

## ~ *Sunrise III: Cabin Fever* ~

by J.A. Bard

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Disclaimers: The characters in this story are mine as is the topic of the story.

Language/Violence: There is some violence.

Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer: This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between women. If you are under 18 years of age or live in a state or country where a story like this is illegal, please don't read it. There are many stories out there for you to read.

NOTE: There will be a sequel to this story.

Goddess bless and peace profound.

If you have anything to suggest, comments, etc., I'm willing to open up your mail.

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### **Chapter 1**

Elizabeth tossed her winter coat on top of her overnight bag lying on the floor behind the driver's seat of Alex's SUV. In the cargo space was food for more than their planned three days, 4/15 packs of 1 liter bottled water, and two back packs stuffed with essential emergency items.

Elizabeth paused a moment and wondered if she was over-doing her packing for their stay in the mountain cabin. Genie had been up once and described it as not a place she would vacation to. Claire's contribution was, if it made her feel better, bring more toilet paper, which she had taken her advice and did so.

According to the weather report a snow storm would hit the mountain when they up there. Alex assured her it was winterized and had modern amenities like an indoor flush toilet, heat, shower and a hot tub...but no land line for a phone.

Nope, she thought with certainty. It was best to be prepared for the unknown.

Elizabeth went on the internet and researched how to prepare for a snow storm if she was isolated from roads and neighbors. She then went to Murphy's Sports Outfitter and bought a new winter coat that was to her knees, ski pants, another set of thermal underwear, new boots, gaiters, two backpacks and added two of everything to the backpacks: strike anywhere matches with case and striker; fire starters; candles; map and compass; flashlight and headlamp with batteries;

energy bars, MREs and dehydrated foods; sunglasses and sunscreen; first aid kit; utility pocket knife; ice pick; nylon cord; poncho; sleeping bag for zero degree and 14 inch foam pad; moleskin; water purification tablets; backpack Raptor stove; extra fuel; snow shovel; hydration pack; emergency rescue beacon; also GPS based beacon; whistle; rolls of duct tape; emergency radio with a crank that could recharge cell phones; repair kit; extra gloves; hat; scarf; wool socks; and fleece blanket. When she got home she checked to be sure she had no cotton clothing packed in the overnight bags.

It was one thing to be isolated with civilization ten minutes away, and another to be isolated and snowed in with no help within a day's walking distance, she said to the salesclerk, Cindy Fletcher. Cindy knew just what she was speaking about. In addition to being a salesclerk at Murphy's Sports Outfitter she was also a volunteer on the Mountain Rescue 911 team with her dog, Pioneer, who located lost people. Cindy had a lot of pointers for Elizabeth. She also had a lot of stories which Elizabeth made a mental note to get back to her about. Story possibilities started to buzz around Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth! Alex is on the phone," Linda called from the house.

Elizabeth closed the SUV's door and joined Linda Scripts at the front door. She and her husband agreed to watch over the cats while they were gone which extended to house sitting. Her husband was Detective Mark Scripts, Alex's partner with the Sunrise Police Department.

"Just what is a breakfast surprise?" Linda asked as she handed the portable phone to Elizabeth.

"Genie said she would prepare us one breakfast. It's to be a surprise. Alex thinks she talked Genie into mixing apple pancake batter, her favorite. I think it's going to be her omelet special, less of a problem to cook in high altitudes."

"Who's going to cook?"

"Me. She hasn't been at her best in the kitchen this week. She burnt the coffee pot twice, yesterday. I'm afraid if she boils water for her trail meals, she'll burn the one and only pot she has." Elizabeth laughed when she heard Alex's indignant snort over the other line. "Hi, hon," Elizabeth answered sweetly. "Ready to make friends with the bears?"

*"Don't even joke about that, Elizabeth. There really are bears up there. Good thing the cabin is reinforced with concrete along the base."*

"Hon, its winter and they hibernate," Elizabeth said.

*"Right. But there is always one that bucks the biological clock," Alex said.*

"You're mixing your species - bucks with bears," Elizabeth said.

*"Are you ready to pick me up?" Alex asked impatiently. "Writers always have to catch you on a mix of...whatchamacallits."*

"Metaphors, and there will be no disparaging remarks about writers. You're talking about your chauffer and cook, darling. I'm on my way. Stand on the corner and I'll pick you up. We'll start new rumors."

*"You picking me up won't start anything new. I'm an officer of the law so no burning rubber stops or take offs, because I don't have my ticket book with me. Bye."*

"Bye."

"Sounds like she's ready for some time off," Linda said. "We all are," she added ruefully.

"Linda, thank you for being here so quickly and for taking care of the cats. I'm sure Angel will keep the cats in line for you."

Linda gave her a quick hug. "I'm great at moment notices. One day early is not a problem. I'm so glad for a cheap few days off from the chaos in our house. I've tried to grade papers and change some class studies, but no peace and quiet to concentrate. Thank you for thinking of us. We haven't had many hours alone and with the Grans volunteering to watch the kids, and Mark not being able to go far, this works out very well."

"The hot tub on the deck in the evening when the stars are out is a very nice and a relaxing experience. The tub is ready and waiting."

Linda's eyes lit up. "Hm. So many choices – the hot tub in the bathroom or under the stars outside with no neighbors nearby. Stay, Angel." Linda put her hand on the wolfhound's collar. "Don't you want some quality time with your dad? Hm? I sure do," she said. Linda gave a gentle tug on Angel's collar and both went back into the house.

Elizabeth slid behind the steering wheel, already thinking of the road up into the mountains she had mapped out. They would be hitting iced roads half-way up, but Alex's snow tires and a shovel if needed would see them to their destination. She was sure there would be no trouble getting up there.

The geese that served as security were in their pens, safe from being run over as the SUV backed out. The electronic gate rolled shut as the back wheels crossed the small hump on the driveway.

In the kitchen, Linda leaned against the counter where water for tea was heating up. She tapped the keys on the portable phone. "Hi, tall dark, and handsome, I got the candles, massage oil, and me dressed in something that will make your imagination sizzle. How about bringing something over of your very own and we can ..." Linda giggled at her husband's interruption. "No, Mr. Detective. Don't be making it too easy. I want you dressed so I have something to work with. Elizabeth just took off. Where are you?... Can you stop at the bakery on Gower?...Uh huh, you got that right. I'll see you in about an hour, and no stopping at home or the office," she ordered.

His reply had her smiling widely.

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Elizabeth parked in the back of the women's shelter and honked that she arrived. The Home, as the residents of Sunrise called it, was a safe house for out of state battered and abused women. Sunrise embraced the cause Claire Brooks took up, being a survivor herself.

Claire came out of the old Victorian House's back gate holding a thermos with their breakfast surprise and a brown bag that she knew contained turkey sandwiches and pastries. Lucky them. Today was Genie's baking day.

Bruno, their guard dog, trotted next to Claire sniffing the air and then the ground for any evidence of another dogs passing, and a suspicious human.

"Hi, Elizabeth. The girls missed you at Tai Chi. I told them you were busy getting ready for a weekend trip to the mountains. Do you have enough warm clothing? Maybe you should drive to the city and spend the weekend in a nice hotel with all the amenities."

"We tried that already and a phone call ended it before we even got to the desert and it was triple chocolate mousse. Something about a pile-up on the freeway and all available officers were to report for duty. I have plenty of warm clothing and back up to the backup warm clothing. Yesterday I visited Murphy's and shopped." She pointed to the back of the SUV. Claire took a peek and smiled.

"Just be careful up there. I wish you took Genie up on borrowing Bruno."

"Poor Bruno would freeze up there, and depending on how deep the snow, would disappear. I couldn't bear to see Bruno humiliated, dressed in snowshoes and a snow suit. Thank Genie for fixing us our surprise a day early."

"She lives to cook and always cooks more than what's needed so there are plenty of left overs in the frig."

"Left-over Fridays!" they chorused with a laugh. Elizabeth had been a resident of the Home and was familiar with the baking schedule of Genie, Claire's significant other who had also been a resident before becoming one of the staffers.

Bruno sat down at Claire's feet and looked up at Elizabeth.

"Bruno, I'm not Alex who keeps dog cookies in her pocket. Sorry about that."

"I can't blame you for not taking Bruno. Taking him out for potty breaks in a snow storm would be a bother," Claire said.

"Are you going to tell me what's in this thermos or do I wait?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm not a woman that breaks secrets. You better get going. Your mate will be sending out smoke signals if you take too long."

"I'm sure she's building the fire now." Elizabeth waved and headed towards the police station where she was sure Alex would be pacing. She pressed the hands-free.

"Alex's cell. Call." She could hear the musical notes as it dialed Alex.

*"This is Detective Adison."*

"Hey, hon. I've picked up Genie's surprise and I'm headed to your favorite corner. Will I be too early? Should I find something to do until..."

*"It's about time. I'm getting comments from people asking if I'm desperate to ticket someone for parking or jaywalking. As if we have quotas!"*

Elizabeth laughed. "I'm two blocks away and coming up fast. Say hi." She waved at Alex through the windshield.

"I see you."

Alex was waiting outside of the station with Harriet, a fellow police officer. Since the plan to go up to the cabin a day earlier was made just hours ago, Alex was dressed in her work clothes, not at all suitable for mountain weather.

Alex opened up the back passenger door and laid her suit coat on the overnight bag. Both women looked in the cargo area.

"After the way they talked in the coffee shop, I was expecting enough supplies to feed a troop," Harriet teased. "It's a good thing Chief Harper listened to Old Miss Hanna's warning that the storm will hit this afternoon so you could get off early. Otherwise, you would be caught in

the ski traffic or get a call for assistance with car accidents on the highway. You two have a good time."

"Thanks, Harriet and thanks for the bagels. These will be great for warming up in the microwave," Alex said. She hopped in the passenger seat and buckled up. The two waved at Harriet and Elizabeth pulled away, heading to the highway and their three day respite from the world.

Alex pulled her cell out of its holder and turned it off, then slid it back in its holster.

"How was your day?" Alex asked, as she slid her hand into Elizabeth's.

"Busy. I hadn't unpacked what I bought at Murphy's yesterday so I was busy cutting off price tags, inventorying, and packing our bags with lots of warm clothing. Thanks to Linda's timely arrival, it took less than an hour. I gather she's used to these sudden deployments."

"She is. You didn't buy as much as they said at coffee shop," Alex said. "There's still room in the SUV." She picked up the thermos that Elizabeth had stashed on the passenger floor board. "I hope Genie's morning's delight means pancake mix." She looked in the back for a place to put the thermos and after storing it between the overnight bags she studied Elizabeth's coat, thinking it was different than what she remembered it to be.

"Genie suggested we take Bruno with us. She thinks we need some protection since your friend Sam isn't going to be there. Should I be worried about our safety?"

"You know she always worries about everyone she likes, and then sends her love and protection via food." Alex drew Elizabeth's hand to her mouth and kissed her palm.

Momentarily overtaken by the rush of sensation, Elizabeth adeptly avoided hitting a parked car. "So, how was your day? Your short message of 'Stop whatever you're doing and start packing, we're leaving for the cabin in two hours' was certainly an eye opener. If Genie didn't call a few minutes later with her message 'I have your thermos of morning surprise ready' and then Linda's call that she was on her way over to help me get ready... I just may have gone back to bed."

Alex laughed. "Everyone takes Miss. Hanna's weather reports seriously. I'm glad Chief let me off early."

"I put your snow clothes, with ski pants and boots with the emergency backpacks in the cargo space. Why don't you change clothes now since there aren't that many cars on the road that will wonder what they're seeing in the back seat."

"Good idea." Alex crawled over the back seat and used the empty passenger seat for changing from indoor to outdoor clothing. It was awkward putting her shoulder holster back on as the sweater was thicker than her blouse. Since she didn't have her equipment bag with her, she didn't want to just leave her weapon lying in the car.

"Is that a new coat you have?"

"Yes. It's down to my ankles and has more pockets than my other one. Have a look at it," Elizabeth said.

"This is nice...and heavy. Deep pockets." She took the bag of bagels Harriet gave them and stuffed them in the pocket to test. "Nice and roomy for ski gloves. Oh, this is why it's heavy. You have stuff in the other pockets. Let's see, matches and starter, lip gloss, 2 energy bars, headlamp, batteries, mirror, utility pocket knife, gloves, whistle - and tablets?"

