her awe as her eyes worshiped his body. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

Luke held his breath, the muscle in his thigh flexing beneath Charlie's light touch. He knew what the scars looked like. They were puckered and ugly, uneven furrows, but to him they were a welcome sight considering that at the time the doctors had wanted to amputate his leg. He knew what the deeply ridged flesh felt like. However, no one, with the exception of his doctors, had ever seen or touched the scars before now.

He was bone-hard with wanting Charlie, his cock jutting straight up, yet her interest lay with exploring the suffering he lived with. Her fingertips trailed a tingling path along the furrows until she leaned forward to kiss him where the wound began, just below his knee. She continued to kiss her way up his leg, changing tactics about mid-thigh and allowing her tongue to take over the sensual journey.

Luke groaned low in his throat and closed his eyes, almost losing control then and there. He didn't know how much he could take, receiving his answer when Charlie's sweet mouth closed over his pulsing flesh.

*Sweet mother of God*

His body jerked as a spasm engulfed him, so sweet and hot that he couldn't stand it. Against his will his hips bucked upward, forcing his torrid flesh further into the pleasure of Charlie's warm mouth. In seconds the sweet rush of an orgasm spiraled through his body.

"No!" His eyes bolted open and he grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to break contact by pulling her up his body. "I want to be inside you when I come. I want to see your face."

She caught her breath, and allowed his hands to guide her over his body until he could lift her above his erection. Automatically bracing her palms against his chest, he slowly lowered her onto him. With a sigh of obvious surrender, Charlie leaned forward and kissed him. The heavy cloak of her hair fell on either side of her, creating a silken veil around them. For a moment time stood still as they savored a deeply pleasurable kiss.

Shivers of ecstasy raced over Luke and left him alive and pulsing. He wanted so much more. As if a silent message passed between them, he began to move, keeping his hands clenched at Charlie's waist to guide their movements. She sat back, arched her body tautly, panting through parted rosy lips. Luke captured the wonder in her eyes. Moving faster, wilder, in a tempo that matched and bound them together, he took them closer and higher to the ultimate completion.

Under Luke's watchful gaze, Charlie's hands came up to cup her full breasts. The sight of her massaging those swollen mounds and tweaking the engorged nipples was all it took to send him over the edge. He welcomed the telltale ball of fire rolling through his body, traveling at a rapid speed to his pounding cock.

With a low grunt of freedom, Luke let loose the burst of sensation demanding release, holding Charlie's quivering body tightly against him for the final deep thrust.

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## Chapter 21

Luke watched a buck in his prime disappear into the woods before grabbing his ax and turning his attention back to what he was doing. He wondered how long the animal had been standing there watching him before he frightened it away. It wasn't the first time he'd stepped outside his door to surprise one of the many creatures that made their home close to his.

He brought the ax down splitting the first log neatly in two sections. It was a good thing they'd had a stockpile of extra wood the night before. With the generator out they'd certainly used it. He was thankful when he checked it in the morning to find that it had only run out of gas. That was a first, which only showed Luke where his mind was these days. Focused way too much on one green-eyed, auburn-haired beauty with a knockout body.

Luke paused for a moment and let his mind dwell upon Charlie. Thinking about her warmed his blood. They needed to talk. Their relationship had reached a point where it needed to be resolved one way or another. When he woke for the second time that morning with her naked body curled into his, he'd accepted the knowledge that he cared deeply for her.

He released a white cloud of cold air and narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun on the snow. Off into the distance a tiny object in the sky caught his immediate attention. Luke couldn't hear anything and at this distance it could be a hawk. Something churned in his gut when he could finally make out that it was a chopper coming their way.

Within minutes it reached the break in the trees and Luke's cabin.

It hovered directly over them, as low as the pilot dared to bring it without bringing the blades too close to the trees. There was no way it could land anywhere near his cabin. Luke shielded his eyes from the sun and glanced up, recognizing the pilot through the glass as someone from the rescue crew in town. There were two other people in the chopper with him. One was wearing a uniform and the other was in civilian clothes.

Luke acknowledged them with a wave. Then watched as the pilot dropped something to the ground within feet of him. It was a wood box with the kind of top that slid open and inside it he found a note. He opened it and read the single hand-written question, an inquiry that left him feeling as though someone was squeezing the breath from his lungs.

*Is Charlie Wayne with you*

The note said to wave once for no and twice for yes. He hesitated, knowing what he wanted to do but ignored the feeling, knowing what he had to do. He glanced up at the occupants and waved twice and waited. To his amazement a rope ladder was tossed from the chopper and then one of the men, the one in civilian clothes, began to climb down haphazardly. It was a gutsy yet dangerous thing to do considering the distance to the ground and the unsteady swaying of the ladder.

Luke moved out of the way as the man neared the end of the ladder, realizing he'd have to jump the last few feet. Surprisingly he landed on his feet and with a thumbs up

gesture to the men in the chopper turned to Luke. He held out his hand.

