

## ~ *Sunrise III: Cabin Fever* ~

I. Christie

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### **Chapter 1**

#### *Day One – Alex's Cabin*

Elizabeth laid her winter coat on top of her overnight bag behind the driver's seat and glanced back at the SUV's cargo space where it was packed with food and survival supplies for more than a week. Studying it speculatively, she wondered if she was over-doing her packing. According to the weather report a snow storm would hit the mountain while they were up in the cabin being cozy and far from people. She shivered as the wind swept rain into the carport. At the moment, she was thinking snow would be better than the rain that managed to get under her pulled up collar.

Alex assured her the cabin was winterized and had modern amenities like warm water, a compost toilet in the cabin, heat, shower and a bathtub with jets...and sometimes bad reception for cellphones and internet connections. 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 did.

"Nope. It's best to be prepared as much as one can for the unknown." She smiled and closed the passenger door. Her motto, travel light but prepared, was firmly entrenched in her being. If she were being extreme she would have additional supplies strapped on the Discovery's roof.

Days ago, Elizabeth had gone on the internet and researched how to prepare for a snowstorm if living far from roads and neighbors. With a list she got from her research, she inventoried what they had and then went to Murphy's Sports Outfitter to shop for what more they could use. She bought a new coat that went past her knees, ski pants, four sets of thermal underwear for each of them, new boots for her, 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 cellphones; repair kit; 2 more pairs of gloves; hat; scarf; wool socks; and fleece blanket. Nothing cotton.

It was one thing to be hours away from civilization and another to be isolated and snowed in with no help within a day's walking distance in deep snow, 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's head like bees around a hive.

"Elizabeth! Alex is on the phone," Linda called. She stood in the covered entrance way with a warm coat wrapped around her as wind and rain sought to drench her. She hurried back into the warm and dry house.

The Ebben's house that Alex and Elizabeth were renting sat on a cliff with windows giving dramatic views of the oncoming storm with flashes of lightening over the ocean and far away. This wasn't the storm predicted to hit the mountain as it was veering off to splatter Mt. Shasta residents along the California/Oregon border.

Elizabeth pressed the remote-lock and ran from under the protection of the carport to join Linda Scripts in a dry and warm house. Kittens scampered before her and Angel, the Irish Wolfhound, gave a short bark and bounded after them.

Linda and her husband agreed to watch over their rescued kittens and mother cat while they were gone which extended to house sitting. Her husband was Detective Mark Scripts, Alex's partner with the Sunrise Police Department.

"She's drooling about a breakfast surprise?" Linda asked as she handed the portable phone to Elizabeth.

They both laughed at a muted protest from the phone caller saying this wasn't a sex call.

"Genie said she would prepare us a breakfast and wouldn't tell us what it will be. Alex thinks she talked Genie into mixing apple pancake batter, her favorite. But this is Wednesday, her omelet day."

"Who's going to cook?"

"Me. Alex 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 said with exaggerated sweetness. "Ready to make friends with the bears?"

*"Don't even joke about that, Elizabeth. There really are bears up there."*

"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, Darling. You're talking about your chauffer and cook. 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 rubber burning stops or take offs. I don't have my ticket book with me to earn my monthly points."*

"We'll work on what kind of bribes you'll take. Bye."

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

"Linda, thank you again for being here so quickly and for taking care of the cats. Angel will keep them 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 the days off from the chaos in our house. I've tried to do my school work but with wild kids and dogs running amok, grading papers and writing constructive student assessments is impossible. 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."

"Well Angel is in heaven having you two to her. She won't feel like she's been abandoned because of your in-laws dogs taking over her house and people. The hot tub on the deck in the evenings when the stars are out is very nice, especially in the rain. 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, and a week to test both out. 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.

Elizabeth hurried back out into the rain, excited that they were finally going to leave town for a whole week. Once behind the steering wheel, her thoughts were on the road conditions up to the mountain. They would be hitting ice and snow half-way up, but Alex's snow tires and a shovel if needed would see them to their destination. She was sure by sheer will alone they wouldn't have any trouble getting up there.

The geese that served as security in their rented home 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. Elizabeth peered through the windshield that was being heavily blanketed with wind and rain, grateful she didn't let the geese out of their penned area. It saved Linda and Mark the trouble of herding them into their pens for the night.

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've 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 six hours and no stopping at home or the office," she ordered. "And no nibbling on the desert before you get here...I don't think Eugene will appreciate his two best detectives unavailable for the rest of the day. Buck up soldier. The six hours will speed by. I'm not going anywhere."

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Elizabeth parked in the back of the women's shelter and honked that she arrived. Wind blew the trees nearby sending damp leaves and light rain over her windshield. The heavier rain on the cliffs diminished to sprinkles inland so she adjusted the wiper speed.

The women's shelter or 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 of an abusive relationship herself.

Claire came out of the old Victorian house's back gate with the wind pushing her along. She held up a thermos and a brown bag, smiling at Elizabeth. Elizabeth suspected the brown bag contained turkey sandwiches and pastries.

Bruno, their guard dog, trotted next to Claire, alert and prancing as he sniffed the air that was filled with flying sand and wet scents. He sneezed a few times then angled his back to the wind.

"Hi, Elizabeth! Your first vacation as a couple and you pick a remote cabin?" she teased. "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. And you needn't worry about my clothing. I have plenty of warm clothing and backup 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. Besides that, Alex would be mortified to see Bruno dressed in snowshoes and a snow suit that Genie insists he wear. Thank Genie for fixing us our surprise a day early and the extras."

"She lives to cook and always cooks more than what's needed so there are plenty of left overs in the frig. She's thrilled she can get rid of turkey left overs. She has another new recipe she wants to try out."

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.

"So, what's in this thermos?" 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 trying to build a fire now and cursing the wind because it's putting out her match." Elizabeth waved and headed towards the police station where she was sure Alex would

be pacing. She pressed the hands-free, then turned off her windshield wipers that were scraping the glass.

"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 police station with Harriet, a fellow police officer. Harriet was sensibly dressed in a raincoat, hat and gloves while Alex was dressed in her indoor office clothes, not at all suitable for snow or for that matter for the present cold wet weather. Alex had planned on spending the day catching up on her paper work before leaving for their weeklong vacation.

Both police officers 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 Miss Hanna's warning that the storm will hit this afternoon so you could take off early. Otherwise, you would be caught in the ski traffic or get a call for assistance with car accidents on the highway."

"Like my last canceled vacation time with Elizabeth," Alex said.

"That was a memorable occasion. You two have a good time," Harriet said.

"Thanks, Harriet and thanks for the bagels. These will be great for warming up in the microwave," Alex said. She hopped into the SUV to get near the vent that was pumping out heat.

"With you leaving they would have gone stale waiting for the cleaning crew," Harriet joked.

"Ahh. That's why she's not that hungry at lunch," Elizabeth said.

"I don't eat that many," Alex protested.

"Only because you're the only one that likes cinnamon raisin bagels. She knows no one will eat them so she picks up an onion bagel for the meetings, puts lots of crème cheese with a thin

slice of onion, and drinks flavored coffee. No one wants to get near her until she chews a few breath mints."

Alex made a face at Harriet. "Now that you've told her another office secret, we'll be on our way. Have a nice day bossing the troops." She slammed the door shut, waving at Harriet as Elizabeth pulled away from the curb.

Alex held her cold hands over the vent for a few minutes then pulled her cellphone out of its holster and turned it off, sliding it back in its holster with a pat.

"How was your day?" Alex asked, as she wrapped her warmed hand around 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. "Genie's morning's delight," she sighed. "Whatever it is, I know it'll be good." 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 in the back, thinking it was different than what she remembered it to be.

"Genie again 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. Gods, but I never would have thought she would be the type to dress her guard dog in clothes." They both laughed.

"It's good therapy for LeeAnn," Elizabeth said, referring to one of the new residents of the Home. "The pet store loves taking orders, and it's great coffee shop talk on dog fashion. Les loves to describe how he's learned the art of taking dog and cat measurements for clothing. Who knew LeeAnn could go from human fashion to dog fashion design so quickly. I especially like the police uniform she designed Bruno." Elizabeth sighed happily, smiling from their trip away from familiarity and interruptions than images of Bruno in dog outfits.

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?" Elizabeth asked, recovering quickly. "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 chuckled. "Everyone takes Miss. Hanna's weather reports seriously. I'm glad Chief Harper let me off early."

"I put your snow clothes 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 you're doing in the back seat?"

"Good idea." Alex crawled over the back seat and rearranged the back for space to change cloths. 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 locked in the car.

"Is that a new coat you have?" Alex asked.

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

"What if the snow is higher than your knees? This is nice...and heavy. Deep pockets." She took the bag with the two 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. There's a collapsible container for water, too."

"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 stuffed with tools, life-saving gadgets and extra clothing whenever I left the cabin, even if I was just going to fetch wood. Since I wasn't familiar with the area he wanted to make sure I was prepared to survive a few nights lost. I thought it was an initiation thing until I stepped out of my cabin on a moonless night and realized I couldn't see the woodshed and I was totally disorientated once I left the porch. Never leave home without the essentials, is his motto. After a while it became a habit, just like carrying a purse, only I've scaled back from a backpack to a tactical hip pack when going to the woodshed."

"Why the pack to the woodshed? A flashlight would suffice."

"A check of the toolshed is also a perimeter inspection. I may need to repair a camera or take pictures of something."

"Just how far is the woodshed from the cabin? And how long does it take for a perimeter check?"

"On a clear day the woodshed is a stone's throw from the porch and it takes about an hour for a perimeter check."

"No vacation or rest from your vigilance."

"It's part of my daily routine so it's not overwhelming. It's why I'm healthy and still alive," Alex said, and after studying Elizabeth a moment added. "I noticed you still check your environment."

"Sometimes I forget. Lucky for both of us you're vigilant," she said. "So what do you have in your pockets?" She smiled as if she had a secret.

"You mean my blazer?" Alex knew it wasn't the blazer she was referring to.

Alex put Elizabeth's coat back and pulled her blazer 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 mints for onion bagel's chaser, 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. Miss Gladys is a woman worth her pins."

"Miss Gladys. The seamstress of the police department is one of her adages on her website. I always thought it meant sewing the seat of your pants extra thick, not adding secret pockets to your clothes. What about your snow coat?" Elizabeth asked.

"That's where I'm going to find a surprise? Oh, I see you added some stuff. Very handy. A whistle, mirror, Chap Stick, flashlight. Hmm. It's like having a purse. 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, as she crawled back to look at the packs closer.

"Blue."

"Hey, where did you get these zipper characters? You're lucky Mark's kids didn't see them."

"Kids aren't the only ones that like them. 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, Wonder Woman, Xena! Daffy Duck and 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 she labeled dead batteries and dumped her spent batteries then 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 gloves Cindy had recommended to Elizabeth. After fifteen minutes of going through the green 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 track you." She opened it up and removed the batteries. "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." Elizabeth turned the wiper blades to a faster pace. It started to rain steadily.

"Do you have the receipt on you?"

"No, I didn't think to pack it. It's in my bedroom with my new boots that I'll break in at another time before I introduce them to the dirt up here."