"Water purification tablets."

"So what's in the backpacks?" Alex asked.

"Other emergency stuff. Always be prepared."

"Good motto. In the beginning, when I would come up, Sam had me wearing a backpack whenever I left the cabin, even if I was just going to fetch wood. Never leave home without the essentials, is his motto. After a while, it was habit, just like carrying a purse."

"What are the essentials?"

"Utility knife, energy bar, matches, whistle, Kevlar gloves in whatever weather, water, mirror, cell phone or walkie-talkie, and never leave without telling someone where I'm going and how long I'm going to be gone. A tactical hipster carries a lot."

Elizabeth laughed. "You mean when you go for a hike, surely not when you're going to the woodshed, and just who are you going to tell those things too?"

"Sam, if it's a hike. Sam always is prepared for the unexpected. He has a tactical pack and wears a fishing vest over his bullet proof vest. Sometimes a perimeter check means repairing or photographing something."

"How long does it take for a perimeter check?"

"An hour at least. I check the cabin, then cameras and see if there are any disturbances around the area. I take pictures if something in the environment has changed."

"Just like at the Ebben's house. I'm surprised you don't feel overwhelmed with the compulsion to do security sweeps wherever you go."

"It's part of my daily routine so it's not overwhelming. It's why I'm healthy and still alive," Alex said.

"Lucky for both of us. So what do you have in your pockets?" She smiled as if she had a secret.

"You mean my snow coat? Or the one I was wearing at work?"

Alex put Elizabeth's coat back and pulled her suit coat over. "I have a Kahr P9 that Mark wants me to get a feel for. American made pistol. Thinner than the Glock 26 because it has less bullets in its magazine, making it easier to conceal. I have breath mint gum, a trail mix bar, and..." she went to the other side of the coat, "two magazine clips for the P7, broken match case and loose matches. Evidence bags, marker, batteries – dead ones. I forgot to dump them. And in my last pocket, a couple of pairs of gloves to pick up evidence."

"What about your snow coat?"

"Hmm. Am I going to find a surprise?" For a moment she thought of old girlfriends' phone numbers, but she never kept them beyond the bar's parking lot and that was when she was available. "Oh, I see you added some stuff. No evidence bags or Latex gloves."

"And that's why it's always good to check your own pockets before leaving home," Elizabeth said.

"Which backpack is yours?" Alex asked. "Hey, where did you get these zipper characters? You're lucky Mark's kids didn't see them."

"Kids aren't the only ones. I bought them at a sidewalk sale. Helen was selling things from her mother's catch-all box. If you unzip the top of the green bag you'll find others. I couldn't decide which to use. Which one do you want?"

"Deputy Dawg, Superwoman, Wonderwoman, Xena! Daffy Duck, Goofy? So many to choose from. What's this?"

"Excuse me if I can't join you at the moment. I'm the driver."

Alex put the 3-inch GPS tracking device in her coat pocket for a later discussion and looked for batteries instead. In an evidence bag that she labeled as dead batteries she dumped her spent batteries and found four to add to her pocket. "Well, I can't fit a shovel or ice pick in my coat pocket so I'll leave them with the pack," Alex said. "Oh, these gloves are nice." She held up the slim gloves Cindy had recommended to Elizabeth. After fifteen minutes of going through the

blue pack and not finding anything else she would add to her snow coat, she crawled back up front.

"I now feel I'm ready for anything in the snow...including a vacation from worry or annoying phone calls," Alex said. She held up the GPS locator. "This is what I found in your backpack."

"Hon, whatever it is, let's talk about it later. I need to pay attention to the road."

"You're right, snow and ice is treacherous. I'll describe it to you, it's a GPS locator that someone can log onto the internet and follow you." She opened it up and removed the battery. "And now they can't."

"I bought so many things, I'll have to look at it and see if it's something I did pick up. Everything for the packs I bought in pairs."

"Do you have the receipt on you?"

Elizabeth laughed. "No. It's in my bedroom, with my new boots. I'll break them in before I introduce them to the dirt up here."

"I didn't see another one. I'll recheck the blue pack later. I'm tired just from changing clothes and looking through all those goodies. I wish I had gone with you. Then we would have really filled the SUV and maxed out my credit card," she added ruefully.

"With the backpack and your stuffed pockets, I feel that if you get lost between the cabin and the road, you'll be safe until you find your way back," Elizabeth said. "I was going to add walkie-talkies but I remembered you mentioned you had those already."

"Yes. During my first year visiting up here, one of Sam's exercises was to leave me in an unfamiliar area...for me, and I would have to find my way back to my cabin. Once he pulled the batteries out of the walkie-talkie."

"That's fun for you?" Elizabeth asked.

"At the time it was to keep my survival skills sharp. I did learn two valuable lessons, check equipment and supplies no matter who gives them to you before going out, and when lost, don't wander around. Wait for someone to find you. Sam and Gray Horse have their own wilderness training program that is not for the weak at heart. Now I know why Gray Horse stays out of Sam's part of the forest. Sam has it well scoped out. There are only two full time park rangers assigned this entire park area and four volunteer smoke spotters during the summer season, so whatever free help is offered, Gray Horse welcomes it."

"And now? Are you still training with Sam?"

"I've been lax. I do miss some of his lessons. The ones that require being out in bad weather I don't miss."

"I don't want to get in the way of your training. You do know it's like belonging to the militia that you keep making fun of, right?" Elizabeth said with a smile.

"I see it as an extension of my police work." Alex yawned. "I do mock them a lot, don't I? I'll have to watch that. My aunties had a saying for that, When pointing a finger, there are four pointing back."

"I've heard that."

"Mark and the chief are planning on training the police station's employees, including the civilian staff, in emergency preparedness."

"Sunrise already has an emergency preparedness. We have practice sessions marked on our kitchen calendar."

"This is a more intense version. This is training the staff to handle their own emotions when faced with violence. They need to separate frightened civilians with real or potential threats, *and* manage their own fear."

"I would like to know how he's going to do that. No one really knows how they're going to react in emotionally charged situations. Each situation will evoke different reactions," Elizabeth said. "One day a hero and the next day a murder."

"It's an experimental visual and auditory training session. 3-D First Responders Emotive Training."

"I've heard of it at a convention. The discussion focused on who is going to run and or program the subliminal messages that are heavily embedded in the visual and auditory program. The presenter wasn't prepared for the audiences' lively discussion of – the agenda of the maker," Elizabeth said.

"They're not the only one that worries about those points. The Chief and Mark are checking it out. They want to know what the subliminal messages are and how to control it so someone doesn't slip their own agenda in."

"So if you come home dressed as Xena or Wonderwoman, I'll know you went through the program." Elizabeth glanced at Alex.

"I asked Amanda to look into the program and people behind it. The Collard Corporation wants to use our small police force to test it."

"This is good story fodder," Elizabeth said. "My creative juices are working on a story already. What are they going to use to measure it as a success...a manufactured catastrophe or play with your heads and have you imagine that it's real?"

"I'm sure those concerns will be covered by Mark and Harper. If they come into work one day wearing Marvel Comic Hero outfits beneath their work cloths, I'll know it's time to take action."

"Just what would that be?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know yet. What would Xena do or Wonderwoman, or Superwoman? I'll need a phone booth for Superwoman...or is that a Superman thing? It will be crowded in the phone booth."

Both burst out laughing, then stared out the window, thinking about subliminal training and how it already was being used for good and bad.

Thirty minutes later Elizabeth woke a slumbering Alex.

"Alex, is this where I turn?"

Alex yawned and looked around. "It's dark already? See that marker with a snowplow, that's our entrance. Go a little slower and go in straight. It's always icy slippery at the entrance and a lot of cars slide into the snow bank. This turnout goes into a parking lot that the snowplows use to turn around so it's roomier than it looks."

They left the plowed road and bumped over the raised entrance to the turnout, sliding a little over the streaks of ice the plows left. The two posts that marked the entrance to the private road to the cabins showed the road blocked by a snow bank higher than the SUV's bumper.

"I hate leaving my SUV in the middle of nowhere, but the SUV won't be able to plow through that snow bank. The cabin isn't far from here if we don't follow the road, which we wouldn't be able to see anyway. I have a rubber raft we can stack our supplies on and pull it in."

"I've seen that in a movie," Elizabeth said as she slid the SUV around so it faced the exit.

"Brrr, it's cold," Elizabeth said, as she slid out of the warm SUV. She put their backpacks near the back car tire, to reach the other supplies.

Alex pulled out a flat self-inflatable raft. Once it was inflated, they both quickly moved the majority of their supplies on it, leaving two of the packs of water. Alex tossed a net over the

supplies on the raft so nothing would fall out as they dragged it to her cabin. Both looked up at the cloudy sky as snowflakes began to fall.

"Snow storm moving in," Alex said. She took the shovel to the snow drift around the parking lot and made a hole wide and low enough for them to drag the raft through.

"It looks like you've done this before," Elizabeth said. Elizabeth looked at the inflatable raft doubtfully. The supplies in the raft looked heavy.

"Let me help you with your pack," Alex said. When it was on she stepped back and studied Elizabeth. "You look like you're going to hike in for an overnigher...no tent?" Alex teased.

"I was hoping for a cabin at the end of my trek, or so I've been led to believe," Elizabeth said.

"And a bed, but if the heat doesn't reach the bedroom, these are nice sleeping bags. We can camp out in the front room in front of the fire."

Alex adjusted the straps on her backpack, with Elizabeth helping. She then grabbed one rope to the rubber raft and Elizabeth the other and they both hauled the raft over the snow to her cabin.

"When I was bringing up supplies to survive my first winter Sam suggested this for hauling in supplies over the snow. It's easy to store in the SUV. When there's no snow and only mud, I can drive the SUV right to the cabin."

"You did say the cabin is winterized."

"Not when I first bought it. It is now."

"I guess Harold never spent winters up here," Elizabeth said.

"He hibernated up here, according to Sam. That was his writing time. He spent his time in the bomb shelter with a heater going full blast."

Elizabeth pictured a bomb shelter looking like a cramped submarine. She shook her head to rid herself of the image, remembering that bomb shelters were a big thing with the 2012 survivor planners, and they had been greatly improved.

It took them twenty minutes to get to the cabin. The physical exertion at that altitude had both women huffing.

"Here we are. What do you think?"

Elizabeth dropped her rope and looked it over from where she was, and Alex crunched through the snow to check around the cabin.

"Nothing vandalized," Alex said. "No visitors since the last snow."

"It looks cozy," Elizabeth said. "What's that, the guest house or the restroom?" Elizabeth flashed her light at the gray shape of another building.

"Woodshed. We need to unload quickly so I can get the rest of the stuff from the SUV."

Alex unlocked and pushed open the cabin door. It was dark and cold inside. Old potpourri scented the air. There was no welcoming heat, which if Sam were around would have started a fire for them. Both women had the supplies quickly moved in to the cabin scattered about the floor.

"Can you start a fire in that potbelly stove?" Alex asked.

"Is it any different from a fireplace?"

"Smaller pieces of wood, but that's it. I'm going back to the SUV and get whatever else I left. I want to make sure there's nothing in there that I would be embarrassed if it's stolen. Let me leave the P9 with you. It's not loaded." She handed her the pistol and magazines. "You only have seven shots per magazine, so make them count until I get here."

"Tell me you're kidding," Elizabeth said.

"I'm kidding." She gave Elizabeth a peck on the cheek and left.

"Just how safe are we up here?"

Alex turned, about ready to say something reassuring but remembered her promise to Elizabeth. No sugar coating danger.

"Well, with our combined pasts, maybe there's someone who is looking for a payback; however, this is in the mountains, high altitude with predicted snow storm any moment, and it's very cold outside. I doubt those unhappy with us are willing to make the effort in this weather. What Sam has found are occasional runaways who take up residence in the empty privately owned cabins but never in the winter."

"Okay, you're just your usual cautious person. Hurry back. I don't want your coffee to get cold. You do have a coffee machine?"

"In that cabinet. I'll be back by the time there's heat you can warm your toes to." First she stopped at a drawer and pulled out two walkie-talkies. She set the wavelength, tested it and

handed Elizabeth one. "Beware of strangers, especially the furry ones," Alex said. From her pocket she pulled out the headlamp and put it over her cap.