"I'm Steve Benton!" he shouted over the noise of the chopper as it hovered over them briefly before turning away.

"Luke Remington."

Luke returned the handshake. His gaze moved briefly over the other man. The resemblance between him and Charlie couldn't be clearer. He was looking into a mirror image of her eyes. This was one of her brothers.

"Where's Charlie? Is she all right?" Steve was slightly out of breath, a huge grin on his face in spite of the seriousness of his question.

Luke had the distinct impression that no matter what he told Steve, he wouldn't be happy until he actually saw her and could determine for himself that she was all right.

"She's fine, survived the crash without a scratch."

The ramification of Steve's presence suddenly dawned on Luke. She'd survived without a mark, but was he going to survive this? They walked toward the door.

"We saw your note at the top of the flagpole. That was a damn smart thing you did," Steve said with a grin.

"I saw a plane flying over the area the other day," Luke admitted. "I went back to leave a marker, worried Charlie had missed her chance to get out of here."

"No chance of that," Steve said. "I made the pilot search every area twice before we moved on. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that marker the second time around."

"Smart decision."

Luke prayed he didn't open the door to find Charlie curled up in the blankets naked on the floor where he'd left her.

Steve nodded. "We had to wait for the storm to pass over before we could come back with a chopper today. When I read your note that Charlie was okay..." He choked with emotion, glancing away long enough to pull himself together.

"You were able to land at the site?" Luke didn't believe it.

Steve shook his head negative. "Lowered the ladder, got close enough to reach it at the end of the flagpole." Something in Luke's expression must have given him away because Steve went on to add, "Used to be a Marine." He grinned. "Do you know where Cutter Pass is?"

Luke nodded, already suspecting what Steve was going to say next. "About two miles north of here."

Steve bobbed his head with satisfaction. "That's what the pilot said. They'll be back tomorrow to pick us up at noon. That's the closest place near here where they can land safely."

Luke acknowledged his comment with a brief dip of his head. That didn't leave much time for him and Charlie. He reached for the doorknob. His gaze landed on her the moment he opened the door. She was just emerging from the bathroom. Their eyes met briefly before she halted dead in her tracks. Her gaze widened with stunned disbelief as they moved past him to where her brother stood.

"Steven!"

She was galvanized into action, and rushed to her brother with a look of pure happiness on her freshly washed face. Her



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eyes were brimming with tears by the time his arms closed around her. He squeezed her as though he'd never let her go.

"What are you doing here? How did you get here?" Her words were muffled against his jacket as she yielded to the heavy sobs that shook her body.

"As soon as we were informed your plane went down, I flew to Tall Pines to join in the search." There was a slight wavering in Steve's tone that revealed the depth of his emotion. A suspicious sheen appeared in his eyes that he tried in vain to blink back. "A chopper just dropped me off a few minutes ago. They'll be back for both of us tomorrow."

Still clinging to him, Charlie asked, "Why didn't they stay?"

"They couldn't land here, honey. Not enough room."

Luke stood silently by, witnessing the emotional exchange between Charlie and Steve and decided they needed some time alone. Without a word he turned and exited the cabin, quietly closing the door firmly behind him.

Charlie leaned far enough back to look her brother in the eyes. "Mom and Dad, are they all right?"

"They're holding up, honey. Scott and Alison are keeping them company," he said, setting off another river of tears.

"I've caused everyone so much pain," she said, her slender shoulders shaking.

"Nonsense." He ushered her toward the sofa. "They'll be okay, especially once the chopper crew radio in that you've been found alive. You were lucky, sis. I saw what was left of your plane a couple days ago. The storm has covered it with snow now, but Luke's marker was still visible."

Charlie sat down on the couch because it suddenly seemed that's what Steven wanted her to do. She looked up at him with watery eyes, watching him shrug out of his jacket. "You can thank Luke I'm still alive. If he hadn't found me and brought me here..."

Steve started to drape his coat over the back of a chair, until he noticed the hooks on the back of the door. He tossed it onto one before joining Charlie on the couch. Their hands linked automatically. His eyes searched hers.

"Brotherly intuition tells me there's a lot more to this story than what you're confessing."

Charlie chose to ignore his comment. Now wasn't the time to reveal what her relationship was with Luke.

"I can't believe you're here."

His eyes smiled down at her. "It's not a dream, sis. By this time tomorrow, we'll be in Tall Pines and home."

*Home.* The meaning behind Steven's words penetrated Charlie's elation at seeing him and threatened to destroy her newfound happiness with Luke. Her gaze unconsciously sought him out, knowing he must have left so they could have some privacy. Charlie didn't realize how transparent her expression was until her gaze returned to her brother. His eyes were on her intently, his big brother face was on but he remained silent. She took a deep breath.