"I didn't see another one. I'll check 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," she laughed and added ruefully, "and maxed out my credit card."

"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 and I would have to find my way back to my cabin. If I couldn't find my way back I would call Sam for help. Once he pulled the batteries out of my walkie-talkie."

"You call that fun?" 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 usually welcomes it."

"It should be three. You forgot to add, tell someone where you're going and when you're returning. 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, though they are important."

"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 three pointing back."

"I recommend following that piece of advice."

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

"Sunrise already has emergency preparedness training. 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 - it's chaos. Each situation will evoke different reactions and each day we're under a different set of stressors. Hormonal changes – PMS for women and whatever men have, and that's just the adults and then there's whatever drugs one is on," Elizabeth said. "One day a hero and the next day a murder. Very complex. Great for plots."

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

"I've heard of it at a convention years ago. 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 what the agenda of the maker is behind the program," Elizabeth said.

"They're not the only ones that worry 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 Wonder Woman 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 cells 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?" Elizabeth gestured with one hand as she became more animated as ideas flew about in her head.

Alex smiled and kept a sharper eye on the road as Elizabeth's attention was seriously divided.

"I'm sure those concerns will be covered by Mark and the Chief. If they come into work one day wearing Marvel Comic Hero outfits beneath their work cloths and it's not Halloween, 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 Wonder Woman, or Superwoman? I'll need a phone booth for Superwoman...or is that a Superman thing? It will be crowded in the phone

booth so not *the* Superwoman. Xena is into leather. What is Wonder Woman into...?" She glanced at Elizabeth with a grin.

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, consciously aware that Elizabeth had slowed down and there was snow and ice being crushed under the tires. The rain had turned into snowfall and they were enfolded in a gray cloud. It was cold near the window her head rested and it hadn't even wakened her.

"Yes. That's the marker with a snowplow though most of its obscured with snow. Good eye. That's our entrance," she said. "It's always icy and slippery at the entrance. A lot of cars slide into the snow bank. This turnout opens up into a parking lot that the snowplows use to park and take a break, so it's roomier than it looks."

"In this mist, there isn't much to see," Elizabeth said.

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. Two snow covered posts with reflector lights shined as the SUV light beams swept over them. A four foot snow bank the snow plows created was too high for the SUV to drive through or over.

"I hate leaving my vehicle in the middle of nowhere, but my Discovery won't be able to break through that barrier. The cabin isn't far from here by foot. We won't have to follow the road but instead, head right through those trees. I have a rubber raft we can stack our supplies on and pull it in."

"You're not going to get us lost, are you?"

Alex laughed. "At last, alone with no interruptions."

Elizabeth grinned. "Miss super cop, can't sit still for a minute is saying what? You're lucky I don't take it personally when you get distracted with odd chores."

Alex grinned back. "I'm not going to take that personally because, sometimes, that's true."

Laughing, they put their coats, scarves, gloves and hats on, exchanged a kiss, then opened the doors to wind and cold.

"Brrr, it's freezing," Elizabeth said. "Next time I'm going to wear one of those ski masks." She dropped to the ground and her boots slid out from under her on the ice. She grabbed the door

and seat to stop her fall, wrenching her arms and hitting her head on the door frame. The knitted cap protected her from most of the impact. After dragging herself back up, she readjusted her knitted cap that fell off.

Alex hurried to the back of the SUV, focused on unpacking and getting to the cabin, not realizing Elizabeth had slipped. Glancing up she didn't see Elizabeth.

"Hey! Are you alright?"

Elizabeth waved to her and slammed the driver's door closed. With considerable care she walked to the back of the SUV, touching the side to keep her balance. "It's a bit slippery," she muttered. "It's just as bad as slipping in duck poop."

Alex started to hand supplies to Elizabeth who put them near the back car tire. Under everything was the self-inflatable raft. Once it was inflated they both moved the majority of their supplies on it. Alex fixed a net over the supplies so nothing would fall out on their journey to her cabin. She then shoveled out a space in the snow wall for them to drag the raft through.

"It looks like you've done this before," Elizabeth said. She studied the inflatable raft doubtfully. The supplies in the raft looked too heavy for them to drag anywhere.

"Let me help you with your pack," Alex said. Elizabeth shrugged the pack on and let Alex readjust the straps. She stepped back and studied Elizabeth. "With that sleeping bag attached, you look like you're going to hike in for a few days...no tent?" Alex teased.

"I was hoping for a cabin at the end of my *short* 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 snuggle in them in front of the woodstove."

"Heat raises, Mountain Woman. Cold air sinks to the floor. Do you have a couch?"

"I do and it's big enough for an intimate two."

"That usually means it's a twin with barely enough wiggle room for a restless sleeper."

"And we're both restless sleepers," Alex said, "with different sleep schedules."

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 began their trek to her cabin.

"When I was bringing up supplies to survive my first winter stay, Sam suggested this for hauling in supplies over the snow. It's easy to store in the SUV."

"How do you get your supplies in when there's no snow?"

"Without the snow above the bumpers I can drive the SUV right to the cabin door."

"We need snowmobiles. You did say the cabin is winterized," Elizabeth huffed, already feeling the effects of the higher altitude.

"It is now."

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

"He hibernated in the bomb shelter, according to Sam. It was his writing nest."

Elizabeth pictured a bomb shelter looking like a cramped submarine. Her nose wrinkled thinking of just how primitive living in a bomb shelter was with scarce use of water.

Both spoke little as they worked on creating a path to the cabin. It took them forty minutes before they spotted a cabin. The physical exertion at the high altitude had both women huffing even with frequent breaks.

"Here we are. What do you think?" Alex asked.

Elizabeth dropped her rope and bent over, trying to catch her breath. Alex crunched her way around the cabin, shining her light around, looking for any disturbances.

"Looks good," Alex said, returning to her side.

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

"Neither. Woodshed. We need to unload quickly so I can return for 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. Both women hurriedly unloaded the supplies laying them about the floor.

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

"Is it any different from a fireplace?"

"Smaller pieces of wood, but that's it. 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." She slid the magazine in and out to show Elizabeth how easy it was.

"Tell me you're kidding," Elizabeth said. She exchanged the weapon Alex handed her with a bottle of water.

"I'm kidding. If you hit a bear with one of these bullets it might not kill her, which would really piss her off." She gave Elizabeth a quick kiss, then took a few gulps of water before sliding the bottle inside her coat.

"Just how safe are we up here?"

Alex was 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 high altitude with a snow storm in progress, and visibility is not good for long distant accurate shots."

"So I better be real close to the bear before I shoot," Elizabeth said.

"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 park cabins but never in the winter."

"Okay, you're just your usual cautious self. If you hurry back your coffee won't get cold. You do have a coffee machine?"

"Coffee supplies in the cupboard on the left of the sink. I'll be back by the time there's heat for you to warm your toes to. That reminds me." She went to a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out two walkie-talkies. She added batteries then set the wavelength, tested it and handed Elizabeth one. "Beware of strangers, especially the furry ones." From her pocket she pulled out the headlamp and put it over her watch cap.

"Keep drinking water. Remember dehydration in high altitudes is a real killer," Elizabeth said, hoping that little bit of advice would lessen her unease.

Alex picked up the rope with one hand and waved at Elizabeth with the other. It was faster going with a path already made and an empty raft. 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. Visibility was ten feet at best.

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.

Her SUV suddenly loomed in front of her. It already had a blanket of snow on it, covering the windows. It looked off-kilter. She pushed the automatic door locks and waited a few seconds, then approached the SUV. "Damn. A flat." Looking around the parking lot, she could see additional tire tracks.

She unlocked the glove compartment and removed her digital camera. She took pictures of the tire tracks and boot prints at the entrance, 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. Are you drinking water?"*

"Yes. We have a flat, though there isn't much I want to do about it now."

*"Remember, you have someone that loves you waiting with a warm cup of coffee, so hurry back."*

Alex wondered if she was getting those prickly feelings too or was she thinking of those distracting chores that came up sometimes.

"I'll pack up and be back soon. Over and out."

Alex moved at a steady pace, noticing that the snowfall was picking up. Miss. Hanna was right again. It was supposed to snow off and on for two weeks. This was ski season.

"Elizabeth, come in."

*"You better be close. The snowfall is getting serious."*

"I'm heading back now."

*"How can you see in this weather?"*

"I'm following our trail. We left a rather deep path. I also have a GPS and compass. This is just another of Sam's training days. Over and out."

She relocked the SUV and grabbing up the rope to the raft, looped it across her chest and began to drag everything she had in the SUV that would irritate her if stolen. Her right hand was tucked in her pocket and curled around a pistol. It was merely a precaution, though with the present visibility she was better off not shooting at all.

It wasn't long before Alex had to focus on one step at a time, going slow with many stops as the effect of thin air was taking its toll.

*"Alex, come in."*

"Yeah? I'm here," she huffed.

*"Just where are you?"*

"Well," she took a few huffs. "Let me consult my GPS."

*"You wait and catch your breath. I don't want you collapsing from over exertion. Drink some water."*

"Good advice." Alex pulled the water bottle from inside her coat and with her back to the wind, finished her water. She wanted her breath back to normal before she started again. Squinting, she focused on a light that was coming toward her.

"Need help?" Elizabeth's bundled up form materialized in front of her.

"Hi," Alex said. "Please. These last few yards are a toughie."

"I was beginning to think of sending a rescue dog after you but I remembered we declined Bruno's company."

"A good thing. Bruno wouldn't have done well in this altitude," Alex huffed.

"He wouldn't be happy away from his admiring pack." Elizabeth helped Alex pull the raft the last few yards. Once in the warmth of the cabin, Elizabeth fixed her a cup of coffee.

"We had a visitor after you called the second time. Said he noticed my tire was flat and came by to see if I needed help. Is there a back road we could have used?"

"A footpath only. What kind of a nut would be out in this weather so far from a cabin?"

"Of course *we're* not nuts," Elizabeth said. "You didn't mention you had a neighbor besides Sam."

"There's a cabin about a thirty minute hike from here. On skis it could be shorter or longer. The cabin used to belong to Dale Fletcher."

"No more Dale Fletcher?"

"Sam said Dale lost his cabin to the bank. Dale and his ex-wife wasted time fighting in court on who could sell it with neither paying the mortgage. Did our visitor leave a name?"

"No exchange of names."

"Can you describe the guy?"

"He looked like Pillsbury Doughboy on skis."

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

"There will be no going out there and looking around. There's little visibility out there," Elizabeth pointed out.

Alex smiled sheepishly. "You're right. Besides, I have security cameras around the cabin. I can see what they've recorded." Alex went to a cabinet and opened it.

"Why am I surprised you have monitoring equipment up here too?" Elizabeth said.

Alex brought up the security program and started back two hours ago, speeding it up to when Elizabeth had a visitor.

"Stop. That's him," Elizabeth said.

"Yep. He looks like the standard Pillsbury Doughboy dressed up in white. He has to have a snowmobile nearby to have come from that direction. Three cameras aren't working."

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

"Besides the prickling at the back of my neck and wondering what crazy nut would be out skiing in this weather...no."