Alex dragged the rubber raft back along the trail they created. She listened to the combined sounds of her feet crunching and the slushing sound of the raft over the snow while she looked around her, searching for anything that didn't belong. Her instinct for danger was twitching. Was it because Sam wasn't around? Though she didn't always see him when she stayed at her cabin, his presence did offer a degree of security for her.

As she approached the SUV she could see more tire tracks than the SUVs in the parking area. Stopping outside of the clearing, she pressed the remote car lock. The alarm chirped, echoing in the clearing, and the locks unlocked with nothing else happening. Walking closer to the SUV she noticed it was off-kilter.

"Damn. A flat." She unlocked the glove compartment and removed her digital camera. She took pictures of the tire tracks and boot marks, the flat tire and the surrounding area. She couldn't see what caused the flat, but maybe after studying the pictures, she would see something. She pulled out her walkie-talkie.

"Elizabeth, come in."

"Elizabeth here."

"How are you doing? Over."

"I have the coffee going and the fire is putting out heat, which is where I'm standing now."

"I'm going to be delayed back. We have a flat and there's some tracks I want to check out."

"I bet rolling over that crunchy entrance did it. Remember, you don't have your pack with you."

"I won't go far. Over and out."

From the SUV she removed from the evidence-gathering kit a can of powered snow wax spray. This was going to take time, she thought irritably, but she knew she would be kicking herself if she didn't do it while she had the opportunity. She began with spraying a thin layer of the red wax over each print she was interested in. It was going to take six layers of spray. Luck was with her so far, because the few snowflakes had stopped. While the last layer was drying she mixed up some plaster in a plastic bag. The castings weren't as thick as she would normally pour

but it was going to have to do. While the plaster dried enough for her to remove, she packed the raft with the last of things she didn't want to leave in the SUV. Then she went to inspect the entrance to the pullout. She took more pictures and walked further out on the road, careful not to slip in the ice. By the road conditions, she wouldn't be surprised if there was going to be a lot of cars sliding into the gullies. Turning back she decided to hurry some of the drying with the portable dryer in the evidence collecting bag. Their winter evidence kits were larger than the summer kits, which her and Mark decided to break up into separate kits. It was tedious and cold work, but she disliked just sitting around, even if it would be in a warm SUV. When the wind picked up and it started to snow Alex decided to not wait any longer. With the flat shovel in her SUV she scooped up the molds and laid them on top of the water crate.

"Elizabeth, come in."

"You better be close," Elizabeth said. "The snowfall is beginning to get serious."

"I'm heading back. I'm at the SUV."

She relocked the SUV and grabbing up the rope, looped it across her chest and began to drag the two crates of water, her evidence kits, first aid kits, and whatever else she had in the SUV that would irritate her if it was stolen. Her right hand was ungloved, warmly tucked in her pocket, curled around a pistol. It was merely a precaution.

As she moved back over their path she strained her eyes to see through the thick falling snow. Their path was deep enough that it wouldn't disappear, but Alex still felt on edge. If the entrance to the pullout wasn't so dug up, her suspicious mind wouldn't have thought the flat tire was not a coincidence.

Elizabeth's bundled up form stepped out on the porch as she neared.

"Hi," Alex said.

"Hi, yourself. You're back just in time." She stepped down to help Alex unpack the raft. "A neighbor of yours came by after you called the second time. Said he noticed your tire was flat and came by the back road to see if you needed help."

Besides Sam, the other privately owned cabin had been owned by Dale Fletcher. The last time she was up here Dale Fletcher and some of his male friends were recovering from a wild day and night of partying. Besides urinating and up-chucking on whatever, they acted like men past their middle-aged years trying to relive college days.

Being a woman alone and they a gaggle of men, they mistook her for an easy mark. To make sure they knew she wasn't in the mood to be played with, she had drawn her weapon and took one shot. Lucky that where she pointed was right where she aimed and all that was damaged was a bottle of beer.

She wondered who was there now. Sam said Dale lost the cabin to the bank and that memorable visit was saying good bye to his cabin with friends.

"Did he leave a name?"

"We didn't exchange names. I thought there was something wrong with the tire."

"You did?"

"When I drove over that ice into the turnout I thought the SUV felt different. I'm not familiar with an SUV so while you were getting your rubber raft ready I checked the tires and they all looked fine."

"The back wheel on the driver's side is flat now. Can you describe the guy?"

"He was on skis and was wearing ski clothes, with a ski mask. He may have had a mustache because the ski hat was red and there was a dark shadow above his lip. He looked like Pillsbury Doughboy on skis. Your coffee is waiting."

"I'm going to take a look around ..."

"The snow storm is here, there isn't going to be much to see including your way back to here," Elizabeth pointed out. "I did get a few pictures of him but they aren't flash and the light isn't good for the distance."

Alex smiled sheepishly. "You're right. Let's see what the cabin cameras show. I'll download my digital pictures and yours. Maybe we got something more than what we think."

Alex went to a cabinet and opened it.

"Why am I not surprised you have monitoring equipment up here too?" Elizabeth said.

Alex went into the security program and pulled up pictures from the cameras surrounding the cabin. "I'm not getting very good pictures from the security cameras. I don't even see a shadow of our visitor. It's not dark enough to go to infrared. I have another problem - four cameras aren't recording."

She downloaded her pictures from her camera and then Elizabeth's. "In this weather, without a flash nothing much was caught. It looks like my flash is too bright against the white snow for the tire marks and footprints."

"Is there a reason why you're treating this like a crime?" Elizabeth asked.

"Besides the prickling at the back of my neck...no. For all I know, I'm just practicing making molds in the snow. They'll be great examples for the team to learn from, I'm sure."

Both listened to the wind whistling around the cabin.

"It looks like Miss. Hanna had the weather pegged right, again." Alex looked at her watch. "It's only one in the afternoon. It feels later," she added as an afterthought.

"Are you hungry? I have a brown bag from Genie."

"What more can I ask for? A cheery fire going, hot coffee, Genie's brown bagged lunch, you and me..." She leaned into Elizabeth and shared a long kiss.

When they parted Elizabeth started to unpack the lunch bag.

"And we have the heater in the bedroom and bathroom going full blast so it should be at least 70 degrees Fahrenheit in an hour, and then we can take our coats off. I hope you don't run out of gas."

"The last time I was up here I had plenty of gas."

"There won't be any sharing a shower. The shower stall is a tiny closet."

"It was a closet. It will be a challenge to share."

Elizabeth turned around to look at Alex. She smiled as if she had a secret that was waiting to be unveiled.

"You can freeze your pretty ass off then, and I'll stand under the warm water. I don't know how it's done but the water is hot."

"Sam keeps my facilities working so I can come up on my days off and not have to worry about restarting things...except the room heater. Do you mind being snowed in with only me...and books, CDs, and a cabin to explore?"

Elizabeth laughed at her added choices. "This is a vacation, right? We don't have to answer phones and we can take our time doing whatever we choose without having to worry about time or people dropping in when we're... unwinding."

Alex giggled at Elizabeth's waggling of her eyebrows and emphasis on 'unwinding'.

"And for meals, I can fix MRE's or boil water for trail packs and..." Alex teased.

"We'll first finish off the sandwiches from Genie," Elizabeth interrupted quickly, "and whatever is in the thermos, then the sandwiches and other things that I packed. Only then will we

call upon your wilderness cooking talents," Elizabeth said. "I heard your wilderness coffee tastes like boiled bark."

"I boil water and throw in a pack of instant coffee. If something falls in the water from an overhead tree, that's not my fault. This is going to be a great vacation with the only inconvenience the flat tire. I have some games somewhere around here too." She beamed at Elizabeth thinking of all the things they could do, then thought about the neighbor she didn't know.

Elizabeth smiled. "I brought a few movies myself."

"After we finish our sandwiches, do you want a tour of the bomb shelter?"

"Not unless you think it's a must. I would rather relax to a comedy. It's been a long day for me, since I'm the night person and you're the day *and* you owe me a massage, preferably before the movie because you fall asleep before the movie ends."

"Tomorrow the tour, then. I do owe you a massage," she grinned. "What comedy do you have in mind?"

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Before the comedy started Elizabeth was sound asleep. A massage and making love, were too much relaxation for her to stay awake, and it was way past her bedtime. Alex watched the comedy alone, and kept her laughs and giggles low, so as not to disturb Elizabeth, who was curled around her. It was a rare occasion that she didn't have to worry about a phone call interrupting their time together.



## Chapter 2

Scampering sounds above her had Alex's senses fully engaged, while she struggled with her body's natural instinct to seek cover. She remained on her stomach curled around a pillow; the pillow that she would normally have her Glock 17 under. However, when sleeping with someone she had made sure it was just out of hands reach. Realizing where she was and with whom, she relaxed.

"It's a squirrel," Elizabeth said, with amusement.

Alex sat up to stare at the tall figure standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Howong..." she cleared her throat, and tried again, "How long has..." then changed directions, "how long have you been up?" She thought she should have been cognizant of Elizabeth getting up.

"A while. Is it a friend of yours?"

"No. Not good to make friends with the wildlife, just in case they get ideas to move in."

Alex threw the covers back and slid out of bed, deciding she might as well get up. It was still dark but the smell of coffee had her mind set on a cup, dark and no sugar. Her toes curled at the cold floor in the bathroom. The shower was wet and Elizabeth's towel was damp. She must have been really tired not to have heard the shower. After her toilet she squeezed into the shower stall. She forgot how small the space was. Normally, the two by two foot shower stall was an inconvenience she didn't use. By the time she made it to the kitchen breakfast smells comingled with coffee. Her stomach growled in appreciation, and she was more than happy it wasn't her cooking.

"Good morning. Is that Genie's breakfast surprise?" Alex asked.

"Good morning. Yes. They aren't the pancakes you were expecting, but just as good. Eggs with all sorts of interesting things tossed in." Elizabeth leaned over to receive the kiss Alex was offering. Alex looked up at the ceiling as more tiny feet scampered across the space between ceiling and roof.

"The noise started about an hour ago," Elizabeth informed her as she turned the burner off under their omelets. "They must think we're invading their space."

"I'll have a look in the attic later. Is there anything I can get for the table?"

"Your cupboards and refrigerator are so bare there's nothing to add that isn't already on the table. I always thought catsup, peanut butter and jam were in every Americans' cupboard."

Alex sat at the table, noting that Elizabeth had moved her laptop and papers to the top of the bookcase.

"I don't dare put anything perishable in the cupboards. I may forget until it rots."

"So that's why you didn't unpack the staples last night."

Elizabeth filled each plate with food and sat down. Alex removed toast from the toaster and laid it on the center plate where two other slices were.

"I'm glad you brought jam," Alex said, using a spoon to drop a big strawberry on her toast. "Did you see how much snow fell?" Alex asked.

"I did. Snow is inches above the porch."

"That's about knee deep for me. I have more winter gear in a trunk in the bomb shelter. Snowshoes, gaiters, and skis included. As soon as it's light I'll visit our friendly neighbor."

"Don't forget your backpack, just in case you fall into a snow drift and need to send up a flair for me to find you."

"I hope you get to me before the bear," Alex said. "Who got you to buy all the equipment?" Alex asked.

"I looked it up on the internet and Cindy Fletcher at Murphy's Sports Outfitter had a few suggestions. She's on my list for possible story fodder."

"I'm sure she has a lot of stories...the funny and sad and all that's in between. She and her rescue dog, Pioneer, are busy during the summer. The area becomes congested with people and some go off the trails and get lost."

While eating, Elizabeth took another look around the room. It was just as Alex described it. A rectangular shaped room that served as a kitchen and front room with a potbellied stove against the wall the bedroom shared. The dining table was handily set near a bookcase and electrical outlets, with heavily draped windows to look out of. The room had a double sleeper couch and a comfortable reading chair with a reading lamp attached to a small table. Her bedroom had room for a double sized bed, a dresser, a tiny closet and that was it. The bathroom had one sink, no mirror, a towel closet made into a shower, and a hot tub, big enough for one person. So far, the only advantages she saw about the cabin was that it was near watchdog Sam, isolated, and for any exercise it would build lung capacity due to the altitude.

"After we clean up, how about a tour?" Alex asked her.