"I love him, Steven," she said simply, rising to her feet. "Come on and I'll fix you something warm to drink. Are you hungry?"

"No." He followed her to the counter that divided the small kitchen space, sitting down on a barstool. "Does he feel the same way?"

"Yes." Her eyes met his, glistening with good humor. "Only he's afraid to admit it."

"Charlie, I don't want you to get hurt, honey," he said, his voice laced with caution.

"Steven," she mimicked, in the process of taking out some mugs. She stopped what she was doing and turned to make eye contact with him. "You must know by now that you can't go through life without getting hurt. And we pick up the pieces and go on, don't we?"

Charlie reached over the counter and placed her hand over his. The action forced him to raise his eyes.

"You've always been there for me, but I'm a big girl, Steven, and I don't need either one of my big brothers waiting in the wings, ready to rush in to the rescue at the first sign of trouble."

She was thankful that Scott had a wife and a career, but Steven had managed to avoid both challenges in life. Whether it was by choice or simply fate, the things most people reached for in their lives like mortgages and a family eluded him. When he wasn't off doing whatever it was he was doing, he stayed close to home dividing his time between his two siblings and their parents. When Robin had been alive he'd been a doting uncle. She thought about the baby Allison was expecting, glad he'd have that chance again.

"You don't have to lecture me, little sister." His boyish grin returned, softening the hard expression on his handsome

face. He accepted the mug of cocoa she held his way, cautiously taking a sip. "Why didn't you tell anyone you were flying to Tall Pines?"

Charlie sat down next to him. "It was a last-minute decision to fly home and surprise Mom and Dad on their anniversary." Her eyes met his over the rim of her cup. "I know it was foolish of me not to call anyone."

The door opened and they both swung Luke's way, watching as he and Lady entered the cabin. He paused in the threshold, his gaze meeting Charlie's briefly, as if trying to gauge whether or not she still needed time alone with her brother. He removed his coat. As he walked by the hearth his eyes dropped to the untidy bundle of comforters and blankets on the floor. Charlie's gaze darted to her brother. She felt her cheeks become warm when his went from Luke's to hers.

"My family and I can't thank you enough, Luke, for everything you've done for Charlie. She says she owes you her life."

"It was my pleasure." Luke accepted the mug Charlie pushed across the counter toward him.

She wondered if Steven noticed the subtle innuendo in Luke's response. Or was it her imagination? Their eyes met, lingering.

"You look hungry." Her smile was meant to set him at ease.

Luke choked on his coffee, and quickly glanced at Steve, who wisely looked in the other direction. Charlie frowned, looking back and forth between them until she realized the double meaning behind her innocent words.

"I mean, what would you like?"

Luke leaned forward to rest his elbows on the counter and peered at Charlie over the rim of his cup. His eyes were laughing at her.

"You're only digging yourself into a deeper hole, honey."

"To eat," she plunged on.

Steve finally cleared his throat. "I'd stop while I was ahead, sis."

It surprised her to see Steven and Luke exchange amused glances.

"You men are all alike!"

She turned away from them with a nervous smile, feeling happy and sad at the same time. Needing a moment to compose herself, Charlie walked to the kitchen window and turned the radio on low. She crossed her arms, vaguely listening to the low drone of the men's voices as they got to know each other.

It was snowing again. Charlie wondered if it meant another storm like the one they had the night before. One thing was certain, if the generator went out again there wouldn't be a pair of strong arms to keep her warm before the fire. She couldn't see Luke offering her the heat of his body with her brother in the same room.

The only thing Charlie was sure of was that she and Luke needed to talk before she left. She wasn't going to leave there without knowing where they stood. Moreover, she owed it to Luke to be honest with him about how she felt.

She turned toward the refrigerator and took out the package of frozen fish, thinking about dinner. It was going to be a long night.

And a lonely one.

Later that evening Charlie lay staring up at the ceiling, listening to the howling wind outside the tiny window above her head. Luke had given her his bed and was making use of the sofa below, while Steven slept in front of the hearth. It was sheer torture lying there with her nose pressed against his pillow, breathing in his warm, comforting scent, which kept thoughts of him in her head that prevented her from sleep. She closed her eyes tightly, mild arousal flowing through her body. She wished fervently that he were there beside her.

They had little time left together. Leaving him was going to be difficult, but if she left knowing he loved her it would be almost bearable. But who was she kidding? She didn't want to leave Luke at all. If he gave her any indication he didn't want her to leave, she'd let Steven fly out of here alone the next day.

A small sound from downstairs penetrated her musings. She sat up. The fact that Lady hadn't stirred from her usual resting place calmed her concerns. She could only guess that it was either Luke or Steven moving about.

When she heard the sound again she quickly pulled the covers back and left the bed, rushing to the rail to peer over the side. The room was illuminated by the soft glow of the fire, revealing her brother sleeping soundly in his improvised bed, with Lady not far away. The sofa was empty.