Both listened to the wind whistling around the cabin.

Alex looked at her watch. "It's only one in the afternoon."

She added as an afterthought, "It feels later."

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

"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. They parted when Alex's stomach growled loudly. "Thanks for the rescue."

"Not a problem. Did you notice I was wearing my survival pack?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm impressed. I thought you were the abdominal snowman dressed to pass for a human at first with your sleeping bag and all. Sam would be impressed too."

"You looked like an out of shape lone sled dog about to collapse. The rooms will be at 70 degrees Fahrenheit in an hour, and then we can take another layer of clothing off. I hope you don't run out of heating fuel."

"The last time I was up here I had a full tank."

"I noticed the shower space is for a small person," Elizabeth said.

"It will be a challenge to share." Alex's grin was too wide for Elizabeth not to be suspicious that there was more to that fact that she wasn't sharing.

"If you insist on sharing a shower with me, you can freeze your pretty ass off while I stand under the warm water."

That got a giggle from Alex.

"How do you keep the water hot if the rooms are cold?"

"Sam keeps my facilities working...except the room heaters. Do you mind being snowed in with only me, books, your computer, and a cabin to explore?"

"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. You're not coming down with cabin fever already, are you?"

"No. I can show you how to make MRE's appetizing or boil water for trail packs and..." Alex said.

"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 when we've exhausted all other food supplies will we then call upon your wilderness cooking talents," Elizabeth said.

"You have saved us both. I have some games somewhere around here"

Elizabeth smiled. "I brought a few movies we can watch on the laptop."

"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 movies end."

"Tomorrow the tour and I do owe you a massage." Alex smiled smugly. "What comedy do you have in mind?"

. . . . .

Before the comedy started Elizabeth was asleep. A massage that led to other things left Elizabeth too relaxed to stay awake so Alex watched the comedy on Elizabeth's laptop alone. Her laughs and giggles were restrained so as not to disturb Elizabeth who was curled around her on the couch. It was a rare occasion that they didn't have to worry about a phone call interrupting their time together.



## Chapter 2

### *Same Evening in Sunrise*

"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. Their evening plans for something more delectable had been circumvented with too many interruptions. Linda's consolation was they had seven days plus one, to sneak in their no interruption time.

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

"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 Guthrie, listening to Cindy Fletcher, store manager to Murphy's Sports Outfitter, vent at a prank she attributed to that Jones 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 locker rooms. I caught Carol with gloves on and wearing one of those surgeon masks on, dripping something from a tiny glass tube on Lois Gels's locker handle. I told her to clean up what she just did. I think she wanted to keep her job because when I returned, the room smelled of cleaning soap. This morning I felt something like oil on my locker handle. I washed my hands but by noon I got a rash. It looks like and itches like poison ivy. I'm going to file a complaint about her." Cindy looked at Bobbie Lyn and then Mark.

"Cindy is the store manager and she gave us permission to look at what used to be Carol Jones's locker. It was empty except for this." Bobby Lyn held up an evidence bag. "It has 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. Here are pictures I took." She handed Mark her camera. "I already sent them to our server, filed under Cindy's complaint."

He went through her pictures, which included pictures of the store and some customers who were smiling at the camera taker. "Good work, Bobbie." He read her writing on the bag seal, giving date/time/setting, etc on the label.

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

"Yes, it looks just like it," Cindy said.

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

"Murph 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 weapons practice so someone he trusts makes sure they all sign in and makes sure they pay before they leave."

"When did you last see her?"

"Three-thirty this afternoon. She came back from break through the back way. I heard the bell that the back door opened. I glanced back that way and saw her dressed in her usual black motorcycle coat going into the locker room. I waited for her to come up front so I could clock out and go home. After a few customers I realized she hadn't come up front so I went to look for her. I found her locker open and empty. I went out back and her motorcycle was gone," Cindy said irritated. "She said nothing to anyone here that she wasn't going to work."

Mark frowned wondering what this meant in the larger scheme of things. He looked again at the locker door now covered with a bag and taped. Should he wait for Mandy's CSI team to remove the locker door or should he 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. She's one of the few motorcycle owners I know that doesn't have a need to be heard."

"Did you check the entire locker room?" he asked Bobbie, knowing she did but it was necessary to ask.

"I did. Just her locker door had something on it."

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.

*"Dr. 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 in her nineties. Her entire body was covered with a rash and open sores. It looks like she was scratching herself to a miserable death. 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 outside of the cups. 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 and the police not wanting to touch anything least they end up with the rash."*

"Who's handling that investigation?"

*"Jack is handling Brisbane cases and Betsy is handling Antioch's cases. I asked Jack to call the rest of the towns to see if any of them have similar problems, then we'll form a task force to handle it. 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. "Has anyone done an internet search on a practical joke as this?"

*"Not that I'm aware of. I sure hope this doesn't catch on. 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 forty-five minutes with all my lights going. They only 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. You know how unsafe Bailey's Pass is when it rains and it's pouring rain here. Take your time." 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 Carol Jones live?"

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

"Sure, 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. She dresses in leather, shirts with long sleeves like she's hiding something, 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 accessories – and the shooting range. Until Carol, I never met anyone that knows more about guns, accessories and ammunition than Murph, and she's the real thing. Since word got around about her expertise we've become busy on the evenings she works. She works the same days Lonnie does and we haven't had any missed fees since. 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 Murphy's don't exist to her and two of the most obnoxious customers don't come by when she's here."

"What three in the store?"

"Me, Lois and Michael. Lois and I work the mornings so we don'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 else do we have on Carol Jones?"

"Nothing. I called Eric and asked him if he could dig up anything on her in any state. He said he'll check and call back. It's a common name," Bobbie said.

Cindy returned.

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

"No. 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 did hear about it the next day. Murph said he had to talk Carol down."

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

"Two weeks ago," 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 friend was," Cindy said. "You know that's probably how I got on her bad list. Murph interviewed her but didn't fill out much on the employment sheet. Verifying information and filling in the blanks is my job as manager. When I asked questions she just focused on the wall behind me and it was like I wasn't there. No social, no driver's license, nothing. Murph said he'll take care of it."

"Did Murph say why he hired her?"

"Hunting season is over and we get a lot of hunters wanting to practice in the firing range to keep up with their skills and check out the new equipment. He usually hires a part time person during this time but he put her on the full time list and right over Lonnie." Cindy smiled at that.

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

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

"Nellie and Murph started western dancing at the Rodeo Round-Up on Wednesday nights," Bobbie Lyn said.

"Let's go take a look around the parking lot, Bobbie," Mark suggested.

It was cold and raining but Mark wanted to see what the back looked like and if there was anything tossed or dropped. Murphy had an awning over the back door so if any of his customers or employees wanted a smoke break in bad weather, they had some protection. The area was cleaned daily and if there were any cigarette butts in the dirt can, it was underwater. All Mark ended up with was cold hands and a wet collar.

When Dr. Sherwood arrived Mark and Bobbie were sitting in the corner near the heater, drinking coffee, drying off and discussing what little they knew about Carol after Eric reported he wasn't able to find anything on her.

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

"Thank you, Cindy. I got your phone call this morning. I'll pick it up when I leave."

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

"Good evening Dr. Sherwood," Bobbie Lyn said. "You're alone?"

"I have this, Bobbie. You can return to patrol," Mark said.

"Yeah, I better get back out there before calls come in worrying about me. Nice that they care," Bobbie Lynn said chuckling.

"Keep an eye and ear open for Carol Jones. Check around and see if you hear of why she took off," Mark said softly. "And Bobbie, be careful. Someone with that much knowledge of guns and has no record is someone of interest."

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

"Yes. But I don't want to jump to conclusions. Alex's sniper doesn't have a face so why all of a sudden does she show us a face and supplies us with finger prints?"

"Good point. I'll stop in at the coffee shop. In this weather, there's going to be a lot of talking."

"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." Mentally Mark sighed. If Alex wasn't more careful, she was going to be the poster cop for bad things can happen to you if you're not careful.

"Good night, Mark, Dr. Sherwood."

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 Alex 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 with Mark following. 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 were there. Can I keep this picture?" Mark asked.

"You can have it," Cindy said.

Mark smiled. "Call me if you see her."

"Gladly. 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."

"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."

"Do they have a preference in weapons?" Mark asked.

"Since Carol took an interest in them, a sniper rifle. If they were good marksmen I would have said something to Chief Harper, but those two like to blow things up."

Mark nodded at the common knowledge of the two troublesome boys. Mark was standing where he could watch the locker room and noticed Lonnie watching Mandy with a few of his friends hanging back. Mark walked over to Lonnie.

"Hi, Lonnie. Finished with your shooting?" Mark asked.

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 this evening, are you?"

"That's none of 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," Murphy said. He came into shop through the back door. "I warned you about not collecting from your friends for the use of my premises."

Lonnie's face turned red and he was about to say something when Mark interrupted.

"I observed you wave Harvey Green through the back door while we were all in the locker room," Mark said.

"Best you go home now and don't bother coming back," Murphy said.

"You can't let me go!"

"But I can. You're fired," Murphy 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. According to Cindy, four of your friends had free pass cards. I'm the only one that gives those out. That's \$25 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.

"What about my pay?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. We need to calculate how much we lost due to your not collecting fees."

Sunrise PD being present didn't give him any space for arguing.

"So what's CSI doing here?" Murphy asked, turning his back on Lonnie.

Mark waited for Lonnie to leave. At the door he hesitated until Cindy opened the door for him. The cold wet gust of wind that blew against her had her shooing him out so she could lock the door.

"I believe one shooter got out without paying," Cindy said. "I'll have to recheck the log and confirm with the cameras of customers to be sure."

"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 for Murphy to see.

"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. Hardly anyone was there so we got out early."

Mandy was standing in the doorway to the locker room, listening. "What city are they from?"

"Bales."

"Tomorrow we'll put up a map and see where all these occurrences are happening," Mark said.

"Make the meeting after ten and you'll have more information from my lab," Mandy said. "I'll set up a teleconference so anyone unable to make it to my office in this weather won't have an excuse."

Mark looked out the window and noted that the rain was coming down harder.

"It's not a good night to be driving back to your office, Mandy," Murphy said. "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 our evidence room."



## Chapter 3

### *Day Two at the Cabin*

Scampering sounds above her had Alex's senses fully engaged. She was curled around a pillow; the pillow that she would normally have her Glock 17 under. 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. After the comedy had finished she had waken Elizabeth to redeposit herself in the bedroom where there was a warm bed, compliments of a heated mattress cover. That was the last she could remember.

"Howong..." she cleared her throat, and tried again, "How long have you been up?" She thought she should have been cognizant of Elizabeth getting up.

"A while. You were running a race that I wasn't part of so I got out of your way. Is the attic guest a friend of yours?"

"No. I don't make friends with the wildlife just in case they get ideas to move in."

Alex threw the covers back and slid out of bed. It was still dark but the smell of coffee had her mind set on a cup. Ritually, her first morning cup was strong, dark and no sugar. Her second cup was for taste, usually a flavored coffee. Her feet found the carpet chilly and the wooden floor to the bathroom cold. 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 and bumped her elbows several times. 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 of food cooking comingled with coffee. Her stomach growled in anticipation.