"Just what I had in mind. I didn't want to go looking around without you...just in case you may have someone stashed somewhere," Elizabeth teased

"I moved all my skeletons and what-nots out before I brought you up here. Though, I may have forgotten a blowup doll somewhere."

"I feel forewarned about what may fall out of a closet."

Alex snorted at the mention of a closet. "Closet space in the cabin is few and far in between."

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The kitchen broom closet was where the entrance to the bomb shelter was. Elizabeth thought it was an obvious place for such a doorway and voiced that.

"Believing it to be there and finding it are two different tasks."

"Ms. Spy, have you thought about thermal imaging? If someone were to..."

"NASA was kind enough to have created an IR-block. It's part of the building."

Elizabeth stood on the stairs in the dimly lit shelter, dressed for the cold, as Alex closed the broom closet and locked the false wall behind them. It was cold, but not freezing like outside. Alex stepped past Elizabeth, shining a flashlight on the stairs. She flipped a light switch and the room lit up. She watched Elizabeth's expression with a grin.

"Just how big is this?" Elizabeth asked, looking impressed.

"Larger than the cabin. The shelter is in a hexagon shape extending past the cabin's foundation. This is where Harold really lived."

Elizabeth nodded looking over the fully equipped kitchen. "Is there a heater down here?"

"Yes. I keep it 69 degrees down here, so you may be wearing a sweater all the time while you're down here."

In the center of the hexagon was an open area, like a hub. Standing there, Elizabeth could see into the other spaces. Besides the kitchen was a sitting room with couch and sitting chairs. The couch faced a large HDTV screen on one wall.

"That was not Harold's," Elizabeth said, pointing at the screen.

"No," Alex laughed. "That's after his time. I won it and it was too big for my bachelor pad."

"So this is where you spend most of your time when you're up here?"

"No," Alex said firmly. "This is underground. I don't care how nice and comfy it is, I don't like being below ground unless I have to. I do like to take showers down here, though. More room."

Elizabeth glared at her. "You could have told me before I experienced that closet shower made for midgets."

"I forgot how small it was." Alex rubbed her elbow where she had banged it while washing her hair.

Standing in the center of the hexagon Elizabeth looked into the other rooms, separated from each other by a thin wall.

"That's Howard's study," Alex said.

"It looks like it. There are a lot of books. Are they yours?"

"A few. I didn't have the heart to toss out his things...good thing I didn't. Now you can use them. Sam said he lived an interesting life which is reflected in his collection, but I think, some of these books are Sam's. reading. I believe he misses his friend, Harold."

"According to literary gossip, Harold's first wife, Beth, left him with a box of clothes and whatever was on his back - and she got a cut in his royalties to his first book, which wasn't much of a seller. His second wife, Marie, before they were married, inherited this cabin she had no use of and gave it to him so he could hide from his first wife and write. His first wife took to stalking him," she explained. "Marie and Harold got along so well, they got married a year later. Marie had plenty of money. They had a prenuptial which said whatever he owned before they married, which included the cabin, and his royalties on his books were to be solely his and her money was solely hers. She liked to do his research for him and introduced him to some people that were good sources for information. Marie steered him to writing thrillers which was his niche. They were more friends than lovers and even when the marriage ended, were still good friends. About two years later he married again, and she also had money and they had the same prenuptial. He was a prolific writer, just churning them out. His publisher only wanted to print one a year so he found another publisher that he wrote under another name."

"Doesn't it take a few years to get a story written and published?"

"For most, yes. He's one of those people that can have more than one book going."

"How long did the third marriage last?"

"Six years and twelve best sellers. He was also on good terms with Isabelle, his third wife after their divorce. He was diagnosed with colon cancer and lived for about six months after the diagnosis. Marie and Isabelle were at his bedside when he died. He had four finished manuscripts and a dozen unfinished that he left with Marie."

"The literary society knows more about him than Sunrise, and he came into Sunrise for supplies," Alex said surprised.

"Actually, that information is from the Sunrise Writers Literary Society. They have a signed picture of him at a book signing at the Books From Around the World, with Heather beaming next to him, and they have a Harold White day. Heather knows Marie who lets her know when his next book published posthumously is coming out."

"Is Heather going to have a day for you?"

"She's asked. I'm not ready for something like that. It's a little too close to home. Now that is a bathroom." Elizabeth walked to the bathroom for a closer look. "I'll be using this when we're up here."

The roomy walk-in shower with a bench and seven shower heads was more than what she expected to find in a mountain cabin or a bomb shelter. There was a bathtub with jets in its own corner where more than one person could fit. The toilet was a bidet and had its own closet, as if Harold needed privacy when he used the toilet.

Elizabeth looked at the next sectional. It had shelves crammed with foodstuffs in cans, boxes and glass jars.

"If I had known you had all this, I wouldn't have packed so much. How do you keep track of the expiration dates?" Elizabeth asked. "There's the catsup and peanut butter. No jam?"

"Preserves on that shelf," she pointed to another shelf. "If we didn't take up any supplies some minds would wonder. Every six months food is rotated out and restocked. What is near expiration is donated to soup kitchens."

Elizabeth looked at her for a few moments. "Are you and Sam planning for 2012?"

"I'm taking advantage of what's here. Thought matters."

"I would think Sam has his own underground shelter to keep up with."

"I would think so too. I asked him if he has one and he just smiled. Only with Sam, I don't think it's in a hexagon. I think he's more into long tunnels with pockets of space here and there."

Elizabeth pointed at two trunks. "What do you keep in the trunks?"

"This trunk is winter gear," Alex opened it up, "and that one is for summer gear."

Elizabeth held up a white snow coat from the winter trunk. "This coat looks too big for you."

"It's Mark's. When Mark comes up for his refresher courses with Sam, he stays here instead of at Sam's. He and Linda don't like to keep some of his equipment in their house because of the kids."

"I'll say it again, Alex, I think Mark knows you're more than a small town detective."

"I can't talk about it so we don't discuss it."

"What happens if the two of you are up here at the same time and a call comes in for a detective?"

"Hasn't happened yet. I think in the two years I've been in Sunrise, we've been up at the same time twice and it was for four exhausting hours of training." Alex went to a cabinet and opened it up.

Elizabeth came to stand next to her. "What is all this for?"

"This is my Wi-fi router and main computer. The HD screen is wireless to this computer so I can view the security cameras on the larger screen. I run diagnostics from here and reprogram the security if it's necessary. I can remotely access the cabin's security from anywhere. Something I should have done before I left the office."

"When I booted up my laptop it found three Wi-fi connections. Jax, Spindle and Hooligan," Elizabeth said. "All password protected. I didn't think you would appreciate me waking you for the password to yours."

"Hooligan is new. Jax is Sam's. He leaves it up when he's gone to see who will try and hack in and if they get past the first firewall, he has a Trojan virus that attacks the hacker. I'm Spindle. My password is reverse of the one we have at the Ebben's house."

From where they were they could see the HDTV screen. Alex typed something on the keyboard in the cabinet and the large screen turned on, bringing up views of around the cabin.

"Just like the monitor in the cabin shows, three of the cameras are not recording and one is too blurry to see anything. Two of them are in the woodshed. There's a tunnel from here to the woodshed so we won't have to go out to check, but it's cold in the tunnel. Do you want to come along?"

"What's with you and homes with tunnels behind walls?" Elizabeth asked.

"The next house we move into won't have a basement and no hidden passageways."

"Sounds right," Elizabeth agreed.

Alex moved one of the trunks out of the way and showed Elizabeth the lever that allowed for a portion of the wall to slide open. Before stepping in the dark opening, Alex sniffed the cold stale air and then flipped a switch. A fan came on, blowing air into the tunnel. Dim green lights running the tunnel's length also came on. Alex handed Elizabeth a flashlight and led the way into the tunnel.

The tunnel reminded Elizabeth of large concrete water pipes. Elizabeth felt she had to duck for fear of bumping her head.

Alex's light revealed 2 PVC pipes. One ran along the ceiling with vents evenly spaced and the other ankle high with dim green lights giving the tunnel an eerie look.

"Snow is covering the air vents, that's why I turned the fan on. When there's no snow the vents are camouflaged by the natural environment, like bushes and other fauna."

"Why green lights?" Elizabeth asked.

"It could have been red but either color dimmed doesn't affect night vision. Sam preferred green and he was the one that changed out the lights. When I stay up here I do a visual inspection of the tunnel before I go to sleep to make sure no one has been through here as well as to make sure everything is working," Alex said. "Last night I just looked at the cameras and didn't see anything...literally."

"This place is ideal for you. You're lucky Harold was as paranoid as Sam."

"I got a great place," Alex agreed.

They reached a y-joint in the tunnel. "This way opens near the water tank." She shined her light down the short tunnel. "The septic tank is on the other side of the cabin with no underground tunnel going to it. There's a camera on top of the water tank that gives a bird's eye view of the property. Sam added small cameras in the tree behind the water tower giving a higher panoramic view of the area."

"Just how did Harold get all this up here," Elizabeth asked.

"About six months after Harold took up residence a forest fire wiped out everything on this side of the mountain. Sam and Harold were best buddies by then and Sam told him he could build a safe house for him that would withstand even a forest fire."

They moved further down the main tunnel. Alex's light picked up pine needles on the ground. She paused to study it then pulled out her digital camera and took pictures.

"I hope it's Sam's." Alex shined her light along the tunnel looking for any more signs of disturbance. "I'll look on the past security checks when we get back to the cabin. Turn your light off," she said. Underneath the woodshed floor, she tried to lift the floor-cover but it wouldn't budge."

"Something is on the cover."

Alex drew a bar across the bottom of the floor cover to keep it from being opened from above. They headed back to the cabin.

In the kitchen, the morning light was barely making it through the clouds. Snow was piled higher than the porch in some places.

"Do you think someone was in your tunnel besides Sam?" Elizabeth asked.

"It could have been Sam or Mark." She opened the cabinet to her PC and turned the monitor on. From the cameras working, she only saw animal tracks. Everything was white and pristine.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take a look at the shed first and see what's wrong with those two cameras, then check the other nonworking cameras. Do you want to come along?"

"Not unless you insist you need help. I'll stay here and keep an eye on the fort."

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Thirty minutes later Alex was back. "That blasted squirrel!"

Elizabeth looked up from the book she was reading. A bruise was forming on Alex's forehead. "What happened to you?" She quickly got up to get a closer look of Alex's bruise. "That must have hurt."

"A damn squirrel threw a nut at me! Or, I think it did. If not, it came out to laugh. I thought squirrels hibernated or snuggled up in their tree hole and ate their stored nuts."

"They don't hibernate but they do stick close to home where it's warmer. It isn't rabid, is it? Are you sure it's not Sam with a sling shot?" she joked. She found a plastic bag and looked at Alex. "How well can I trust you to make sure there will be no nuts flying my way while I get some snow for an ice pack for you?"

"It's not Sam. All I need is a hammer."

"To attack the squirrel?"

"No."

Elizabeth pulled her warm coat on. She intended to give Alex support and to see what was throwing objects. The lump didn't look like something a squirrel could do.

From the porch, Alex scooped up snow and filled the plastic bag Elizabeth held for her, then pressed it to her forehead. After looking around she stepped off the porch and headed back to the shed. "Someone had broken in the shed and dumped all the neatly stacked cords of wood onto the floor, the axe is missing, the tree saw is missing, and the two cameras are damaged. I was returning to the cabin to get a hammer when I was hit with something. Nearly had me seeing double. I located one camera inside with a pole over it, frozen. It looks like water was poured over it to freeze the bar to the lens. The other I couldn't reach but it looked like it was disconnected."

Before pulling the shed door open, Alex looked back at Elizabeth then gave another look around the area. Turning back to the immediate problem, she cautiously opened the door and turned on the light before stepping in. Climbing back on a box under one camera, she tapped along the pipe gently to loosen it. Holding on the pipe she gave one more tap and it broke loose.

Elizabeth leaned down and picked up a stone that seemed out of place in the woodshed.

"The lens is broken. I have replacement cameras in the cabin," Alex said.

Elizabeth looked at the end of the pipe. "Do you think this was used to smash the lens?"