She didn't think twice about what she was doing and quietly made her way down the ladder. When she reached the bottom she took a moment to glance over at Steven, satisfied when she heard his soft snores. Her gaze moved about the cabin in search of Luke, but the glow of the fire didn't reach the far corners of the cabin.

"Luke?" she whispered softly, instincts taking her toward the kitchen.

"I'm here," he responded softly.

Charlie's gaze followed his voice, barely able to make out his shadowy form in the darkness. As she moved closer to his silhouette, her eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom and she could see he was leaning back against his chair with his feet propped up on the opposite one. On the table in front of him was the outline of a bottle and a couple glasses.

"You couldn't sleep either?" Charlie purposely kept her voice low so it wouldn't reach her brother.

"Something like that."

His too-quiet tone seemed unapproachable, almost hostile to Charlie. She watched him raise his arm and knew he was taking a drink. The telltale noise that followed revealed when he'd set the glass back on the table.

She stopped close and leaned against the counter across from him. She was unable to make out his expression, but didn't need to see his face to sense that something was very wrong. Fear that he'd relapsed back into his old self twisted like a knife in her heart.

"Are you all right?"

"Yep."

His clipped remark was tight and made through clenched teeth. Charlie got the impression he was about to explode. Concern overrode caution and she moved toward him without hesitation.

"Luke, what is it? What's happened?" She raised her hand toward him.

He turned on her before she had a chance to draw another breath, dropping his feet to the floor and scraping his chair back at the same time while rising to tower over her. Charlie stepped back, suddenly finding herself braced against the counter again.

"*You're* what happened, Charlie. For three years I've lived alone here, content with my life, not missing a damn thing because there was nothing out there worth missing. And then you drop from the sky. Invading my home and my heart with your tenderness and quiet strength, your loving ways, making me remember the things I lost."

Luke's words were harsh and full of emotion, yet he was in control enough to keep his voice down so it wouldn't carry to the other room. He'd lowered his face close to hers, the heat of his breath fanned Charlie's face. She stared up at him, unable to speak.

"Thanks to you I want those things again." He paused long enough to take a deep breath. "Damn you..."

"Luke." Charlie raised her hands and flattened her palms against his chest, tears building in her eyes. There was no denying the hope in her tone when she asked, "Do you want me to stay?"

"Hell no, I'm sorry you ever came into my life."



He curled an arm around Charlie's waist and jerked her against him. She caught her breath as he lowered his head and kissed her roughly, thoroughly. His actions made him out to be a liar. Struggling didn't enter her mind. She opened herself up to him, welcoming his possession with a passion that matched his.

He loved her, nothing would convince her otherwise. Why couldn't he admit it? As their tongues mated Charlie felt tears slip down her cheeks, and finally reach their mouths, becoming part of their kiss. As though realizing what he was doing, Luke's kiss turned tender. Then he pulled back.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Charlie." He led her to the table, but instead of directing her to the other chair he sat down and pulled her onto his lap. "Don't cry, baby. God don't cry. I can take anything but that."

She curled naturally into Luke's embrace and leaned her head against his shoulder with a sob that couldn't be contained.

"Are you really sorry I came into your life?"

He cupped the side of her face before running his fingers through the loose hair over her ear.

"God, no." There was a slight trembling in his hands. "I'm going to dream about this hair for a long time to come."

Didn't he realize what he'd just admitted? Charlie pulled back, meeting the glittering of his gaze head on in the darkness.

"I have something to tell you." Her whisper sounded overly loud in the darkness.

"What's that, baby?"

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"I love you."

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 22

Everything in Luke froze.

For a second he was tempted to tell her how he felt, but paralyzing fear kept him silent. He had nothing to offer Charlie, other than a humble home and a quiet life. He knew he couldn't compete with her loving family or her singing career. He'd let her go tomorrow and deal with the loss later.

"You what?"

Maybe he hadn't heard her correctly. Maybe he'd drunk more whiskey than he thought, and it was just beginning to dull his senses.

"I love you." Her tone was soft and fragile.

Luke hadn't heard anyone say those words to him in a long time. He couldn't help wondering if Charlie actually believed she loved him, or if out of some sort of misplaced gratitude she just thought she loved him. It occurred to him she was patiently waiting for his response. She loved him, it was more than he could have hoped or prayed for. Yet the words she wanted to hear remained stuck in his throat, choking him.

He knew if he told Charlie he loved her too, everything would change after that. She'd probably insist on staying with him. He didn't want to come between her and doing the right thing and the right thing was for her to return home with her brother in the morning.

"Charlie, I don't deserve you." Luke lowered his chin on top of her head, and released a long breath.

"You haven't exactly told me what your feelings are." She raised her hand and tenderly traced the line of his cheekbone and jaw with her fingertips.

Their conversation was too important to interrupt with a kiss; still, he couldn't help thinking about her mouth and the havoc it wreaked. He turned his face to capture her teasing fingers with his lips.