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

"Good morning." She kissed Alex then turned back to the stove. "Yes. They aren't the pancakes you were expecting, but just as good. Eggs mixed with all sorts of interesting things."

Alex looked up at the ceiling as 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 omelet. "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 bare. There's nothing to add that isn't already on the table. I always thought catsup, peanut butter and jam were staples found in every American cupboard."

"I don't dare put anything perishable in the cupboards. I may forget until it rots. Besides, the less in the cupboards the less chance of uninvited visitors."

"No problem with that. You don't have much closet space anywhere in this place."

"Are you alright? You look...stiff."

"I'm sore from my slip getting out of the SUV yesterday. So, where were you running to or from?"

"You fell?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"I didn't see that. I don't remember any running in my dream. I was swimming with the porpoises in Hawaii before the noise in the rafters woke me."

"Maybe it was your underwater swimming that needed so much room."

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 our jam," Alex said, using a spoon to drop a big strawberry on a slice. The preserves were from JoAnne's Home Preserves, a local Sunrise co-op, not necessarily being JoAnne's personal preserves.

"Did you see how much snow fell?" Alex asked.

"It was still coming down. We might have to dig our way out but, we have a week to get around to it."

"Cabin fever is a potential problem in a snowstorm but there are routine chores to reduce the intensity. As soon as it's light I'll do a perimeter check, fix the cameras to make sure the cold hasn't disabled them, and see if there's any sign of our friendly neighbor."

Elizabeth laughed. "Alright. Just don't spend a long time at the neighbors. And, 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 especially during the traditional vacation months. The mountain becomes congested with people and some go off the trails to get lost."

"Are you implying they do it purposely?" Elizabeth asked.

"They're looking for something different and when they find it they realize they can't find the well-traveled path back."

Elizabeth chuckled. "I bet they have a better story of how they got lost when they get the bill for the rescue."

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 in the corner that had electrical outlets and a window that was heavily draped. The room had a double sleeper couch and a comfortable reading chair with a reading lamp attached to a small table. The bedroom had a double sized bed, a six drawer dresser, a tiny closet and that was it. The bathroom had one sink, no mirror, a towel closet converted into a shower stall, and a hot tub, room for one person. So far, the advantages about the cabin were that it was near watchdog Sam, isolated, and for any exercise done up here, 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 poking around without you...just in case you may have someone stashed somewhere," Elizabeth said.

"I moved all my skeletons and what-not's out before I brought you up here. Though, I may have a blowup doll somewhere."

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The kitchen broom closet floor was where the entrance to the bomb shelter was. It was under a blast hatch which reminded Elizabeth of the bomb shelter doors to keep out radiation from nuclear fallout. Elizabeth thought it was an obvious place for such an entrance and voiced that.

"Believing it to be here and finding it are two different tasks," Alex assured her.

"That's true. It is well hidden under the mop bucket." Elizabeth sniggered at that. "Ms. Spy, have you thought about thermal imaging? If someone were to..."

"NASA was kind enough to have created an IR-block that all we spy types like to use for our special places. It's part of this building structure."

Elizabeth stood on the stairs in the dimly lit shelter dressed warmly, while Alex closed the hatch and locked it.

"Since I don't know what's going on above me, I like to make sure the hatch is locked behind me," Alex explained, joining Elizabeth halfway down the stairs.

It was chilly, but not like a freezer. Alex stepped past Elizabeth, shining a flashlight ahead of her. She flipped a light switch and the room lit up. Alex watched Elizabeth's expression with a grin.

"Just how big is this bomb shelter?" 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."

"Is there a heater down here?"

"It's kept at 69 degrees but you can heat up a space with a room heater."

In the center of the hexagon was an open area, like a hub. Standing there, Elizabeth could see into the other spaces. Next to the kitchen was a sitting room with couch and two 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. It has more elbow room."

Elizabeth glared at her. "You could have told me before I experienced that shower made for a skinny model."

"It was going to be made larger but it wasn't high on the list of to dos since there was this one. I forgot how small it was." Alex rubbed her elbow where she had banged it while washing her hair. "I was thinking of removing it and putting the closet back. I'll put it on my summer to do list."

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

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

"It looks like it. Are those books yours?"

"A few. I didn't have the heart to toss out Harold's things and it's a good thing I didn't. Now you can use them. I think Harold was a recluse."

"He had a good reason. According to literary gossip, Harold's first wife, Bethany was a nasty and bitter piece of work to the end. One day she packed up and moved out with all their belongings while he was at the library. When he returned he couldn't get in. His landlord told him she turned in the key and he changed the locks. She told the landlord some story of what a monster he was. All he had were the clothes on his back, his briefcase and notes. She said if he

wanted anything of his back he would have to pay for them. The judge told her to return his belongings and she gave him a pile of ashes, claiming that was what was left."

"What did he do?"

"She didn't stop there. She began stalking him and causing scenes so he had to get a junction to keep her away. He met Marie, his second wife, in the library. She was a volunteer research assistant. Marie had a cabin she had no use of so that's where he hid from Bethany. Marie also found a better divorce lawyer than he had," Elizabeth explained. "Marie and Harold got along so well, they got married a year after his divorce from Bethany. For a wedding gift she gave him the cabin."

"I bet Bethany went after that. What was she so bitter about?" Alex asked.

"There are so many rumors it's hard to separate truth from fantasy. Marie was responsible for him finding his niche in thrillers," Elizabeth continued. "Even when their marriage ended, they remained friends. About two years later he married again. He was a prolific writer, just churning them out. His first publisher only wanted to print one a year so he found another publisher who was willing to publish under various names."

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

"For most, yes. He's one of those people that can have more than one book going, but his temperament was well suited for his long isolated periods."

"That's not good for a marriage. 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 two months after the diagnosis. Marie and Isabelle, good friends since childhood, 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 picture of him signing books at the Books From Around the World store 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 this is a bathroom." Elizabeth walked to the bathroom for a closer look. "No more closet spaces for me. 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 composting toilet was the same MullToa model as the one upstairs and had its own closet, as if Harold needed privacy when he used the toilet.

Elizabeth looked at the next storage 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," Alex 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. "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, and traps for the unwelcomed."

Elizabeth gestured at two trunks. "What do you keep in these trunks?"

"This trunk is winter gear with weapons camouflaged for snow use." Alex opened it up. "And that one is for summer gear."

Elizabeth looked in the winter trunk and pulled out a strange coat. "What is this?"

"Mark's snow Ghillie suit. In the summer trunk are our summer Ghillie suits." She wiggled her eyebrows. "When Mark comes up for his refresher courses with Sam, he stays here instead of at Sam's. He and Linda like to keep some of his equipment out of the reach of the kids. Jonathan has been checking out his dad's work stuff and Katie, not to be left behind, has been right behind him."

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

"It hasn't happened yet. I think in the two years I've been in Sunrise, we've been here at the same time twice and it was for four exhausting hours of training. We were both so tired we flipped to see who would drive back." 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 wirelessly connected to this computer so I can view the security cameras on the screen. I run diagnostics from here and reprogram the cabin security if it's necessary. I can remotely access the server from anywhere. I forgot to check before I left the office yesterday."

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

"Hooligan is new. Maybe that's our new neighbor. Jax is Sam's. He leaves it up 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. No telling what else he has for the nosey hack. 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 and the large screen turned on, bringing up camera views of around the cabin and beyond.

"I was hoping those three cameras magically fixed themselves. Two of them are in the woodshed. There's a tunnel from here to the woodshed, so I won't have to go out in the snow to check, but it's cold in the tunnel. Do you want to come along?"

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

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

"Agreed," Elizabeth said.

Alex moved one of the trunks out of the way and then slid a portion of the wall to the side revealing a blast door. Alex unlocked that and swung it open. Before stepping in the dark opening, Alex sniffed the cold stale air and then flipped a switch. Above them a fan came on, blowing air into the tunnel. Soft green lights running the tunnel's length also came on. Alex handed Elizabeth a flashlight and led the way into the tunnel.

Elizabeth touched the sides of the curved tunnel. It reminded her of walking through a large concrete water pipe.

Two PVC pipes ran the length of the tunnel. One was 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 so they're closed so water doesn't drip in, that's why I turned the fan on so we have air. When there's no snow the vents are camouflaged by the natural environment, like bushes and rocks."

"Why green lights?" Elizabeth asked.

"It could have been red. Either color dimmed doesn't affect night vision. Sam preferred green and he was the one that changed out the lights."

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

"I got a great deal and a perfect 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.

"Did Harold buy this place like this?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not quite like this. About two years after Harold took up residence a forest fire wiped out everything on this side of the mountain, including the cabins the US Forestry manages. Sam and Harold were best buddies by then and Sam told him he could build a bomb shelter below his rebuilt cabin for him. Until it was repaired Harold holed up with Sam, still hiding out from Bethany."

"How did he get this dug without someone blabbing about it?"

"The gas tanks blew a boulder loose leaving a big hole in the ground. Since the rebuilding of the cabin the gas tank is in its own bunker."

"Almost like a natural made hole. It sure sounds like it was meant to be," Elizabeth mocked.

"I'll bet Sam and Harold thought that. Turn your light off," Alex said. Underneath the woodshed floor, she tried to push up the floor-cover but it wouldn't budge.

"Something is on the floor cover. I'll have to go out in the snow to check it."

They turned around and retraced their steps. Back in the bomb shelter Alex locked the door and slid the wall back in place to hide the blast door.

Upstairs the morning light was barely making it through the curtains. Snow was piled higher than the porch in some places and still coming down.

"Do you want to come along?"

"Not unless you insist you need help. I'll stay here and protect the fort – and keep it nice and warm."

Before Alex left she cleared snow from the porch. Elizabeth took over sweeping it clear, though she thought tomorrow she would be doing the same.

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Twenty 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? We're both going to look like we've been bumping heads at this rate." She quickly got up to get a closer look at Alex's bruise. "That must 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?" Elizabeth 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." Alex laughed. "Do I look that possessed?"

"I'm going with you to see what's the real deal."

"Good. You can watch my back. Make sure you put the thick knitted cap on."

"And a bullet proof vest?" Elizabeth looked over at Alex before wrapping the scarf around her neck, then donning on her coat.

"If there's a sniper out there, it would be a head shot. But it's too cold for a sniper," she added quickly. "They would be out there in the cold never knowing when either of us would come out. Sling shot is my guess and that's something a juvenile mind would cook up. Someone broke into the shed and dumped my stacked cords of wood onto the floor, and nipped my axe and tree saw. The thief also damaged the two cameras. I was returning to the cabin to get a hammer when I was hit with something. Nearly had me seeing double."

"Well, I'm ready so let's go and see what mischief is afoot," Elizabeth said.

From the porch Alex scooped up snow and filled the plastic bag, then held it to her forehead. After looking around she stepped off the porch and headed back to the shed following her previous path through the snow.

At the shed she opened the door and turned the light on.

"Well, the logs are neatly stacked," Elizabeth said.

"That's about as far as I got. They didn't break into the supply boxes," Alex said.