"It looks like it. The tip fits the imprint." Alex took a digital camera out of her pocket and took pictures of the disabled camera. For the other camera she moved a trash can out of the way and dragged the box over. A trail mix bar cover was wrapped around the lens. She pulled an evidence bag out of her pocket. "Elizabeth, can you open this?"

Elizabeth opened the bag and Alex unwrapped the lens and dropped the wrapper in the bag. "This is going to be interesting to process. Someone must know Sam's not around and is taking advantage to vandalize my property. I'll have to take a visit to his place"

"Well you do have the evidence kit from your SUV in the cabin," Elizabeth said. "It looks like work just follows you around."

"Didn't you admit to Claire that stories are always going on in your head?" Alex bumped Elizabeth with her elbow.

"Even in isolation, we can't escape our professions," Elizabeth mocked.

"Let's see what the other cameras problems are." Alex exited the woodshed, closing the door behind Elizabeth. The cut padlock she had already put in her pocket to study later. Who but a crook would carry bolt cutters?

Using the snow laden trees for guidance she led the way, clearing a path for Elizabeth until she got to a waist high hump covered in snow. Alex carefully brushed snow off a wooden box used to cover a water pump no longer used. Once uncovered, she used it to sight the spot where the next camera should be, but it wasn't. She crunched her way to the tree and brushed off snow from the trunk and damaged branches. The tree had been hacked at as if someone was taking out their rage on the tree. The senseless damage to a living tree upset her.

"What are you cursing about?" Elizabeth asked. Alex stepped back to let her see the damage done to the tree.

"That's not bear damage." Elizabeth looked around them. She was looking for any sign of vapored breath from behind the trees surrounding them.

Below the spot where the camera would normally be, under layers of snow, Alex found bits of camera. She took more pictures and because of its depth, decided the camera had been broken more than a week ago. The vandalism was done shortly after Sam left for vacation was her suspicion.

Alex went to the third camera and it had something smeared over the lens. Using snow she was able to wipe it off. She would have to see if that helped. There were two people at work here, she was sure. One with a lot of anger aimed at smashing things and the other seemed more reluctant to vandalize.

"Keep an eye out while I go up on the ledge and see if I can see any tracks," Alex said. From memory, she climbed a path, sinking into snow from ankle to knee deep. Pulling binoculars from her pocket she studied the area. From her new vantage point she looked over the area. She couldn't see her cabin or Sam's, but she could see smoke coming from the Fletcher cabin's chimney. There were tracks, but from her angle she couldn't tell if they were foot prints or ski tracks, and they disappeared behind a tree. She looked for more disturbances and found one branch among many, cleared of snow. Without skis, for her to go over and investigate would be exhausting to walk through snow that could be higher than her knees.

She tucked the binoculars back in her pocket then pulled out her camera and proceeded to take pictures of the entire area, zooming in on what she thought were changes in the landscape. Alex returned to where Elizabeth was waiting.

"Someone is out there but I'm not sure what the threat to us is. I do know, someone knows that I have cameras and that person put three out of action."

"Everyone knows you're the type to have security around her cabin."

"After I fix the cameras, I'm going to put my skis on and visit the Fletcher cabin."

"Do you think it's Fletcher?"

"I don't think so. He lost the cabin to the bank and I just don't see him as the type to vandalize other people's cabins."

Alex's gaze swept over the cabin as she neared it. No new footsteps. Would the vandals take the time to remove their skis and walk in their footsteps to vandalize the cabin while they were gone?

The two climbed the stairs to Alex's cabin, following in their footsteps literally. Alex opened the door and both ducked, diving into the cabin as they heard a snap. A rock skidded across the floor. Alex kicked the door closed. Another thud hit the door.

"What did I tell you!" Alex remarked rolling to her knees outraged.

"That isn't a squirrel, Alex."

"Of course not. Since when do they use sling shots."

After taking a glance around the room to see if it was safe, Alex crawled out of the room and returned with a scope. At the corner of the kitchen window she panned the area in front of the cabin. She thought she detected movement, a shadow, and refocused the lens.

"I thought I saw something moving, but now all I see is a blasted squirrel in the tree. Ahh. There he is, wearing a dark coat. Whoever it is, is leaving on skis. Good riddance."

However, the person wasn't heading in the direction of any cabins nor a road and Alex didn't trust the obvious. There were two people, she was sure of that.

"So, what do you suggest?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm going to repair the cameras, inspect the perimeter and visit the Fletcher cabin."

Alex collected what she needed and in thirty minutes had replaced the cameras. Back at the cabin she checked to see if they were working.

"I'm setting the motion alarm so no one can get near without you knowing. I have rifles and pistols and semi-automatics in the summer trunk. If you feel better, you can retreat down there until I get back. Lock the door and wait for me."

"Right now, I'll wait. It doesn't seem anything more than a teenager."

"A mean one," Alex said. "I'm going to start with the Fletcher cabin and then Sam's place and then I'll return. I let you know where I am."

She attached snowshoes to her pack and locked her boots into the skis. She started by looking around her cabin, looking for disturbances in the snow, then moved to points that would be advantageous to a sniper, though it was hard to believe a sniper would be out in this cold. A person using a sling shot was a different story. At the service road she found tracks, first ski and then boot, and truck tracks. It was recent and the chassis was high because it cleared the recent snow fall. There were six people that she knew that had vehicles with a high clearance. Two were in the militia, Lonnie Hoehl and Mack Watts.

Alex glanced at her watch and realized she had been gone for over an hour. Alex clicked on the walkie-talkie.

"Elizabeth, come in."

"I'm here. Go ahead."

"I'm on my way to the Fletcher cabin. I'll let you know when I get there. Over."

"No disturbance here. Over and out," Elizabeth said.

Alex studied the snowflakes that landed on the walkie-talkie. They melted but were followed quickly by others. She needed to get a move on before the snowfall got serious. Glancing at the tire tracks on the side road she wondered which way the tracks were heading. It appeared they were in the center of the road and there were no overlapping prints.

The Fletcher cabin had no smoke coming from the chimney. Snow was cleared off the steps and front porch, and as she neared the cabin, she couldn't see any prints on the porch or leading away from the cabin. A green car was snowed in too deep for her to recognize the make and model, and there were no tracks around it. Whoever was staying at the cabin hadn't made any attempt to dig the car out. She took pictures. There were two cords of wood on the porch.

"And he was offering to help me?" she said under her breath. "Hello. Anyone home?" she called loudly. "Helllooo. Anyone home?"

No movement around the windows. She skied around the cabin, looking for any hints of habitation. Smoke had been coming from the chimney earlier. Where was the occupant? Doing mischief somewhere else? There were no tracks leading away from the cabin. She called again and strained to hear anything. She only heard the wind which had picked up. The snow was coming down steadily and heavier. She still needed to look around Sam's place. Taking another route, not alongside the road, she moved through the woods, looking everywhere for any signs of anything not an animal. It was not wise to get too close to Sam's cabin, since she didn't want to spend time figuring out where he laid traps. She made a complete circle around it and didn't see anything disturbed, not even snow knocked off branches by someone that needed to use the branch to balance a rifle or scope.

It was hours later that she skied back to her cabin. "I'm approaching the cabin, Elizabeth. Any visitors?"

"Just your squirrels but nothing tossed."

Elizabeth was standing on the porch when Alex arrived. She took Alex's skis and leaned them against the wall as Alex peeled off her coat and hat.

"It's nice and warm in here."

"I have hot cocoa or coffee."

"Cocoa with a marshmallow on top, yum. I noticed you had a small container of those little soft sugar cubes." She accepted the mug and took a tentative sip. "I found tracks and a place where a vehicle had been parked recently on the road behind us. No smoke from the Fletcher chimney when I was there and no one answered my call. There's a green car buried under snow. It looks like one of those repainted jobs because it's not a color I recognize on a car lot. The porch was cleared of snow and there's a stack of logs outside. I think it's going to snow another inch."

"It looks it," Elizabeth said.

"Did you get some rest?"

"I couldn't sleep. I was worrying about you."

"Too bad geese aren't useful up here."

"This is a vacation from them too," Elizabeth said. "Next place we move into will have no underground tunnels and entrances into the house and no geese for security."

"That should be easy to eliminate from rentals," Alex said.

"What are you thinking," Elizabeth asked.

"So far, it's just sling shots, damaged cameras, and a flat tire. I have a cell with a signal booster in the bomb shelter. I'm to see if I can reach Gray Horse and let him know of the situation. He won't be able to do anything until this snow stops. The good thing is, whoever was up here, would be foolish to continue with this vandalism in the cold." Alex looked out the window. It was impossible to see beyond the porch. "It's not like we're going to starve for the next two days. So we might as well relax."

"I know just the thing," Elizabeth said.

"Me too. Shall we start in the larger shower?"

"Two great minds that think alike," Elizabeth smiled. "Should we first make the bed, just so the flow isn't interrupted?"

Alex smiled. "So you like the larger bed."

"I'm curious about what it's like to sleep below ground. Weren't you?"

"I was. Then I started having disturbing dreams and decided I would rather the peaceful and less provocative dreams. This is supposed to be a vacation or a rest, not a soul searching experience."

"Just what kind of dreams were you having?" Elizabeth asked.

"Hm. One of them was about me escaping by sliding down a water slide that took me to a cave underground. This shaman type of woman met me and told me I wasn't supposed to be down here and she would help me escape to the upper world safely."

"And what kind of dreams do you have in the cabin?"

"It depends on how involved I am in my cases."

"We'll have to discuss that dream more, but now..."



## Chapter 3

"Mark, Bobbie Lyn's on the line."

Mark looked up from the crossword puzzle he was doing. "What now?" he murmured as he climbed out of the hot tub. Linda exchanged places with him. The deal was, since both office and home were calling them, they took turns getting out of the hot tub to answer the phones.

"Yes, Bobbie Lyn?..." It seemed like a long time before Mark said anything and it was unfortunately, "I'll be right there."

"If you're not back in an hour, I'll be passed out on the bed," Linda told him, getting the expected kiss on her cheek.

Mark grinned at her. "I wish I was there too. This may be a long one. I'll leave a message on your cell." He kissed her one more time, this time on the lips, and went to get dressed.

Thirty minutes later he was standing next to Officer Bobbie Lyn Gutherie, listening to Cindy Fletcher vent at a prank she attributed to that Smith woman. Her hand was in the first stage of poison ivy but by all the sticky stuff also on her hand, she had it under control.

"How sure are you that she put something on your locker?" Mark asked.

"I was working late last week and walked by the lockers. I caught Carol with gloves on, dripping something from a tiny glass tube on Lois Gels's locker handle. I told her to clean up what she just did and she said she wasn't doing anything. She looked guilty about it but I think she wanted to keep her job because when I returned, the room smelled of cleaning soap. This evening, I felt something like oil on my locker handle. I washed my hands but I still got a rash. It looks like and itches like poison ivy. I'm going to file a complaint about her," Cindy said, looking at Bobbie Lyn and then Mark.

"Mr. Murphy gave us permission to open up Carol Smith's locker. It was empty, but I found this," she held up a plastic bag that had a broken ampule in it. "It was at the back of her locker. It's not well lit in here so I figured she didn't see it."

"Good work, Bobbie." He read her writing on the seal.

"Cindy Fletcher identified it as the same she had seen Carol Smith with a week ago."

"Yes, it looks it," Cindy said.

"Was she let go, is that why she cleaned out her locker?" Mark asked.

"Murphy would have told me if he let her go. Either he or I would have to cover her shift. Lonnie works tonight with his buds coming in for practice so someone has to watch the front."

"When did you last see her?"

"Three-thirty. She came back from lunch through the back way. I heard the bell that the door opened. I glanced toward the back and saw her black motorcycle coat and I waited for her to come up front so I could sign out and go home. After a few customers I realized she hadn't come to tell me she on the floor. Since she doesn't talk to me, I usually have to notice she's working, so I went to look for her and couldn't find her. I looked out back and no motorcycle. She left her locker open...it was empty," Cindy said flatly. "I couldn't believe it."

Mark frowned wondering what this meant in the large scheme of things. He looked again at the locker handle now taped, deciding whether for either Mandy's CSI team to remove the locker door or he would gather his team to collect and send it to her lab.

"You didn't hear her motorcycle when she took off?" Mark asked.

Cindy shook her head. "Her cycle isn't noisy."