"Actions speak louder than words." The husky tone of his voice indicated what he was feeling.

Luke felt Charlie's grin against his hand. "I know you want my body."

"That's enough for now."

Luke cringed at his own words. He didn't mean them the way they came out. Charlie wasn't about to let him get away with his comment, either.

"Not good enough, Mr. Remington." She closed the distance between them, finding his mouth instinctively with her own.

Someone groaned, the sound seeming overloud against the stark silence. What started out as a chaste kiss turned into something demanding and hot, claiming them both in a whirlpool of rocking emotions. Luke's arms crushed Charlie to him as he accepted her surrender. They both released a little sound of protest when she pulled away.

"We've been through so much." She kissed the corner of his mouth, but pulled away when Luke turned his face to capture her lips again. "We owe it to ourselves to be honest with each other. Why are the words so hard for you to find,

Luke? What are you afraid of? That I'm leaving and never coming back?"

"You're right about us being honest with each other." He forced Charlie's head back down to his shoulder. "You managed to wiggle your way into my life. You brought me back to life, but please don't expect me to say things I'm not ready to say, Charlie. Maybe in time..."

"Fear is the only thing holding you back from saying those things."

She was right. Before Luke had the chance to admit it she nuzzled her nose against his neck and breathed in deeply.

"You know what? I could spend the rest of the night right here on your lap. You're very comfortable." There was laughter in her voice, as well as telltale signs of drowsiness.

"That may be, but I don't think it would be a very good idea. And I don't want to wake up in the morning and have to contend with your angry brother."

"I could get used to sleeping in your arms." She wiggled her bottom against him.

Remembering their fireside bed the night before, he wished fiercely that Steve wasn't asleep in the other room.

"I doubt we'd get much sleep." He groaned low which only prompted her to continue her persistent movements. "Stop that!" He gave her ear a tug with his teeth, but it was too late because his body was already betraying him.

"Are you two ever going to bed?"

They both started at the sound of Steve's unexpected voice coming at them from out of the shadows. Charlie

jumped guiltily off Luke's lap when her brother's dark silhouette materialized as he moved toward them.

"Steven. We, ah, were just about to go to bed."

"That's good. For a minute there I thought you intended to spend the night on Luke's lap. It's two o'clock in the morning you know."

"Oh. We, ah..."

Luke took pity on Charlie. "Sorry if we woke you."

"It wasn't you two, but that dog of yours. She snores and I woke up to find her snuggled against my backside a little too close for comfort."

"That's because you're in her spot," Charlie said. "And that dog is a wolf. If you two will excuse me, I'm off to bed." She kissed Steven on the cheek on her way past. "Goodnight, brother dear."

"See you in the morning, sis."

Luke's eyes followed Charlie's dark form as she made her way to the ladder and climbed up to his bed.

"You and Charlie seem to have gotten close in a relatively short span of time," Steve commented after Charlie disappeared.

There was no denying the concern in his tone. Luke couldn't fault him for that. He'd act the same way if the situation were reversed. He motioned to the bottle in front of him.

"Don't mind if I do." Steve reached for the extra glass next to the bottle and turned it right side up so Luke could fill it.

"You don't have to worry about me, Steve. I'm not going to hurt Charlie by telling her I love her just to keep her here in my bed."

Luke could tell Steve didn't like what he'd said, his brows rose high above his forehead as his eyes rounded.

"Do you love her?" he demanded in a hard voice. "Or have you been taking advantage of her just to while away the time?"

Luke scraped back his chair and jumped to his feet, his hands tightening into fists with anger. But before he could act on the insult flung his way, Steve held up his hands as though to fend him off.

"Relax, man. That was uncalled for, I apologize. I just wanted to see what your reaction would be."

"You like to live dangerously," Luke retorted, slowly sitting back down. "I hope I didn't disappoint you."

Luke saw a flash of white teeth, a clear indication that Steven was smiling.

"Not at all. Your reaction indicates to me that you care for my sister."

Luke clenched his teeth, refusing to acknowledge Steve's remark in any way. It was none of his business.

"That realization will keep me from having to beat you up."

Luke studied Steve silently for a moment, trying to figure the other man out. Then all at once a smile simultaneously broke out on both their faces. It had been a hollow threat.

"Do you mind my asking what your intentions are toward Charlie? I don't want to see her hurt."

Luke swallowed his first response. Telling him to mind his own business would only bring about an argument he wasn't in the mood for.

"I can understand that. You'll just have to trust me."

"That's it, that's all you're giving me?" Steve said in astonishment.

"Charlie's flying home with you tomorrow, that's more than I'm getting," Luke shot back, his tone rising with anger before he forced himself to calm down. It wasn't Steve's fault he was hung up about divulging his true feelings to Charlie.

"If Charlie's flying home with me tomorrow, it's because you haven't asked her to stay," Steve guessed accurately.