Climbing on a wooden crate under one camera, she tapped along a pipe gently that was frozen to one of the camera lenses. Holding on the pipe she gave one more tap and it broke loose.

"Maybe you should think about adding to your belt one of those leather pouches home repair types wear on their hips."

Alex's reply was too low for Elizabeth to hear, but she was sure it was something rude.

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

"The lens and rim are broken. I have to replace the entire camera."

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 on the rim." Alex took a digital camera out of her pocket and took pictures of the disabled camera and the pipe. For the other camera she dragged the box over. A candy bar wrapping was on the ground. She pulled an evidence bag out of her pocket. "Elizabeth, can you open this?"

Elizabeth opened the bag and Alex dropped the wrapper into it. She then proceeded to reattach the wires that were ripped out of the camera. "Someone must know Sam's not around to patrol and is taking advantage to vandalize my property. Heaven help them if they try to mess with Sam. He doesn't suffer the uninvited well and he takes no prisoners."

"With your one clue you can play CSI using your evidence kit you dragged from your SUV," Elizabeth said. "It looks like work just follows you around."

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

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

"Let's see what the other camera's problem is." 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 with premeditation 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 brushed snow off a wooden box used to cover a water pump no longer used. Once uncovered, she used a mark on it to sight the spot where the next camera should be. 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.

"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 worried.

Alex pursed her lips in vexation. The vandalism had to have been done between the last time she remotely checked the cameras and when they arrived. She didn't believe she knew anyone this crazy to go out in a snow storm and vandalize a few cameras. Whoever it was must know Sam left for vacation. How did the vandals know he was going on an unscheduled leave? She was regretting more that she hadn't remotely checked the cameras before they came up. Had she known, would she have rethought coming up here? It would have ticked her off enough to come up anyway, to see what was going on. Elizabeth wouldn't have been happy, or would she? Would she be able to tell if Elizabeth was bored?

"I'm going further on the trail and see if I can see any tracks," Alex said. "If you get too cold, you can use the water tower for protection."

"If I didn't feel like we're being watched, I would be heading back to the cabin and let you get this sleuthing out of your system alone," Elizabeth said in an undertone.

"Duck if you see a nut coming your way," Alex said. She climbed what she knew was a path, sinking into snow from ankle to knee deep, depending on what shelter the surrounding trees provided. She had her eye on a boulder that she knew was secured in the mountain side and had a good view of half the area around her cabin. Reaching it, she took a few moments to catch her breath. She removed the fingers protection on her gloves and pulled binoculars from her pocket. From her new vantage point she looked in the direction of the Fletcher cabin. She couldn't see it clearly, but wisps of black smoke were coming from that direction and with gusts of wind she could smell the wood mixed with something unpleasant. Moving her binoculars closer to the trees beneath her there were tracks. From the amount of disturbance to the snow, there was a lot of activity. The tracks disappeared into a grove of trees where someone had knocked a lot of

snow off branches. Without skis it would be too exhausting to check out the tracks, as tempting as it seemed. Were the tracks a ploy to get her to investigate?

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 disturbances in the landscape. Sliding her camera in her pocket and securing all her equipment, Alex blew on her cold fingers and put her finger warmers back on. Turning around she headed back to Elizabeth. She was thinking how exposed she was if someone didn't worry about frozen fingers and had a rifle.

Elizabeth looked cold and worried. She had been pacing, probably to keep warm.

"Someone is out there but I'm not sure what the threat to us is."

"Shall we head back to the cabin?" Elizabeth said. "All this has me feeling too exposed." She laid a hand on Alex's arm. "But I would be nervous just about anywhere outside of Sunrise."

Alex squeezed her hand. "Thanks for keeping an eye out for me. After I fix the lone camera, I'm going to ski over to the Fletcher cabin. It will do both of our nerves good to know just where all of this is coming from."

As they crunched their way back to the cabin, both were looking around for any evidence of visitors.

"Do you think it's Fletcher?"

"I don't see him as the type to vandalize other people's cabins so maybe our visitor is the new owner."

Alex's gaze swept over her cabin as they neared it. No new tracks.

Alex opened the door and both dived 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 said, rolling to her knees outraged.

"That isn't a squirrel, Alex."

"Of course not."

Pulling out her binoculars she crawled to the corner of the front room and peered out the window, knowing someone was watching the windows for movement. A rock hit the thick screen covering the window. Ignoring the rock she panned the area in front of the cabin. She thought she detected movement, a shadow, and refocused the lens.

"There he is, wearing a blue coat instead of the white from yesterday. He's not moving like the guy we saw yesterday. That's two visitors for sure are up here."

However, the person wasn't heading in the direction of any cabins nor a road and Alex didn't trust the obvious. Someone was interested in getting her to leave the cabin and head up into the tree area where there were a lot of places someone could be waiting to ambush her.

"While I'm gone, I would feel better if you locked up until I return."

Alex collected what she needed and in an hour had repaired the camera and moved two to new positions. Back at the cabin she checked to see if they were working. The two she moved covered a wider area.

"I'm setting the motion alarm so no one can get near the cabin without you knowing. If you feel better, you can retreat to the shelter until I get back. Lock the door and wait for me."

"Do you think the sling shooter will revert to a rifle?" Elizabeth asked unsure of how to treat their unknown attacker.

"What?"

"You're getting me worried. You're going out there alone and I'm in here alone. If you should find the trouble makers and bring them back here, I won't be responsible for what I'll do to them. They're ruining our vacation."

"Ditto. I'll let you know where I am."

"And if someone is there?"

"I'm just going to look and take notes...and pictures. I want to know who is pranking us."

Alex attached snowshoes to her pack and locked her boots into the skis. She made one more perimeter check around her cabin before leaving. There weren't any disturbances in the snow near the cabin other than her tracks so she moved to points that would be advantageous to a person using a sling shot.

Alex stared at the space behind a tree that had a good view of the shed and cabin. Someone had kneeled here recently and had backtracked their way out, or was it two people? Instead of following she headed to the hiking trail that would take her to Fletcher's cabin. There she found more tracks, skis and boots and it appeared to be more than one person. Further along the trail where it was wide enough were snowmobile tracks. Clearly there were three different tracks and they went in different directions. They weren't recent since the snow fall covered details and left little evidence. She took copious amounts of pictures, getting more irritated as she moved along the trail.

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."*

"How's it going?"

*"No disturbance here. Over,"* Elizabeth said.

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

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. The back road veered away from the cabins and so did the snowmobile tracks.

Alex continued to the Fletcher cabin. There was no smoke coming from the chimney now. The front porch and steps were swept clean of snow, which meant someone had been there this morning. There weren't any clear prints leading away from the cabin. Someone had dragged something across where prints may have been. 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. The way it was buried, she guessed it was here for more than a week. She took more pictures. There were two cords of wood on the porch with nothing to protect them from snow.

"Hello! Anyone home?" she called loudly. "Helllooo. Anyone home?"

No movement around the front windows. She skied around the cabin, looking for any hints of habitation.

Where were the occupants? Doing mischief somewhere else?

Behind the cabin was a detached shed in need of serious maintenance. There wasn't any door and some of the roof was missing. It looked like someone had shoveled snow from the interior because the snow accumulating from the present snowfall was creating a thin layer on the inside floor, while around the shed it was four feet deep. Tracks from two snowmobiles led to and away from the shed, disappearing toward the road. She shinned her light for a closer look inside the shed. One was leaking something. She was sure if there were snowmobiles she would have heard them, but then they were in the shelter for some time.

Alex skied closer to the back of the cabin for another look. The windows were uncovered and it was dark inside. The windows were also too high to peer inside. She let out a puff of air, irritated. Carrying a ladder wasn't something she thought of.

She tapped her nose, testing how cold her exposed skin was. She couldn't feel it. She remembered she had a ski mask in her top pocket. After putting that on and taking a few sips of water she called Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, come in."

*"Hi. How's trail blazing?"*

"It's cold out here."

*"It's warm here. Can I interest you in spending some time here?"*

Alex felt guilty about leaving Elizabeth behind when someone with a slingshot was taking shots at the cabin, but she knew she was safer there than with her. Finding out who was trying to get her to chase them through the woods was sidetracking her from her time with Elizabeth.

"You sure can. I'm heading back now. See you soon."

She took another route through fresh powdered snow.

"Elizabeth, come in."

*"I'm in and you're not."*

"I'm approaching the cabin, Elizabeth. Any visitors?"

*"Just your squirrels."*

Elizabeth opened the door for Alex. She took Alex's skis and leaned them against the inside wall as Alex dropped her backpack on the floor and peeled off her coat and hat.

"It's nice and toasty in here."

"Do you want hot cocoa or coffee?"

"Cocoa with a marshmallow on top, yum. You put everything away," she said as she looked around the small kitchen and front room that were clear of everything they had brought with them.

"I moved everything downstairs for lack of room up here and because you're making me so nervous I would rather be downstairs..." she paused smiling, "Besides, with the room heater going, Harold's study is too good to go to waste."

Alex smiled as she accepted the mug with two marshmallows floating on top. "Is his ghost down there?"

"I hope not. Was your nosing around worth the effort?"

"I found a lot of tracks on the trail in the back. There could be about four people up here. When I looked over the Fletcher cabin, no one came to the door. There had been smoke from the chimney earlier, I'm sure of that. There's a green car buried under snow. The porch was cleared and swept of snow and there's a stack of logs uncovered on the porch. In the back, there's a broken down shed where two snowmobiles were kept, but I don't know how recently. If there were any going, we would have heard them."

"Would we have heard them in the shelter? I think not," Elizabeth said.

Alex looked out the window. "I think we're getting another foot or two of snow. Did you get some rest?"

"A short one. I was waiting for your calls. The walkie-talkie doesn't work downstairs."

"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.

"So do we continue to worry about these local terrorists?" Elizabeth asked.

"Vandalism, pure and simple, with malicious intent to do harm. I'll send an email to Ranger Gray Horse and Mark to keep them informed of the situation. Nothing can be done until the storm passes. The good thing is, with the weather, this vandalism will stop." Alex looked out the window again. It was impossible to see beyond the porch. "It's not like we're going to starve or freeze, so we might as well relax."

"My very thought and I know just the thing to help us relax," Elizabeth said.

"Shall we start in the larger shower?"

"Two great minds that think alike," Elizabeth said. "I've made the bed downstairs just so the flow isn't interrupted."

Alex smiled. "You have been busy."



## Chapter 4

### *Day Three of Cabin Time*

Alex took another bite of her tuna sandwich, humming her contentment.

A good sandwich followed up with a short workout in the snow, and then collapse on the couch to watch movies curled up with my favorite person. The only thing missing is popcorn."

"You don't think this is weird eating a tuna fish sandwich for breakfast?" Elizabeth asked.

"How do you know its morning? There's no clock or windows down here."

"I've taken peeks outside the window upstairs while you were still sleeping and it was dark, with the wind howling and snow piling against the windows. And the last time I looked at my cellphone, it was seven in the morning."

"Should I be getting up later or earlier?"

"This is a vacation. Get up when you feel like it. How about a board game instead of going out in that cold stuff?" Elizabeth asked.