"We'll need to determine what is on your handle and what is in the ampule. Then find out who put it on the handle. We're going to check out this entire locker room," he told Bobbie." He pulled out his cell and gave Dr. Mandy Sherwood, head of the CSI department that covered four small towns, Antioch, Bales, Brisbane, and Sunrise a call.

*"Sherwood, here. Make it quick, Mark."*

"Mandy, we have a situation here. A substance with..."

*"Urushiol poisoning? Poison ivy, oak or sumac rash?"*

"How did you know? We think the oil was wiped on a locker handle."

*"My first case was a death. Mrs. Burg. Normally, it's not something a person will die from but she was seventy years old. Her entire body was covered with a rash and open sores. It looks like she was scratching herself to misery. Her granddaughter swears she doesn't know how her grandmother could get poison ivy because she never goes out. My team found three of her tea cups had urushiol oil wiped around the rims. Bernard Collins, he was admitted to the emergency room due to poison ivy on various body parts, and we have six other cases with poison ivy poisoning. Mrs. Burg was the only death...so far."*

"Who's handling that investigation?"

*"Jack is handling Brisbane cases and Betsy is handling Antiochs cases. I asked Jack to call the rest of the towns to see if any of them have similar problems. I'll tell them you also have a case."*

"I hope this isn't going to be a new prank the kids pick up," Mark said.

*"Me too. Anything you need me for?"*

"No. We'll collect evidence here since you're busy and drive it to your lab."

*"Evidence? If there's evidence, I would rather my staff collect it. I'll send someone your way. What's the address?"*

"Murphy's Sports Outfitters."

*"In that case, I'll handle it myself. It'll take me 30 minutes with all my lights going. They stay open until 7pm. Who's going to be there?"*

"Me." The moment she said she was driving Mark had a bad feeling. "Mandy, drive carefully. The storm is moving in and you know how unsafe Bailey's Pass is with rain." She assured Mark she would be fine. Mark disconnected and looked at Cindy. "There seems to be a rash of poison ivy outbreaks occurring in two other towns. Where does Ms. Smith live?"

"I don't know. Sometimes she smelled like smoke from a campfire. She was always clean but usually wore the same clothes. Can you excuse me a moment. I need to ring this sale up."

"Go ahead," Mark said, wanting to speak with Bobbie alone.

When she was back to the front counter Mark turned to Bobbie. "Anything you can add?"

"Carol Jones isn't from around Sunrise. I've seen her leaving this place at night and taking the highway out of town. Her dress style is leather, T-shirts, jeans, motorcycle boots and she usually wears a half helmet, however, I've seen her twice with a full helmet along the mountain road," Bobbie said in a low voice.

Cindy returned.

"Cindy, what section does Carol work?"

"Guns and the shooting range counter. Until Carol, I never met anyone that knew more about guns and ammunition than Murph, and she's the real thing. The folks that use the shooting range especially like to talk shop with her. Since word got around about her expertise, we've become busy in the evenings she works. She works the same days Lonnie does and we haven't had any missed fees. She keeps Lonnie and his boys in line. But I'll tell you, if she doesn't like you, there's no changing her mind and it can be a customer or an employee. Three of us, here at

Murph's don't exist to her and two of the most obnoxious customers don't come by when she's here.."

"What three?"

"Me, Lois and Michael. Lois and I worked the mornings so we didn't see that much of her. Michael was working the afternoons and Murph moved him to days to keep the peace. Michael doesn't like working with Lonnie because the till never balances so this worked out for him quite well. Excuse me." She left again to ring up another customer that was checking out from the firing range.

Mark looked at Bobbie Lyn. "What have we on Carol Jones?"

"Nothing, Mark. She hasn't registered any license for gun or car with California. I called Eric and asked him if he could dig up anything on her. He said he'll check and call back. It's a common name," Bobbie said.

Cindy came back.

"Cindy, do you know the reason why Carol left early?"

"I don't know much about her. She's a loner. She brings her own lunch and eats out back where she parks her motorcycle. I just remembered why she doesn't like Lois. Lois was backing up her Honda Civic and bumped her motorcycle. I had already gone home, but I sure did hear about it the next day. Murph had to talk her down."

"When did she start working here?" Mark asked.

"Three months ago, maybe less," Cindy said.

"Can you get me her address?" Mark asked.

"It's a PO Box. She said she was staying with a friend and didn't want any of her mail going to him. She didn't say who the male was," Cindy said. "You know, that's probably where I got on her bad list. Murph interviewed her but didn't fill out any of the paperwork. That's my job. When I started to ask questions she just focused on the wall behind me and it was like I wasn't there."

"Did Murph say why he hired her?"

"Hunting season and she knew her guns. He usually hires a part time person during the hunting season to help him, Michael and Lonnie out, but he put her on the full time list."

"Where is Murph?" Mark asked, realizing the owner wasn't present.

"It's his night off," Cindy said.

"Nellie and Murph do Country Western dancing at the Rodeo Round-Up on Wednesday nights," Bobbie Lyn said. "I checked all the locker handles and only Cindy's has something on the handle. I took a sampling for CSI."

"Dr. Sherwood, good evening. Your order came in this afternoon," Cindy said.

"I'll pick it up when I leave."

Mark and Bobbie Lyn stepped over to help her with the cases she was carrying.

"I have this, Bobbie, you can go on back to patrol."

"Yeah, I better get back out there before calls come in asking where the patrol car is," Bobbie said chuckling.

"The shops open at night depend on our presence to keep the thieves away. Keep an eye and ear open for Carol Jones. Check around and see if anyone can give us some information on why she took off," Mark said softly. "And Bobbie, be careful. She maybe someone of interest and if she is, she's dangerous. She's very intelligent."

"She fits the profile of the sniper that shot at Alex. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"I'll stop in at the coffee shop."

"Whatever you say, remember we have a gang that makes people disappear if there's a threat to them."

"Like pushing Alex off a cliff," Bobbie said.

"Yes."

"I'll be careful, Mark."

While Dr. Mandy Sherwood was testing and collecting evidence of malicious mischief, Mark stepped aside and called Linda, then tried to reach Alex. Unable to reach her to discuss his suspicion of Carol's identity, he left a voice mail and then called Sam and left a voice mail.

"Cindy, do you have a picture of Carol?" Mark asked.

"No. Oh, yes." She turned and went into the office. She opened a file with a collection of pictures. "We took pictures of our last picnic, about a week before Carol was hired. I couldn't believe it but she was in the crowd. It's not a good picture of the group so we didn't post it on the bulletin board."

"You're right. This isn't a good picture."

"She's right there."

"Sitting on her motorcycle," Mark said thoughtfully. "Can you remember what was happening where she was staring?"

"No. It was Hoot and Holler at the park."

"It was a busy weekend. As usual a lot of out-of-towners. Can I keep this picture?" Mark asked.

"You can have it. She was too good to be true, right?" Cindy asked.

Mark smiled. "If this is who I think, don't mess with her. Call me if you see her."

"Gladly, she gives me the creeps. I have to go. Lonnie isn't that trustworthy about charging his friends for the use of the rooms and some like to slip out about now through the back way. He forgets to charge them before they use the rooms."

"Lonnie Hoehl?"

"Yeah. You should warn Lonnie about Carol. His son Johnnie and his friend, Allan Watts have a crush on Carol. I didn't see either of them come in to target practice this evening, so they must know she's not here."

Mark was standing where he could watch the locker room and noticed Lonnie watching Mandy, with a few of his friends hanging back.

"Hi, Lonnie. Finished with your shooting?"

He stood up straighter. "What do want?" he asked gruffly.

Mark looked around before answering. Lonnie looked around too.

"Your pals there aren't planning on sneaking out the back without paying, are they?"

"You have a lot of nerve accusing people of things."

"The last time I used the practice range here, I noticed everyone had to pay first. You're not taking advantage of Murph not being here are you?"

"This is not your business," he said defensively.

"Defrauding your employer by not collecting fees for the use of his premises is my business." Mark didn't lower his voice and the men hanging around the hall to exit out the back way quickly moved to the front cash register.

"You're harassing me," Lonnie said.

"That won't work. You've already been identified as the cause for Murphy losing money on your shift only, and this evening, I was able to observe you wave Harvey Green through the back door while we were all in the locker room. I suggest you go home now and find a lawyer."

"You can't tell me to go home!"

"But I can. You're fired," Murph said firmly.

"On what grounds?"

"I told you if you try to sneak your friends through again without paying, you would be out of a job here. Four of your friends had free pass cards. I'm the only one that gives those out. I keep them locked in my desk. I just counted how many are there and I'm missing two dozen. That's \$20 a pop."

"Well they lied. I didn't give them anything. Maybe that new employee..." he paused and then continued, "maybe someone else stole them."

Murphy laughed. "You're right to reconsider blaming Carol Jones. She's not one to make enemies with."

"Well it wasn't me!"

"Bye." Murphy gestured for him to leave. "So what's CSI doing here?"

Mark waited for Lonnie to leave. Lonnie hesitated at the door until Cindy opened the door for him and shooed him out, then locked the door.

"One shooter got out without paying," Cindy said.

"It's still better than it used to be," Murphy grumbled. "Did Carol say why she isn't here?"

"No."

"She assured me with her watching the till and customers, there wouldn't be anyone slipping out without paying. She not only stopped the losses on her workdays but attracted new customers. So why is CSI here?"

Cindy held up her hand.

"You have a rash?" He looked at it closer. "You too? That's poison ivy. Pat and Mags didn't make it tonight because Pat has a rash, poison ivy, all over her right hand and legs. She has no clue how she got it."

Mandy was standing in the doorway to the locker room. "Image that. You think we have some kids pulling a nasty prank."

Mark shook his head. "Tomorrow we'll put up a map and see where all these occurrences are happening. This is only Alex's first day off. She has two more and she's going to miss all the fun."

"Make the meeting after ten and you'll have more information from my lab," Mandy said.

Mark looked out the window and noted that the storm had moved in. Something was making him nervous about the weather and Mandy traveling back to her lab and then home.

"It's not a good night to be driving back to your office, Mandy," Murphy said. "Not many people were at the dance. No one wants to drive through the pass when it rains. Why don't you stay with us? Nellie would shoot me if she finds out I let you drive in this weather."

"I..." Mandy started.

"That's a good idea," Mark said. "You can lock the evidence you gathered in the evidence room."

"It would be a good idea," Cindy added.

## Chapter 4

"Well, I can see that we have the old stand-by for after Thanksgiving. I love turkey sandwiches. Besides the turkey dinner, to me this is second best."

"Turkey sandwiches?"

"Yes. Thick cuts of meat with mayonnaise. The only thing my mother was good at...baking turkeys, while I perfected the sandwich by using wheat nut bread and for variation, a slice of cheese."

Elizabeth nodded at Alex wondering if this would be a good time to ask her more questions about her mother. If Alex spoke about her family it was usually about her trips to visit her twin aunts that lived in Washington State. That's about all she really knew, with the exception of her mother's boyfriends and husbands who sometimes abused Alex and her brother. She also, knew her brother had died in a motorcycle accident but Alex didn't seem especially distressed over his death. Elizabeth decided to leave that for another time.

"So, why don't we bring out the board games?"

Alex looked up from her half eaten sandwich.

"I noticed in your basement you have a Chutes and Ladders. I got pretty good at that with Noel."

Alex looked up the ceiling, annoyed with the noise in her attic. "I had bought it for Katie for last Christmas and hid it up here because she can find presents like a blood hound on a scent and forgot where I hid it."

"She already has the game."

"I bought another. What are they doing up there?"

"We can play in the basement where you won't hear your up stair guests," Elizabeth said.

"You're getting to like it down there," Alex said.

"It has most of the comforts of home and since it's too dark outside we may as well enjoy the space down there."

"You like the spacious bed too," Alex said.

"And the more than adequate shower. How much water did you say you have?"

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Both women were startled when a boom sounded above their heads then a rocking motion, followed by a few more muffled booms. Darkness engulfed them.

Alex rolled off the couch, knocking the Chutes and Ladders players onto the floor. Quickly she made her way to her emergency trunk, pulling out her flashlight and backup gun.

The ground shook again.

Alex crept up the stairs to her cabin but backed down when the floor cover was hot to the touch.