"And I'm not going to either. Charlie has a family. She has a life off this mountain. It wouldn't be fair to ask her to give all that up for this."

"Don't you think that's for Charlie to decide? I love my sister and want her to return with me tomorrow, but more than that I want to see her happy again."

Luke decided it was time to end their conversation. He thought about the woman in his bed, the urge to go to her and tell her everything she wanted to hear so powerful that he grabbed the bottle in front of him and filled his glass. Maybe he could drink himself into a drunken sleep.

Steve must have sensed his thoughts because he finished his drink and stood with a yawn. "There's a couple hours left before daybreak, I think I'll try and get some more shuteye."

*Good idea.* As Steve walked away Luke drained his glass, welcoming the slow burn flowing straight to his belly.



It gave him something else to think about...for a little while anyway.

Hours later the aroma of fresh coffee drifted up to Charlie and beckoned her to slip into a pair of long johns and go below. A girlish chuckle escaped her when her gaze lit on Steven and Lady. Apparently neither one had won the desired spot in front of the fire and had given up to share it. Steven was asleep on his stomach, snoring softly and Lady was lying next to him with her head on his shoulder.

Her eyes automatically went to the sofa, finding it empty, before darting in the direction of the kitchen in search of Luke. He was taking a sip of coffee and their eyes met instantly. With a lazy morning smile on her face, she walked toward him, swaying her hips in an exaggerated bounce that produced a smile of amusement on his face. He continued to sip his coffee, his eyes dropping down her body in a long, slow sweep. Her eyes traveled over his powerful form. She grew warm inside. Luke took her breath away.

"Good morning," she breathed, making her way to him.

His only response was a brief nod of acknowledgment as he continued to stare at her over the rim of his cup.

"You have exactly what I want." His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Coffee." Charlie pried the cup from his fingers and took a cautious sip.

"What do I get?" His mouth quirked at the corners with humor.

"For starters, a good-morning kiss." She set the cup down on the counter and melted into his arms, turning her face up to his.

Luke didn't need any coaxing. His arm slipped around her waist to hold her close.

"Did you get any sleep?"

"Some. What about you?" Charlie teased him with a sweep of her tongue across his sensuous bottom lip.

Spreading his thighs, Luke fit Charlie against him. In a few hours they'd be leaving to make the rendezvous with the search and rescue team, they'd be saying goodbye. Only now it seemed he wanted to keep her as close to him as decently possible.

"I slept great in your bed. Your scent was everywhere, making me feel safe and comfortable. Keeping me warm while I imagined you there beside me." Nestling against his solid warmth, she rested her palms against his chest. "How long did Steven keep you up?"

A grin spread over Luke's face that made him seem years younger. "Not long, he had one shot of whiskey and couldn't wait to get back to bed." His hands delved deeply into Charlie's loose hair, letting the strands flow through his fingers. "I think he holds his liquor about as well as you do."

She smiled in return. "So that explains why he's still dead to the world. Steven's not a drinker, either." Thinking about the rendezvous they had to make later that morning, she asked, "When do we have to take off?"

"We'll need to leave here around nine."

"At least I don't have to pack." Charlie hardly recognized her husky tone and realized she was close to tears. *Damn!* She wanted to remain strong, at least until she was on the

chopper. Leaving Luke was proving harder than she'd expected.

Luke put a finger under her chin and forced her to meet his serious eyes. "Charlie, don't, honey," he whispered softly. "This is for the best. Before long you'll be reunited with the rest of your family and all this will become a faded memory. Maybe even become one of your songs," he teased.

She shook her head, and wanted to remind him that he had yet to tell her how he really felt. How could she be certain of anything if he didn't say the words? Nothing else in the world mattered if she only knew that he loved her.

"Are you two at it again?"

A tolerant smile broke out on Charlie's face at the sound of Steven's voice. She turned until she could see him out of the corner of her eye.

"Good morning to you, too, brother dear." Unlike before, this time she slowly moved out of Luke's embrace.

"Coffee! I need coffee!" Steve exchanged a brief nod with Luke on his way to the coffeepot. "I hope you don't mind, but I let your wolf out."

They'd been so preoccupied with each other that they hadn't heard the door open. Charlie reached around Luke for the mug she'd placed on the counter earlier, taking a sip of the now cool brew.

"How did you sleep last night?" she asked, swinging her gaze to Steven.

He took a drink before responding. "Not bad considering Luke's wolf kept nudging me."

"We'll need to leave soon if we're going to reach Cutter Pass by noon," Luke cut in, joining their morning chitchat.

Steve nodded, running his free hand through his sandy hair. "My family and I will never be able to repay you for what you've done. We owe you a lot, Luke. If you should ever need anything, just name it."