"That sounds like a good idea." Alex looked over her shoulder where she had a few games stored, hoping she didn't have any word games.

"The Chutes and Ladders you have on the shelf is gathering dust. Is that yours or Harold's?" Elizabeth asked.

"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. She has the makings of a good detective, like her father, even though Linda says she wants to be a ballerina and a bounty hunter like Dog the Bounty Hunter. I was hoping to get a chance before Christmas week to take a quick trip up here but we got busy and the road was closed due to a blizzard."

"What's so exciting about that show?"

"She likes the way he screams bloody murder and then prays for whoever he catches."

"It sounds crazy-making for a child to hear that. You do know, she already has a Chutes and Ladders game?"

"I bought that one too. I've since learned that Toys and More Toys would have kept it in their backroom for me until Christmas Eve. So, you like the bomb shelter better than the cabin upstairs."

"Besides being quieter and safer, it's more modernized than the cabin," Elizabeth said.

"I noticed you've taken over the study. I was hoping you would like it."

"Who wouldn't? Bookcases full of books, space to spread out my stuff and I found a tack board where he must have laid out his plots. I've been doing mine in my head and on a computer but I can be tempted to adapt to my new environment."

"Are you planning on disappearing down here when you have a deadline fast approaching?" Alex asked.

"I can use it to threaten you when you keep tapping on the study door to see if I'm awake or working."

Alex leaned over and kissed Elizabeth. "I'll take that warning seriously, though for you to drive all the way up here during the winter and lug your supplies to the cabin..."

"I would have to really be worked up," Elizabeth finished for her. "Unless I really liked being up here. Its entrances I can lock."

At that moment a muffled boom sounded above them.

"What the hell is that?"

Alex stood up and moved to look at her security monitor. The two cameras in the woodshed were swinging while the others showed thick snowfall.

"What the hell happened to..."

Another boom directly above them sounded, shaking their shelter. In a few moments another boom and they were in darkness. They bumped into each other, falling to the ground. On hands and knees Alex crawled to the glow on the wall that said Emergency. Her fingers felt along the side of the box for the latch and opened it. She fumbled until she found a flashlight. From the box she pulled out an oxygen mask and handed it to Elizabeth and took one for herself.

"What was that? A gas explosion? Did we leave the gas on?" Elizabeth asked. "I didn't smell any gas escaping when I went up for a look."

"Put the oxygen mask around your neck in case you should need it," Alex said. Alex handed Elizabeth a flashlight. "Wait here, I'm going to check the seal on the hatch to the kitchen."

While Alex climbed up the stairs, Elizabeth ran her light along the walls. The books in the bookcase hadn't fallen, and nothing from the food shelves.

Alex's light picked up a red LED light on the hatch. Heat on the other side would activate the warning. Alex went to the main power box for the shelter.

"We have emergency backup down here. We'll be alright. I need to check the cameras." Her hands were shaking as she switched to battery power. Lights and air turned on making it less menacing. She powered on her server that crashed to see again what she thought she had seen and see what else there was above them. While the CPU worked on recovering itself she took a walk around the bomb shelter, shining her light on the shelter's walls and ceiling to see if anything was damaged and to collect her wits.

If the explosions didn't call outside attention to their situation her server going down would alert SID, her previous employer and Sunrise PD, her present employer. Both had reasons to monitor her cabin server.

Mentally, she began to set up priorities and at the top of her list was the need to assess damage, inside then outside. The operating system on the server came up. She signed on then clicked on her security cameras. There was a snow storm outside making it difficult to see anything clearly, except the fire where the cabin was. The two cameras in the woodshed were askew and showing it was snowing outside through a gaping hole in the shed wall.

Elizabeth leaned over her shoulder for a closer look. "That hole is big enough for a person to fit through. It looks like a missile went through it."

"A missile up here?" Alex thought the same thing. What nut would bring a shoulder cannon up here and shoot it in the middle of a snowstorm? She didn't know anyone that crazy. Did the sling shot shooter get a shoulder cannon?

"I've seen enough military documentaries and news reports to know that was caused by a missile," Elizabeth insisted.

Alex could feel Elizabeth shaking. She slipped her hand over hers. Holding each other's hands help settle them both.

"The cabin is on fire. These other cameras used to face to the cabin. The explosion must have knocked them sideways. It's a good thing we're down here."

"What are we going to do?"

"First, make sure this shelter is secured. We have power. The air down here is good for a week without going topside for fresh air. We have plenty of food and water to last more than a few months. We can safely wait out the snowstorm and whoever or whatever caused the explosions."

Alex went to the trunk and pulled out warm clothing, a tactical pack and a shoulder holster for her P17.

"You're going out there in the storm?" Elizabeth said.

"I don't know what caused the explosions."

"I like your first decision to wait out the storm. Opening that door may be letting the devil in," Elizabeth said. "What are you going to see in a snowstorm? What if whoever set the cabin on fire and put that big hole in the shed is waiting out there for you to show yourself? You're not Superwoman. You can't stop cannon fire or a bullet that body armor isn't made to stop!"

Alex took a deep breath and mentally stepped back at Elizabeth's fear for her and probably the up welling memories of losing her previous lover to a bullet through her head.

"If a psycho caused that, in this weather, then that same person or persons, will want to be sure the two people that are supposed to have been in the cabin are dead," she explained as calmly as she could; however, her insides were quivering with the fear of being trapped below ground causing conflict with her need to protect Elizabeth.

"I say let the psycho stay out in that freezing weather, worrying about his or her limbs going numb while we stay in here, warm and safe. When the storm passes you can go out and find the body or bodies. This is a bomb shelter, isn't it?"

Was it better to stay where it was safe? Her server going down would be noticed, but would the monitors attribute it to the storm? Alex pursed her lips as she tried to convince herself not to relieve her anxiety by seeing what was going on above them. What she would do to the person or people she found was where she stopped her thoughts before they became too violent.

"It makes sense what you're saying," Alex said cautiously, "This place is like a vault." Alex glanced at the monitor that showed little visibility with the snow fall, realizing the likelihood of her quickly finding who blew up her cabin before they found her was slim at best. Alex paced around the shelter, poking at this and poking at that, returning often to the camera views of the cabin fire that was being smothered by the snowfall.

The shelter was a secured structure that Sam had supervised construction of, she reminded herself. He would have thought of something like this because he was that type of person. Realizing she was not doing either of them any good pacing, she sat back down in front of the cameras. The fire from the cabin was out. It wasn't totally burnt down.

"Come and play a game with me. We need to relax before we go stir crazy."

"I don't like sitting down here when someone is up there doing I don't know what."

"Freezing. That's what. I don't care how good their winter clothes are, staying up there isn't good for their health. May they find peace freezing to death. Come on and pick your player."

Elizabeth setup the Chutes and Ladders game and they were on their third game when Elizabeth knocked over the board, jumping up.

"What was that?" Elizabeth asked.

A tap, then another, then more tapping on the blast door of the tunnel had Alex standing up, holding her breath as she translated the Morse code.

"Sam!" Alex said relieved.

"Are you sure?" Elizabeth asked but was helping Alex open the blast door.

"You two feeling a bit warm down there?" Sam's asked. He moved in hurriedly closing and locking the door behind him. "It's cold out there," he continued.

Elizabeth had backed up frightened at seeing a figure in a white Ghillie suit with a white rifle move into their secure space.

"Sam! Gods you scared the crap out of me in that outfit. I am so glad you're back." Alex said.

Sam handed Alex the rifle. His eyes searched the interior while removing his gloves then stepping out of the Ghillie suit. "Looks like it held up well."

His eyes then rested on both scared women.

"Are you two alright? You two are damn lucky, you know that?"

"Angles are watching over us," Alex said, nervously reciting a blessing her aunties had taught her.

"It isn't over yet," Sam said.

"I've been trying to talk Alex out of going out in the storm to look at what happened."

"What did happen?" Alex and Elizabeth asked simultaneously.

"One of them militia boys shot a shoulder missile at your cabin. Missed his first shot and hit the shed. The second shot hit the cabin. The third shot went through and hit your gas tank. If it wasn't in that container it could have been worse. The shooter was Johnnie Hoehl. After your cabin's gas tank blew, an explosion from the direction of my cabin came and a few minutes later an explosion from the Fletcher cabin. That one was bigger than the other two. Someone must be cleaning up after themselves."

"Johnnie Hoehl?" Alex asked incredulously. "I would never have put him down for being tough enough to be out in this weather, but blowing things up would be a good incentive. His buddy Allan Watts has to have been in with him on this."

"Do you mind if I fix myself something to eat? I've been going since yesterday on cold coffee and stale sandwiches."

Sam picked some things from the shelves and they followed him into the kitchen. While he warmed his dinner Elizabeth boiled water for coffee.

"Mark left a message on my cell phone Wednesday evening," Sam continued. "He thought he identified Henrich Reiner's protégé. She was working at Murphy's Sports Outfitter under the name of Carol..."

"Jones," Alex and Elizabeth finished for him, though both had a different tone.

"I don't believe it," Alex said. "Too many people know her face now. It's not her. She doesn't move like the person I saw shoot at me. Body movement is difficult to change. They also have different body types. Carol has goddess hips, you know the Mae West, Marylyn Monroe look. What used to be called voluptuous figure with wide and padded hips. The person that shot at me was slimmer. No. Carol isn't Reiner's protégé."

"I think Mark's rethinking on that one too. Carol got my attention the day her and her friends arrived in a minivan with Tennessee license plates. There are five of them. I've been tailing Carol. She's been cultivating a friendship with those two young hoodlums, Johnnie and Allan, and meeting up with them outside of Sunrise in that skanky hotel, Moonshine Inn. When they left Wednesday afternoon, they had two snowmobiles in Johnnie's truck bed. I was ten minutes behind them when I got a flat. By the time I was back on the road I found the truck in a pull off near the road crews' maintenance building. It had four flat tires and the snowmobiles were gone. I followed their trail to the Fletcher's cabin. For two days they've been taking turns keeping an eye on your cabin. It was pretty amusing to see Carol score a few shots at you with a sling shot, Alex. It looked like she was baiting you to go into the trees. She had a rifle."

"I thought it was suspicious that's why I didn't follow the tracks," Alex said.

"Good nose. Today, two of them exited Fletcher's cabin with heavy weapons on their snowmobile. When I caught up with Johnnie, Allan was nowhere to be seen. I was too far away to stop him from blowing up your cabin. The fool was pumping his arm in victory and shouting when someone shot him. There were two of them. The way they were working it was like a

sniper and his spotter. I followed them up to the trees and didn't want to get caught in there so I took the long route around. I heard a shot and then later another shot. With my binoculars I located a red splotch in the white snow. I think it was Allan. I didn't locate the assassins but thought I better see how you two are doing."

"Earlier when I looked over the Fletcher cabin, I spotted at least three sets of tracks on the back trail and tracks from the snowmobiles."

"The other women that came with Carol have southern accents but they aren't up here. Know anyone from the south that you pissed off...a whole bunch?"

"Bobby Miles," Elizabeth said softly.

"He's dead," Alex said hurriedly.

"That doesn't mean his family isn't pissed off," Sam said.