"What was that? A gas explosion? Did we leave the gas on?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, it wasn't our gas. Let's wait out the fire. This bomb shelter was made for something worse than this. With all that noise, Grey Horse would have heard it at the ranger station."

"With that much noise we should also be getting the Mounties," Elizabeth said. "Your vacations are a bit too exciting, Alex."

Alex moved her flashlight near the staircase. The metal trapdoor and the seal were preventing smoke to leak. "I agree. If this is an escalation of the other stuff, we're going to have to do more than hide. Let's dress warmly and see what it looks like at the water tank and wood shack."

"What about the boot print in your tunnel?"

Alex went to the trunk and pulled out clothing. "That's what my weapon is for."

"I sure hope it was just an accident," Elizabeth said.

"Me too, but I'm not taking chances. "These are Mark's and will fit you better than my clothes. They're white and before the fire, would have let you blend in with the snow. With the explosion there's going to be debris of I don't know what."

"After this vacation, we're hiring a vacation planner," Elizabeth said as she pulled the large pants over her sweatpants.

"I agree."

Alex led the way to the water tower exit, thinking if there was a fire, that would be one place not damaged. Through the vents water was dripping. Alex pushed at the cover plate and finally got it to open. Looking out she could see flames in the night, still burning what was left of her cabin and her neighbors. Snow was falling thick. Looking toward Sam's cabin, she could see there was a fire over there too.

"Whatever caused all this, covered a lot of ground." Alex pulled herself out of the tunnel and turned to help Elizabeth out.

"Alex," Sam said from behind her.

"Sam! Are you alright?"

"Are you two alright? Do you two know how damn lucky you are? Come on. We need to get you out of here before that drone passes by again."

What happened?" Alex and Elizabeth asked simultaneously.

"A small drone plane flew overhead. It must have had explosives because as it went over your neighbor's cabin, it exploded then your cabin and then mine. Someone wanted to be sure they hit their target. Your SUV exploded too. We'll be staying at one of the guest cabins down the road until you get a ride back down the mountain." He sniffed the air as he led them away from the collapsed water tank. "This snow fall is going to work its way into a storm."

"That's some drone to fly in a snow fall and hit its targets," Alex said.

"Someone had to have dropped beacons because it looks like direct hits."

"There was someone earlier. They flattened two of my tires, took pot shots at me with a sling shot, and damaged two cameras."

Sam crunched his way to his SUV parked on the back road. The three gratefully climbed into Sam's battered SUV. It was still warm.

"I have to call the chief and let him know we're okay."

While Alex called her boss, Elizabeth, sitting in the passenger seat, studied Sam carefully. "So Sam what have you been up to lately?"

Sam briefly glanced at her and then looked back out at the road as they bumped along. "Not much. Spent some time in the city getting pampered...got bored and headed back early."

Elizabeth nodded, partially listening to Alex's conversation. There seemed to be an argument going on which kept Alex preoccupied.

Elizabeth first met Sam when her previous lover, an FBI agent, introduced him as one of her few real friends in the business. It was because of Sam, that Elizabeth came to work with SID. It was her trust in him that gave her strength during the hard times.

"Did you see the plane?" she asked softly.

"I picked up the radio wave and went out to see what was going on. I could barely see it but when the first bomb went off at the first cabin, I didn't wait around to see if I was the next."

"Is there anyone else up here?"

"Not many people up this weekend. Too soon after Thanksgiving and there's a storm coming in. Another reason for me to get back early. I prefer to be snowed in than out."

"Sam?"

"Yes?" Sam replied to Alex.

"Just when did you get back? I checked your cabin out earlier..."

"Did you take my road kill specimen?"

"Was that what was in the pink bowl?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes. Someone's been practicing with a sling shot on the wildlife."

Alex touched her forehead. "A sling shot? That's what hit on the head."

"I didn't get back while there was enough light to see if there were any tracks around my cabin," Sam said.

They got out of the SUV and hurried to the cabin. The wind was picking up and it was cold. While Alex secured the cabin, Sam started a fire in the potbellied heater. Elizabeth did her own checking of the cupboards. There were two cans of baked beans and in a plastic container, something she couldn't recognize in the light from her flashlight.

"We're going to have to setup watch," Sam said. "It's too dark for the rangers to come up and investigate and the storm is already here."

"I'll take the first watch, then Elizabeth and then you. You looked wiped." Alex said. Sam and Alex looked at their time pieces, figuring how long each watch would be.

Sam nodded and moved a chair closer to the fire.

"Who is after us now?" Elizabeth asked.

"I have a lot of ideas. Whoever it is, I hope they freeze to death in the storm." She settled away from the window worrying about bullets that could pierce the building's walls. Right now she was feeling exposed. She got up and started to head for the bedroom to look around.

"Shh," Sam whispered, straightening up after colliding with Alex.

"Sam, I don't like this. I'm feeling like an exposed duck here," she whispered.

"Me too. I think until the storm is over, we may be safer in your bomb shelter."

"It's going to be the first time I've used his life support stuff."

"That's okay, I helped him set it up. We'll head over there and worry about who knows you have a basement later."

"You know, it's snowing out there," Elizabeth informed the other two.

"That'll be a mixed blessing. I have warmer clothing we can slip into and weapons if you need some," he said to Alex.

"How the hell you can be so prepared when your place went up," Alex asked.

"I'm like a squirrel that stores my stuff in more than one pile. Before we go, I need to check out my SUV."

"I'll help; Elizabeth can be the look out."

Stepping out on the porch, none of them could see due to the thick snow fall.



## Chapter 5

Progress was slow as Sam searched for two of his supply caves in the dark, and then, minus the usual trees for locating Alex's cabin, found the remains of the water tank and then the entrance back into the bomb shelter.

Sam knew more about the accommodations in the shelter than Alex did. He showed them were under a cover against a wall were cots to pull out. Warmer and dry, the three attempted to sleep.

Meanwhile, the snow storm raged on, covering everything in another layer of white.

The white clad figure that had guided the drone and fired at the cabins, was disgusted with the winds from the approaching storm. They had caused him to miss his first shot. As the assassin was coming out the back way, the old man's SUV was spotted with three passengers in it, taking shelter in an empty rental cabin. It meant his job wasn't finished.

When the chill factor dropped and the snow started to fall, the assassin decided it wasn't worth losing digits over and rather than finding shelter in a cabin that had no warmth, left for a warmer place. There was always another day.

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"Hey, you two. Rise and shine. We need to make contact with the outside world," Sam told the two women.

Alex rose stiffly. Sleeping in a cot took the body a while to get used to. She dropped out of it. Folded her blanket and reattached the cot to the wall.

"I can't believe I didn't see these when I looked the basement over."

"You were distracted, if I recall," Sam said.

"So, what do you have in mind?" Alex asked, pulling on her boots.

"It's still overcast and colder than an iceberg out there. Two feet of new snow. I contacted Grey Horse. He's bringing fed agents out to investigate. Drones aren't the usual weapons of the local militia. We'll go the long way around to avoid contamination of the area."

"Is there a way we can get them to not find this shelter? Once it's in the reports..."

Sam nodded. "Amanda Briscole can keep secrets. Joe Carpenter is her partner. I don't know much about him."

"Amanda? What brings SID and not DEA," Alex asked.

"Me, I thought. What has you worried?" Elizabeth asked curious.

"The MO of this accident has the SID worried," Sam said.

"So, where are we going?" Elizabeth asked.

"It would be wise to send you back down with Gray Horse but he's already making the long trip to the airport and back with the agents."

"What is SID worried about it?" Alex decided that if Sam was answering Elizabeth's questions without his usual noncommittal replies then she may as well start asking her own questions.

"Someone stole four remote controlled small planes that were in a storage unit SID uses."

"Hm," Alex rubbed her forehead. "Well, that certainly has my red flag warnings up."

"Yep. To complicate matters...don't forget 9-11 and the ever-present terrorist threat."

"Who's working on this besides the SID?" Alex asked suspiciously.

"No one."

"You know, I would say you're a magnet for trouble Sam...but I can't."

Sam nodded. "For that matter...all three of us."

"Not Elizabeth," Alex said.

"Do you know that for sure?" Elizabeth asked. "I don't feel all that safe."

"What we need to do is stay safe until SID gets up here and I can send you two back home."

"So, we're now to the question...who was the target?" Alex looked up at the exit to her snug bomb shelter. She pulled out the periscope and looked for any sign of life. "Hey, I got a hit," she whispered excitedly.

Sam exchanged places with her. "Uh huh. Do you have a telescope stronger than this?"

"You can kick it up," she explained pushing a small button at the base.

"Ehh. Not so smart to let us see a rifle," he muttered softly as he moved the periscope around looking for anything else. "I know there wasn't anyone out there earlier." He swung it back to where the sniper was and then cursing under his breath. "Our visitor has disappeared."

"Someone approaching?" Alex asked.

"Not sure," he whispered, least their visitor was near.

Alex got anxious. Sam must have the same feeling because he had them moving back to the shelter. Suddenly behind them they heard a cover move, the soft noise amplified by the

tunnel. Sam pushed Alex forward who in turn pushed Elizabeth forward, then slammed the door close. They all heard a thunk just before the door shut.

"Holy shit!" Alex whispered. "That's an assassin."

"Someone is determined to collect on their contract," Sam said.

"Now for sure this is not going to be my safe house."

"Why not?" Sam asked as he moved into the space behind the shelves. "What do you have in here?"

"What are you looking for? It's where Mark and I store I stuff."

"We need to get topside and nab our assassin before he or she gets away," he said.

Elizabeth raised two eyebrows. "We?"

"You'll be our eyes."

Alex looked toward her worriedly then back at Sam. She sighed. Maybe she should ask Elizabeth before she made decisions for her.

"Elizabeth..." she started.

"I'm fine, Alex. I've done worse."

"Worse?" she asked worried.

"Yes. Sitting and waiting is the worst thing I have ever done. I would do anything no matter how scary."

Alex looked over at Sam uncertain.

Sam pulled out equipment he needed. There were four radios. Sometimes Sam had Genie, Mark and her chasing him and she was the keeper of the radios. He set the frequency and handed one to her and one to Elizabeth. He pulled out two sniper rifles and a pair of white socks, handing one rifle and sock to Alex. She slid the sock over the barrel.

"The rules, don't speak unless it's for misdirection, or a real emergency." He taped one of the buttons causing it to give off static. "Assume but don't rely on the idea that our hunter can hear." He pushed in the ear bud and connected it to the radio. Elizabeth and Alex fit in their ear buds.

"Where are we going to exit from here?" Alex asked out of curiosity.

"Well, there if it's safe on the other side of that door. Alex?"

Alex put her hand against the door and then flicked the channels on the cameras she had monitoring her hide away. "Cameras have been knocked out. The door feels warm. Check it out."

Sam placed his hand on the door, as did Elizabeth. He frowned and waited a few minutes more. "It's cooling. Stun grenade with a canister attached. At least it's not phosphorous." He took a deep breath.

"I don't like the idea of us all exiting out the same place," Alex mentioned, knowing it was looking like that was exactly what they would have to do.

"Me too," Elizabeth agreed.

Sam looked at the door to where he would have liked to have escaped through. "I think we can take the stairs through the cabin and then check the scene before we can split three ways. We can all start up the back but there's a rock that Elizabeth can roost on and spy out the land. It's light out, but visibility isn't going to last with the weather."

Alex nodded, having lived through two years of winters in the area, she quickly learned that unless she planned on spending the week snowed in, it was wise to either beat the snow storm and get out or plan to hibernate.

"Isn't there a way to check on the tunnel?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes," two voices answered. "If you want to stick your head out there," Alex added. "The tunnel is made of stuff to withstand an explosion but if it's a phosphorous fire...it'll be burning for a long time."

"So, the way to see if there is a fire is to see if the snow is melting topside," Elizabeth guessed.

The two looked at each other. "Yes. Alright, let me take a sneak peek from the top of the stairs."

Sam climbed up the stairs with Alex close behind to pull him back to safety if necessary. However, through one of the air vents he slid the goose necked telescope to look around. "Looks okay. Visibility is bad. Snowflakes are pretty big out there. Listen, I don't want any of you getting lost."

"Don't lose your radio Elizabeth. It has a locator in it for us to find you," Alex warned her.

Elizabeth nodded and slid it into her coat pocket and buttoned it down.