Charlie's gaze shot to the clock radio on the windowsill as Steven and Luke exchanged words. He was right. It was already a quarter to nine. Their time was rapidly coming to an end. She felt a fist squeezing her heart. Determined not to let Luke see her sadness, she moved to turn the radio on and glanced outside. For a moment she admired the view. She was going to miss it here. She was going to miss him.

"I guess there's nothing left for me to do but get ready." Her hand swept down her borrowed shirt and long johns when she turned to face them. "I can hardly go back to civilization in these."

"I don't know about that, sis, you might set a new fashion trend. As a celebrity you carry a lot of clout." Steve shot her a wink.

Charlie shook her head, her eyes filled with humor. "I don't think so. I doubt flannel will catch on as a cool trend for anyone under forty."

"Are you saying I'm out of style?" Luke crossed his arms, and raised his eyebrows with mock ferocity. "Or that I don't look under forty?"

Like Charlie he was wearing a flannel shirt, only his fit his broad-shouldered frame. It was untucked and buttoned haphazardly and he looked rakishly handsome in it. Her eyes

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ran over him with approval. Luke looked good enough to eat. She met his eyes, the laughter in them disappearing to be replaced with something else. The lighthearted moment was replaced with the seriousness of the situation. Charlie sank her teeth in her bottom lip. Emotion kept her from speaking.

Before she made a fool out of herself she swung around and headed for the bathroom to change.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter 23

"How much further?" Steven asked, breaking the awful silence.

Luke and Charlie hadn't said more than two words between them since they'd left the cabin. Luke was leading them for obvious reasons, with Lady at his side. Steve brought up the rear and Charlie was sandwiched between them as they made their way single file toward Cutter Pass.

"Not much. Just over that little ridge up ahead."

Luke tossed the remark over his shoulder. Charlie noticed he seemed to be going out of his way not to look at her. She gauged the ridge he was referring to was a little over half a mile away.

"You warm enough, sis?"

She nodded silently, warm as toast on the outside, but too numb with heartache on the inside. She couldn't believe this was it, that in half an hour she'd be boarding a helicopter and flying out of Luke's life forever. Until that moment she hadn't wanted to accept the truth that she wasn't coming back. It had been a hard decision, but the only logical one. If Luke couldn't say he loved her there was no reason to assume that he did. Why leave herself open for more heartache?

Lord, it was going to be hard saying goodbye, but she'd said goodbye to a few people she loved in her lifetime. Each one had left a different void in her life. Time and experience had taught her that as hard as it was, she would survive.

In spite of her determination to remain calm and in control, she felt the betraying sting of tears behind her lids. She bit down on her bottom lip for control. As they trekked on relentlessly the tears began to slip quietly down her cold cheeks. She reached up to wipe her runny nose as unobtrusively as possible and kept her blurry eyes on Luke's backside. She forced herself to put one foot before the other, when what she really wanted to do was turn around and go back. Her mind wandered foolishly at what she might have left behind that they'd be forced to return for, drawing a blank.

*Unless losing my heart counts for something*

Finally they cleared the trees and crested the slight ridge Luke had been talking about. At the bottom was a vast opening, a meadow in the summertime, buried under a blanket of solid white snow. Animal tracks were evident on the glistening snow. Charlie began to scan the landscape around them, looking for signs of life. She was rewarded with the sight of a moose in the distance, but all too soon it disappeared into the forest, frightened by something, possibly them.

"Right on time," Steve breathed, pointing in the direction of a tiny speck in the sky.

All three came to a standstill to watch the approaching chopper. Gradually the sound of the rotating blades penetrated their peaceful surroundings. As the tears began to flow again Charlie was thankful Luke was in front of her. She bit down on her bottom lip to hold back a sob, certain her heart was breaking in two.

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She quickly reached up and wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands, willing herself under control. Praying she could hold onto it long enough to board the chopper and take off. By the time Luke finally glanced her way, she hoped he attributed her red face and swollen eyes to the blistering cold.

Their gazes clung and she swallowed with difficulty, forcing a smile she didn't feel, knowing it couldn't possibly diminish the sorrow in her eyes. She wondered what Luke was thinking. His expression so guarded and somber and very much like it was the first day they'd met. Only she knew what lie beneath the solid, hard surface was a passionate, caring man.

"Looks like it won't be long now," she said softly, her eyes moving back and forth between Luke and the helicopter as it prepared for landing. "Going to miss me?" Her throat closed up with emotion and she bit the inside of her cheek for strength.

His gaze fell to her quivering mouth. "Maybe a little," he said hoarsely, and glanced reluctantly at the chopper. A muscle jumped in his tense jaw. "Maybe I'll see you again some time?"

The breath Charlie took turned into a sob and she shook her head sadly. She reached up to cup his cheek lovingly with her palm.

"It's a nice thought, Luke, but not a good idea. I don't like goodbyes. I couldn't bear going through this again."