"But women in a machismo organization on a mission?" Alex said.

"You don't kill a husband or boyfriend of a gang leader and not expect his sisters, girlfriends and or wife to come looking for revenge," Sam said.

"You think Carol is a relative of Bobby Miles? We didn't kill him. A sniper shot him," Alex said, "probably from the White Knights."

"What's really scary is what are the others doing while we're up here?" Elizabeth said.

"If it's a revenge killing or just a contract killing there's going to be clues. The snowfall is light to heavy so most of the clues will be lost until the snow melt, but the obvious we can look at," Sam said.

"Are we safe here or not?" Elizabeth asked.

"Depends how much Intel they know about these cabins. As you learned in Sunrise, there's never anything that's really secret."

They were all quiet as they sipped their coffee and Sam ate canned stew. When he finished he laid his plate in the sink.

"Why take out three cabins?" Elizabeth asked.

"Johnnie loved to blow things up. Just telling him he can blow up a cabin, and my cabin at that, would give him a hard on," Alex said. "What bad boy wouldn't join Carol for a fun week out if that was on the play list?"

"How many people know about this shelter?" Sam asked.

"It wouldn't be a safe house unless it's secret. My list of who knows is, Mark, Harper and us. However, SID also knows and I don't know who all that would include."

"Fed security is vulnerable to the new wave of hackers that are employed by mobster cartels," Sam said glumly. "However, we do have the home advantage."



## Chapter 5

### *Day Two in Sunrise*

"Mark, I want to see you before the meeting," Chief Harper said.

Mark set his coffee and bagel on his desk, hung up his coat and picking up his coffee and bagel, joined Chief Harper in his office.

"Something about Carol Jones?" Mark asked hopefully.

"Close the door," Harper said.

Mark shut the chief's office door and sat in a chair near him so they could converse in low voices.

"Officer Jessie Higgins from Antioch picked up a *woman* trying to poison the water supply. She had a tattoo on her wrist that we've identified as White Knight affiliation."

"A *woman*," Mark repeated thoughtfully. "Our Intel on the WKs is that they're a white supremacy type of family that were male dominant with women playing a behind the scenes roles. It obviously needs updating."

"She broke his jaw before he could take her into custody. The security guard that called in the 10-0-0 came over to zap the woman with a Taser. Her vehicle was searched and explosives were found in the trunk. It looks like some are missing."

"10-0-0 - suspicious person or persons sighted at Most Likely Terrorist Target. It wasn't something I thought I would hear since our four cities don't have any value to a terrorist hit. But to the White Knights who hold grudges..." Mark sighed. "I was hoping we were done with them. I read Gary's report on the robbery at Lonnie Hoehl's late last night. The inventory of stolen weapons is something to worry about and the missing snowmobiles. Now with this WK woman..."

"With the 10-0-0 call and Gary's report on the stolen weapons, I contacted ATF and SID. Both are interested in our situation. The woman Higgins arrested," Harper slid over a picture to Mark, "is Odie Bobbie Danner Deats, she's nineteen, and her tattoo is new. SID said the new tattoo is like the men's, aligning the wearer to an assignment. SID's monitor hasn't seen three key women in the White Knights hierarchy for two days. SID is guessing those three women left with their own assassinations and a team of five women each to accomplish them. My guess is that SID and the FBI were caught with their pants down."

"We can only hope we have five to worry about with one caught. Why the water in Antioch?" Mark asked.

"It feeds all four cities."

"The snowmobiles and those two boys have me guessing they're headed up to the mountains to ruin Elizabeth and Alex's vacation. Johnnie doesn't like Alex one bit. Even though I know Alex is able to take care of herself, I'm worried."

"Yes. I sent her an update, but she hasn't opened up her email yet. This changes who Carol may be and it's not Henrich Reiner's protégé. It makes more sense. Reiner's protégé is a mystery by design. We have no face or name only DNA and gender and only because Alex shot her. Carol doesn't care if people have seen her face and that we have her fingerprints. Murphy said he had seen a tattoo on her arm but couldn't say what it was. I'll make a guess that Carol is one of the five. So we have two identified. That leaves three unidentified and four loose," Harper said. "SID hasn't gotten back to me on identifying the fingerprints we sent them on Carol, but I'm sure the report will be hand delivered by a SID agent."

"The more the merrier. The snow storm hitting the mountains is already snowing us in. If anyone plans on arriving, it better be before noon. As for a hit squad," Mark pulled out his cellphone. "Hi, Hon. I was calling to ask if you want to go out for dinner, but I just remembered you already took the steaks out. How about if I bring desert? Call me back with your request." He hung up. "It went into her voice mail."

"I never trained my wife for what ifs or how to recognize trouble before it gets to a point where she can't back out," Chief Harper said. "Then when the Jaded Amulet moved to town, I hired a retired field officer, Andy Kim to be Bessie's house aide. I just hope he's on his toes."

"Linda was a black belt in Taekwondo when I met her." Mark grinned. "She taught women's self-defense at her then boyfriend's martial arts dojo."

Harper looked surprised. "I would never have guessed."

Mark picked up his vibrating cell. "Hello?...Hi, hon....Sounds good. No whipped crème for tonight. I'll be home on time. I love you."

Mark folded his cell and slipped it in his hip holster looking thoughtful.

"We'll let our communities be on the lookout for women with tattoos and looking suspicious around public targets. ATF is sending out agents who will be here tomorrow. Lonnie has given us his list of what was taken but I'm wondering why Allan Watt's father hasn't said anything. Allan and Johnnie are joined at the hip."

"He didn't report anything missing? Did anyone call him?" Harper asked, as he picked up his phone. He quickly punched in numbers. "Hi, Pecora, this is..." he paused and smiled as the voice on the other line not only identified him but his business. Pecora was the front desk to Brisbane's Police Department. She transferred his call immediately to Chief Culwell.

"Good morning Chief Culwell..." Harper was quiet as his counterpart in Brisbane shouted his anger at Harper for calling a four corner emergency without consulting him. It was costing his department overtime and he felt it was a self-serving 10-0-0 emergency call.

When he stopped for a breath, Harper gave him the time and place ATF wanted to meet with the four police chiefs and whoever they had as leaders in a possible terrorist attack.

No serious law enforcement officer liked Chief Culwell and his hooligan police force. Since he made police chief the town's crime rate and unsolved cases went up which Culwell blamed on the surrounding cities and the seasonal migrant workers. Most of the people they caught for a crime had to be taken to the hospital first. When Judge Mead had too many of his poorly prepared cases before her she had ordered him and his department retraining and if they didn't graduate with scores acceptable to big city police departments, he would be held in contempt and without a job as well as the officers not passing would not be officers of her court.

She was able to do it because his department was under investigation by the FBI for abusive practices and a few other Federal agencies for the disappearance of large quantities of seized drugs and weapons that were missing from their evidence room.

"I was calling to see if you received any burglary calls...."

Harper was quiet as Culwell shouted at him for calling about burglary calls. Doesn't he know how to delegate? When Culwell paused, Harper added, "ATF will be asking the same question..."

Culwell went off again that ATF had no business sticking their nose into his business. He hung up on Harper.

"Is he on drugs?" Mark asked.

"If he is, it better be for the heart. Last night after Judge Mead and I discussed this White Knight threat, she told me the FBI let her know that Culwell's credentials are fake. Sometime today after Bales Town Council gets their business together, they will make it official that Chief Culwell is dismissed and his staff will be reviewed."

"Oh, that puts another knot to this joint operation."

"Find out if Mack Watts called in a burglary report, will you Mark? He lives in Bales."

"He no longer lives in Bales. I can call his militia buddies to find out where he now lives. Do you need to know before the meeting?"

"No. It can wait. We have enough already to go over."

Harper opened his office door and the dayshift and night shift drifted through his office to the meeting room.

Harper, Mark and Eric presented information on the 10-0-0 call, what was happening about it, and then went over the usual department information to prepare them for the snowstorm that would be hitting them by noon.

"What about Alex and Elizabeth?" Harriet asked.

"They'll have to rely on their skills. They're snowed in and soon so will the towns surrounding the mountain. For now, we know of five, there are four left looking for targets – people and places. Sunrise keeps few secrets, so we're going to use our citizens for spotting strangers. I'm sure by now everyone knows a 10-0-0 has been called in from last night. Reassure everyone that we are looking for strangers and they will have a tattoo on the inside of the left wrist or maybe not. Normally, in this weather, we wouldn't be getting any visitors. ATF will be sending people and maybe other Federal agencies without telling us. Don't take anyone's word for it. Ask to see their badges and call it in. Take their picture to verify. Everyone needs to ask to see their badges so we don't have strangers going into places we don't normally allow strangers to access. Give a positive spin on this. This is a good test of our emergency preparedness. Alright, anything I missed?" Harper looked around. "Remember, these women will kill without hesitation. If they're willing to poison city water it's a good guess that they don't care about anyone. Everyone keep safe and good hunting."

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By noon another women was caught and captured at a local hamburger stop. Her vehicle was stolen from another state and it was loaded with weapons in the trunk. Maps and notes were found in the glove compartment. SID ID'd her as Inna Bobbie Chasley Deats Armstead, age 34. Second cousin to Bobbie Miles.

Mark checked on Linda regularly and Linda called him now and then to reassure him she was alright. His grandparents had taken the children for a drive in the RV along with Bessie, Chief Harper's wife, and her bodyguard.

At four Mark called Linda to say he was on his way to the Ebben's House.

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Linda hung up from Mark and began preparations for dinner. While the food warmed up she called her in-laws.

"Hello, Marta, it's Linda....Oh. Well that's really good. The children will love it. Okay. Have a great time." She laid the phone down carefully. There was the sound of the sliding door opening. Where was Angel?

She pulled out the plates to set the table and then the utensils. A board creaked from the hall. She went back to the cutting board.

"I wouldn't if I were you," a southern accent voice warned.

Linda laid the knife on the cutting board and turned to see who was speaking. She was dressed in dark clothes with a weapon pointed at her. Her heart pounded wildly while she tried to concentrate on identifying the weapon.

"What do you want?" Linda asked, not hiding her fear. Let them think you are so frightened that you are just a common housewife, her husband had told her.

"Your husband, your children and everyone else in your family," she said, then after a pause, added. "And your friends too."

"Why?" Linda asked, her voice shaking.

The woman said nothing for a few moments, enjoying the fear she was causing. "You killed one of us, we kill all of you."

"Revenge? For who?"

"Bobbie Miles, my brother and our leader." Her eyes hardened and her hands shook a little. "He would have been our family leader."

"We didn't kill him. One of your own did."

"Liar!" She shouted, losing her composure, but it was for only a moment.

"He tortured a friend. He killed her child! He was a baby killer."

"That was *our* business." That restored her calm. "No one interferes with our family business without paying the penalty." Carefully she looked around her taking in everything that was in the kitchen that could be used as a weapon, then she peered over the bar into the front room, seeing the fire going in the fireplace.

"Is anyone else here?"

"Like I'm going to tell you the truth after you just told me you plan on killing everyone?"