Sam smiled. "Do you know how to fire one of these things?" He handed Elizabeth a P7.

She checked the lock, removed the clip, shoved it back in and held it loosely at her side.

"Right."

"Is there something you want to tell me, girlfriend?" Alex asked feeling off balance.

"I had a girlfriend in the FBI, remember? She insisted I learn what I wrote about. If my detective was going to pull out a gun, I had to learn it inside out." She smiled at Alex. "That's not saying I can hit the bulls eye but it does mean I look before I shoot. I also know what a look out does. Clueless Until Midnight was my training manual."

Sam exchanged looks with Elizabeth and nodded. "Sure was. Let's go. I'll give you five minutes to get in position and then I'm out. You don't have a watch," he pointed to Elizabeth. She shook her head.

"You'll hear Alex tell you when to go."

The two women nodded. Alex moved to the door and checked the door again. It was cool. Carefully she pulled the door open. She paused and then moved out, her gun extended in two hands before her. She flipped a switch near the door and a red glow lit up the tunnel, though some of the lights were out with red bits scattered on the floor.

Elizabeth was terrified, but she moved forward listening for anything louder than her heartbeat. She had been through several mock training skirmishes with Helen, her FBI girlfriend, to get a feel for what it was like. On her first one she froze because it seemed so real. The second wasn't as bad and she actually got a compliment for thinking quick by not shooting the wrong person. But after her two years of being stalked, this type of activity seemed to have a less numbing effect on her and she managed not to stumble on suddenly clumsy feet.

Her eyes studied the bits of metal lying about as they neared where the grenade had been tossed. The top to the opening was just big enough for a fist. But to release the latch required Alex's encrypted code, not something Elizabeth easily remembered.

Alex showed her two fingers and mimicked clicking on the radio then showed three fingers. Elizabeth nodded and let Alex unlock the larger cover. Snow covering the tunnel floor dropped down. Elizabeth adjusted her NV goggles and then nodded at Alex. Alex made sure she knew to use the periscope before poking her head up. Elizabeth nodded relieved. She had every intention of looking before jumping out of Alice's hole.

Elizabeth scanned the area, and not seeing anything when the two clicks on her radio sounded, she counted to three and climbed the ladder, lying flat in the cold snow. The cover moved back into place automatically. She rolled to her left, knowing that there was debris from the cabins scattered about. She was hoping not to discover any body parts from wildlife. She

brought her attention back to her task. To observe, she needed a high point. She headed for a huge boulder covered in snow. She wondered if Alex was right and the assassin would not use a rifle because her fingers would be too cold to squeeze off the perfect shot.

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Alex moved up the stairs to what was left of her woodpile. Silently she cursed whoever was responsible for burning out her entire winter store of wood and a cabin that was just getting comfortable. She glanced at her watch and waited for one more minute before she gave Elizabeth the signal. She then hefted her rifle with her and ran from the remains of the woodshed and through the remains of the plane. She could see footsteps already being covered with the falling snow. The footsteps headed towards Sam's cabin. Rather than follow them she headed up the rocky slope, intent on getting a view of the area that used to have three cabins.

Alex dropped to her stomach and held her rifle pointing in the direction where she thought she heard someone grunt. Above her she could now hear heavy breathing and blowing on fingers. Visibility was low in the blowing snow.

Damn! They are going to see my footprints if they look this way.

But the crunch of footsteps continued above her, crossing to her left back towards her cabin. She counted to five and rose. Looking in the direction of the footsteps, all she saw were footsteps. Glancing around her cautiously, she studied anything not blending in, not trusting anything to luck.

She moved far enough away to still see the break in the snow from the footsteps but not to be seen. The terrain she was moving over was rocky, slippery and difficult to move over very quickly. Whoever it was, was making fast progress. The snow started coming down harder so she could only see a yard ahead of her.

Stopping to rethink this approach, she nearly missed the sound of someone blowing on their hands again. Peering through the white she froze. Right before her was a white figure pulling a rifle to his shoulder. Alex's hands were too stiff to get a good shot off, she knew that. Suddenly she dived to the ground and rolled cursing while holding her rifle at ready. She felt cold, tight and hoped the person swinging the rifle in her direction was in worst shape.

The sound of a rifle firing had her rolling behind a rock. The bullet ricocheted when it hit the boulder. Another shot was fired and not from a rifle.

*Elizabeth!*

Alex pulled her rifle into position and peered into the white mess swirling around her. She couldn't see her shooter...but she could feel him...or her. Alex threw herself back, hoping she accurately remembered this section of the slope to know that behind her was another boulder that she could brace herself against. Everything was covered with white...except for the dark shape that was dropping toward her. Alex shifted her weight and used the rifle butt to hit her attacker. It reminded Alex of the last person she fought...in the rain and lost. This time it would be different.

Her rifle butt slammed down against the barrel of the shooter. Alex shifted her weight dropping to one knee and pushing up, catching the rifle of the assassin and slamming the barrel down. Her adversary dropped the rifle. And as Alex moved to attack a body knocked both of them over the hard rocks. Both were momentarily stunned and before Alex could regain her feet a figure Alex recognized as Sam fired something at the shooter.

"Let's get our quarry and gather up Elizabeth. It's too harsh out here. Gray Horse radioed in. The two SID investigators are holed up at the vacant cabin we were in."

"Elizabeth, come in."

"I'm here," a breathless voice answered above them.

Sam hauled the unconscious figure onto his shoulders and the three marched down the slope.

"Hey, do you know where we're going?" Alex asked panting as she took the lead to break a path for Sam.

"Yes. Look over to your right."

Two headlights were heading toward them.

"Right now I don't care if it's not the Mounties," Elizabeth muttered between two cold lips.

"Hey! Get in!" Gray Horse shouted at the group as they staggered through the thigh high snow. Two figures sitting in the vehicle quickly exited and helped Sam with his load.

"Oh, it's warm," Alex groaned as she sat between Elizabeth and Amanda. Her partner was with their unconscious prisoner, cuffing the cold hands.

"I'm glad to see you and this warm car."

"It looks like trouble just follows you two no matter where you hide." She nodded to her partner and he pulled off the mask of their sniper. With his cell phone he took pictures of the face.

"When we get to the cabin we'll get a print and send it to Interpol."

When they reached the cabin it had a fire burning and the smell of something cooking.

"We got the oven working and put the fried chicken in to burn off some of the grease," Amanda said.

"Warm and food. This is great," Alex hummed.



## Chapter 5

Monday they were snowed in and Agent Briscole, once Alex's SID partner and Elizabeth's handler, shared the information SID had gathered.

"So, seven more on the list are dead?" Alex tried to recall the names on the list.

"Yep. So that makes, Johnnie Redfield, Dr. Gene Richmond, Carl Gates and Richard Mack...Gates and Mack met their end in a small plane crash about a year ago on the way to a police convention. BJ Headers remains...and I do mean remains, were found in the desert...a small stolen private plane crashed into his shack...we only found a small part of his body. Someone had cleaned the area to remove evidence of his remains ...let's see that's three...Bill Prost...his RV caught on fire on the freeway and nothing left but ashes. Thomas Meadows, drowned in his bathtub...OD. Mike Houston was shot in a bar room fight a week ago. And...Mike Learner died a few days ago in the prison yard."

Alex looked worriedly at Elizabeth. "Someone is hurrying up the hits."

"Uh huh." Sam nodded. He took another sip of his coffee. He stretched his legs out and looked over at their sullen prisoner.

"So, why are we on it?" Elizabeth asked.

Amanda got up and handed Elizabeth a piece of paper. "You still have a contract out on you...and Alex unfortunately pissed off someone. And Sam...well, he's just Sam."

Sam nodded and saluted her. "So we don't know who the real target is," he surmised softly. "Or maybe three in one?"

Amanda nodded. She gestured toward their prisoner. "She's got a bad headache from the dart. We should be getting a jail wagon in a few hours. Chief wants to start on her right away."

Elizabeth cleared her throat and nursed her warm cup of coffee for a few minutes before looking up at Amanda. "You may not have her for long. Don't trained assassins have a pill or something to swallow so when they are captured they croak?"

"Only in your books," Amanda told her. "No one wants to die that bad. By the way, when we were checking her, did you see that scar on her leg?"

Alex nodded. To her it meant this probably her sniper from a few years back.

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"So, where are you going to stay, Sam?"

"Around. You two get on home to your warm bed. Your kits will be wondering if you deserted them," he teased.

"Don't change the subject," Alex told him.

"I've got two SID agents protecting my back. We'll be okay up here."

"Amanda is staying up here? I didn't take her for a camping person."

"I guess you're going to have to get yourself a new SUV," Sam said.

"My insurance agent is going to tell me it's not covered for remote airplanes," Alex groaned. "I haven't finished paying for the thing."

"Well, you never know what Santa is going to bring you," Sam grinned.

"Well, if it's a replacement for my SUV, tell him not to be dropping it down the chimney."

"Afraid it will clean the thing?"

"No. Elizabeth and I will be spending a nice romantic evening in front of it and I'll be really pissed off if he interrupts."

"Hmm," Elizabeth commented. "Come on charmer. Let's go. I see lights and I know in my cold bones that it's our ride home."

"Hey you two. Can't you take a vacation," grumbled Chief Harper as he stomped his snow covered feet on the porch. Mark followed him nodding as the chief did to the group sitting around the table. Amanda conveniently slipped into the one bedroom, to avoid complicating the situation by being seen.

The Chief and Mark spoke with Sam and the SID agent that introduced himself as a Federal Agent. Elizabeth and Alex listened. Sam pretty much gave out the information, which didn't escape Harper and Mark.

"Yes, we got the notification about Mike and Mark heard about the barroom death last night from some chit chat at the coffee shop. We were worried about you two..." Harper glared at the two women. "Hell, you both need a bodyguard. Let's get going. Snow is falling again. Blasted weather."

"I'll send you the pictures...I'll borrow Gray Horse's equipment. He should be back tomorrow with supplies and I hope a better weather report," Sam mentioned. He looked at the SID agent. "That alright with you?"

He nodded.

The ride back down was quiet. There was no tension and no questions. The two women were left off at their house. Angel came galloping towards them, pausing long enough to sniff them for new odors.

"Come on. Those two were too polite to say anything but I have to get out of these clothes and into a nice hot shower, clean clothes and between clean warm sheets."

"I'm not so sure I can take any more of your cabin vacations," Elizabeth said.

"Honest, I usually have something else planned for special people that I take up there...though, you're really the only special girl I've taken up there. I mean, the others were just..."

"I got it, Alex."

Elizabeth kissed her forehead and both resumed their walk to the shower. While Alex quickly peeled off her clothes and got into the shower, Elizabeth paused to read the note on the door.

"What's it say." She looked back at Elizabeth who was sniffing the hot tub that was filled with warm water.

"That smells nice. What did Linda put in there?" Alex commented.

"Linda said she cleaned the hot tub and filled it with a rose scent. She says we don't know how to relax."

"I am trying," Alex said. "But is it my fault other people don't read my schedule?"

"We need a new place to call home," Elizabeth said. She stepped into the shower and let Alex help her wash herself.

"I agree. Tomorrow, we'll check the want ads."

"I'm thinking seriously of buying some land next to the forest. How does a castle sound?"

"Does it already have a castle on it?"

"No."

"I'm not sure I can wait for it to be built. I feel over exposed here. I'm tired of worrying about an unexpected guest popping up during breakfast...or some other time."

"I agree. I'm also ready for no geese in my yard."

"Maybe we can stay up in the cabin until your castle is done," Alex suggested, yawning enough to have her jaw crack. "Do they have prefabs?"

"Hon, you don't have a cabin. You have a bomb shelter, which doesn't have a shower or toilet," Elizabeth said.

"Sam said they have prefab cabins. They just ship the parts and click the ends together and presto."

"Alex..."

"Hmm?"

"Have you ever heard of cabin fever?"

"I've been accused of having that just living in my one bedroom apartment...and they were right. Then you came along and rescued me."

"Well...anyway...I would get cabin fever up there. This is alright because ten minutes from here is a small town with people, not bears. We need to rent a place in town."

"Tomorrow. I feel brain dead. Let's go to bed."

"I'm so tired from my vacation," Elizabeth said.

End

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