*It's better this way. Break the ties now before they go any deeper.* His expression told Charlie he hadn't expected that



answer. She squared her chin and took a deep breath that turned into another traitorous sob.

"Thank you for everything, Luke. I'll, I'll never forget you."

She focused her blurry gaze on the chopper, trying for a nonchalance she was far from feeling. The situation was becoming unbearable and Charlie felt like she was about to crumble. Maybe if she didn't look at Luke she could get through the next few minutes.

*She isn't coming back*

*She can't be serious! Doesn't she realize I love her*

Luke's mind froze. He glanced down at her small outstretched hand as if it was something he'd never seen before, before having the presence of mind to take it. He yanked her into his arms in a moment of weakness.

His mouth slowly descended and he lost himself in a goodbye kiss that wasn't supposed to happen. He didn't care if the whole damn world was watching. He kissed Charlie until she melted against him in total surrender, sighing sweetly against his mouth.

*She isn't coming back*

How was he supposed to go on without her? He felt her shudder, knowing he was being unfair to both of them, but he had to have one last taste of her sweetness and passion.

"No, thank you," he said huskily against her mouth before turning it into another soul-stealing kiss. "This one is to keep me warm at night." He kissed her again. "This one is to remember you," he added, finally pulling away with reluctance.

The chopper had landed and the men onboard were motioning them over.

"It's time to go, sis." Steve gently touched Charlie's arm to get her attention. He held his hand out to Luke. "You're not going to kiss me, too, are you?" he joked.

"Not likely," Luke retorted, a reluctant grin breaking out on his face. He shook Steve's hand. "Take care of her."

He watched them turn toward the chopper, automatically crouching as they moved beneath the twirling blades. A man in uniform waited for them at the doorway, his hand out to assist them inside. Charlie was hoisted off the ground and into the seat next to him and Steve followed suit. Steve buckled the safety belt around his waist, while Charlie fumbled with her own, her eyes on Luke.

He stood there like a frozen block of ice, clenching his teeth so hard he was surprised his jaw didn't crack. In another minute she would be flying out of there, out of his life. And he was doing absolutely nothing to stop her.

He watched a shudder rack her body, instincts told him it had nothing to do with the blistering cold. Then she was wiping at her reddened cheeks, her mouth trembling with a weak smile.

*She isn't coming back*

If he let her go, he was a fool!

Luke could see the pilot and Steve exchange words. The man sitting next to Charlie finally realized her plight with the seat belt and moved her hands away, buckling her in without any trouble.

Steve glanced back at Luke with a smile and gave him the thumbs up that all was okay. They were ready to take off. Luke swallowed hard and opened his mouth to holler goodbye. Emotion made Charlie's name come out in a croaked whisper.

"Charlie!"

He had doubts she'd even heard him. Then remarkably she glanced his way.

"I love you!" Luke yelled over the noise of the helicopter blades, saying the words he hadn't been able to say before. Words he knew sealed their fate forever.

"I love you!" he yelled again, just in case she had any question.

As his declaration slowly sank in a radiant smile gradually spread across her face. Steve must have heard Luke's words too because his head swung toward Charlie, his eyes watching and waiting for her reaction. Her hands went to the belt buckle cinched at her waist. The chopper was about to take off. She turned to her brother with a panicked look on her face. With a cry for the pilot to wait, she unbuckled her belt and gave her brother a hug. They exchanged words, then with his help she jumped to the ground below.

She didn't look back as she ran the short distance to where Luke was standing. He was forced to catch her when she threw herself into his waiting embrace, almost knocking them to the ground with her enthusiasm.

"You little fool, what do you think you're doing?"

He braced his legs against her weight, clutching her to him with a grin on his cold face. His heart was nearly bursting with happiness.

"I can't go!" she yelled over the noise of the departing chopper. "I left something behind!"

"What?" he hollered back, lowering his face close to hers.

"My heart," she said without hesitation, stretching the rest of the way to kiss him.

Luke's arms were trembling yet he held her like he'd never let her go.

"You were almost too late, Remington!" she scolded when their lips parted.

"God, I love you, Charlie. I've been a fool."

"Yes you have, but I forgive you." She smiled, her eyes sparkling.

"What about home, sweetheart?"

"I am home," she said against his waiting mouth. "I am home."

\* \* \* \*

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

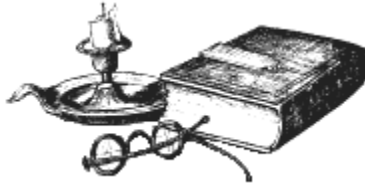
Tory is a daughter, mother, aunt, wife, grandmother, and author. She lives in Florida, and has the freedom of moving back and forth between her hubby and her daughter's family. She works full-time, and spends her evenings and days off penning tales of steamy, erotic romance. Writing is a hobby for her, one that she's embraced since the age of thirteen. She enjoys sharing her stories, and hopes by the time she retires she's making enough money from it to buy cat food.

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