"I'll just have to blow this entire house up then," she said bitingly. "What better way to empty a town but an explosion they have to drive out to see for themselves. Turn off the burner and sit." She gestured to the small dining table with her free hand. "Put both of your hands flat on the table."

"Where's Angel?" Linda asked hoping to give time for her bodyguard to get into position, and most of all, hoping she was still moving around.

"Who's Angel?"

"My dog," Linda said.

"That mangy looking thing? I darted it."

A dart gun. The woman was holding a dart gun on her. Linda felt relieved that only the dog was darted and that she felt she could beat a dart gun.

"So sad that your dog will wake and find he failed in protecting you. No doubt it will break his heart."

Linda wanted to smack the smirk off her face and the woman knew it. Her finger slowly began to squeeze the trigger and Linda ducked, flipping a plate like a Frisbee at her. As Linda moved putting the table then a screen between her the dart missed her and hit the wall. Still moving, Linda glanced at the woman, she was pulling out a pistol from her boot.

The woman was very cool. Too cool. Linda tossed a knife she picked up from the table to distract her. Angrily the woman took two steps toward her instead of shooting her but a boom sounded knocking the woman back into the counter. She slid to the ground looking shocked. A bean bag dropped to the floor near her.

Officer Carry Ames slowly approached the figure on the ground. She pulled a backup pistol from her ankle and handed it to Linda while keeping her rifle trained on the fallen assassin.

"Slide your hands out where I can see them," Carry said. The fallen woman looked like she was trying to catch her breath.

Hands barely moved.

"I have more bean bags. They can numb your arms or legs. Now, move your hands where I can see them. One hand slowly moved out from the body but not far enough out. Carry cocked the rifle. "Do it!" she ordered.

The woman made to roll over and Carry shot another bag at her right arm.

Mark Scripts appeared suddenly with his gun drawn, taking in the scene quickly.

Linda was shaking now that the woman no longer threatened her.

Officer Mike Jones leaned over the bar from the front room with his weapon trained on the woman on the floor.

Mark reached down and grabbed the woman's belt and pulled her up as if she were a doll, shaking her roughly. While the assassin tried to control her balance and catch her breath, Carry grabbed weapons from her waving hands. Her clothing was removed revealing weapons taped to her body and a detonator. Only when she was redressed in Alex's robe and handcuffed hands, legs and ankles did Mark take Linda out of sight and give her a hug.

"I'm thankful for all those lessons you insisted I keep up," Linda whispered in his ear.

"And keep it a secret?" Mark said.

"Oh, yeah. She darted Angel."

"I found her. She's okay. I told her to stay so she wouldn't try to move around and fall. Where were the geese in all this?" Mark stopped to turn on the security cameras. The geese were locked up in their pen.

"I didn't let them out," Linda admitted. "I didn't think turning on all the security equipment was necessary since everyone knows Alex and Elizabeth aren't here. She said she was going to blow this place up. She probably has explosives somewhere."

"In her backpack. She left it in the car port. Nothing setup yet. She wanted to first make sure everyone in the house was neutralized."

"Lucky us," Linda said, kissing her husband. "My hero."



## Chapter 6

### *Day Three in the Mountains*

A Ghillie clad figure fixed his rifle sights on the teenager that was jumping up and down and screaming his glee at putting a hole through a woodshed and setting fire to a cabin. Neither warranted the energy he was expending in this weather, considering he was supposed to be packing up and quickly leaving the site to meet with one of his partners, who no doubt would also be dressed in a white Ghillie uniform that seemed to be the favorite dress for this snowy escapade. With a cloth the sniper wiped the fog caused by his breath from the rifle optics. The target was too far for the velocity of his shot to not be affected by the cold. If the shot was important, he would use a ballistic calculator, but his partner also dressed in a Ghillie uniform was slowly moving in for a closer shot with a handgun equipped with a silencer. He readjusted his sights, not getting any better of an image of the youth continuing his celebration. The snowfall was getting thicker. He kept one eye on his jumping target and the other on his partner that was moving in for a close shot. He waited to see if he would be needed.

*Alright already. Enough is enough. Amateur,* he thought contemptuously.

A flash from his partner's silencer knocked the teen's body sideways ending the teen celebration. Bits of his brain mixed with blood splashed on white with snowflakes melting in the warm mix.

His partner skied over to verify it was a good shot and then to cut the teen's trigger finger off as proof of kill to their employer. Using his scope, he panned over the area, not expecting to see much of anything. Visibility was bad and what nut would be out in this weather? He laughed at that. He ejected his cartridge and put it in a warm pouch, covered his rifle with an insulated sock and went to help strip the body of whatever they could use. They were in no hurry. The Matador shoulder cannon the teen had used to demolish the cabin was a nice prize that they would flip for later. Slinging it across his shoulder his partner took ownership of the bag with two more missiles.

Using GPS they skied to where their next mark would be heading to. They kept to whatever cover there was, and at each stop they scanned for anything that moved in the snowfall. Settling comfortably between two snow covered boulders the sniper unpacked his rifle and scope and waited for his spotter to zoom in on their next target. Under the trees the visibility was better, as

the wind and snowfall was less intense. It would be slow going for the other teen to arrive at this point due to the deep snow. Both were hoping he knew how to use a GPS. Thinking it was about time for the other teen to appear, he uncovered his rifle and pulled out his bullet from his warm pouch. He had no qualms in his ability to hit a target in freezing temperatures. It just might not be hitting the target with as much velocity as it would in warmer weather. It was still a killing shot, and the body wouldn't be found until the snow melted.

It was startling to see the movement of the various colors of white from the Ghillie clad form move into his telescope sight, making it appear as if the youth was only inches before him. His spotter gave him the coordinates. He checked his scope and looked for the figure again. His target had an RPG slung across his chest and as he skied toward them, then he came to a stop to reposition it. The teen's body was jolted out of his skies and into a tree from the shot. The sniper smiled at his shot. It didn't surprise him that it was teenagers that were carrying heavy missile launchers since in his group, they trained their youth early in the use of weapons. He just thought it was a waste they had no discipline about blowing up targets and not being so easy to take out. Their loss.

The spotter took off to collect a finger and the RPG and whatever else he might have on him.

The sniper was looking around them when he heard a muffled sound that he recognized as coming from a rifle with a silencer. It was behind him. The sniper became still and pushed himself into the snow to not be seen. It seemed like hours when the sniper moved his scope to see what was around him. He wasn't able to find his spotter nor the teenager he shot. Both were covered in snow falling. Ever so slowly he moved his scope, searching for anything that moved. It took a few moments to register that he was looking at a Ghillie clad person looking at him in their scope.

The noise from the shot didn't register with him.

The unknown sniper smiled and retreated back into her hidden cover. Strangers in her territory and having a war. Not going to happen, she thought.



## Chapter 7

"Holy shit!" Alex whispered. "This is an assassination." She glanced around them. In the gray lighting with white pristine snow all around them, there were only two tracks to the Ghillie clad body with theirs standing out fresh and sharp. "By the damage to my cabin, I would say he used a shoulder cannon."

"Since he's wearing a shoulder harness to carry one, that's a good guess, detective," Sam said.

"The evidence of a backblast is buried under a layer of snow," Alex continued, ignoring Sam's dig.

"The lack of a finger is proof of the killing. They probably took the weapon and whatever missiles he still had," Sam said, not touching the corpse.

Alex took pictures of the partially snow-covered body they had uncovered of Johnnie and his mutilated hand. One part of his face remained intact, allowing them to recognize him after Alex pulled off what was left of the ski mask. It took all of her will power to not up chuck.

Alex began searching his clothes by peeling back the Ghillie suit, then worked hard to go through his frozen pants and shirt pockets with her cold fingers. It was difficult to free anything from the stiff clothing. Sam took pictures as she worked. She retrieved a set of keys and a folded up paper. His lack of identification was just like a person who in case was found doing something naughty, didn't want to be ID'd right away.

"We'll come back and gather evidence later. Go up the slope and follow along that tree line. I'll follow along here." Sam started skiing toward his cabin with Alex taking the physically harder route. Sam had heard two explosions and guessed his cabin was also hit.

Alex began her climb feeling less vulnerable than Sam, but skiing uphill was a lot of work, requiring a lot of stops to catch her breath. At each stop she scanned the area with her binoculars. "I see tracks," she said over her com link to Sam. As she shifted her weight snow loosened under her right ski and with a whoop she lost her balance. She fell on her side and slid down the slope with her snowshoes attached to her backpack preventing her from rolling.

She could hear Sam yell at her in her ear piece but somewhere in the fall she lost it and her skis as they automatically unlocked. Her fall was stopped abruptly by something not solid enough to not slide a little from her impact. When she was able to untangle herself she grabbed the dangling ear piece. She was hip deep in snow. Wrestling her pack off she unattached the snow shoes.

"Hey!" Sam yelled from behind her.

"What?" she yelled back impatient.

"Forget the skis for a moment."

Looking back at Sam, she could see her fall had been against another Ghillie clad body and not far from the first body was another.

"A shoot-out and they're all fashionably dressed in Ghillie's," Sam said. "It looks like bad weather brings out bad people. There's another body over there. I tripped on it coming over here."

Both looked at the body near Alex.

"Missing his finger too," Sam said. "Allan Watts, the other bad boy."

Sam searched the area while Alex took pictures. "These two are together. It looks like this one took a sniper shot through his scope. Look at the remains of his face. If it were a more expensive scope he would only have an eye injury. Here's the missing shoulder cannon that took out your cabin." Sam uncovered the rest of the Matador missile launcher. He looked at one of the frozen hands of the nearest body. He had a bag with two fingers in it. "This guy is the one collecting fingers. Whoever killed these two guys was just interested in killing them and didn't come to look over his or her shots."

Alex went over the bodies while Sam kept an eye over their environment. Allan had candy bars in his coat pocket and a RPG, rocket propelled grenade launcher strapped around him. It was more difficult to search him but more rewarding.

Alex dug into her pack and pulled out a cellphone with a signal booster.

"Who are you calling?" Sam asked.

"Dr. Mandy Sherwood, CSI. I want to know how she wants us to preserve the bodies...Oh, damn. Her voice message says there's an outbreak of Poison Ivy. The message is giving directions on what to do..." Alex sighed and listened to the message to its end. "Hi Mandy, this is Alex. Elizabeth and I are up at my cabin in the middle of a snowstorm and I have found, so far, four bodies. All have gunshot wounds, two are missing their trigger fingers and I have the bag with the fingers. How do you want me to preserve the bodies until you can send someone up here to collect them? Give me a call back or try sending something to my email. I hope you're getting some rest. I'll send pictures from my cell. Bye." She sent copies of the bodies to Mandy then the bag of fingers then called Chief Harper.

Alex left a similar message only with the names of the two boys, the same set of photos, then called Mark. "Hi, Mark. You're the first I've been ...."

*"Are you alright?"*

"Sam's here, helping me find bodies in the snow. We've found four. Two unidentified males and the other two are Allan Watts and Johnnie Hoehl. Johnnie blew my cabin up and we're on our way to find out what's left of Sam's and then the Fletcher cabin. How's the poison ivy outbreak going?"

*"We think it has to do with the White Knights. You didn't find a woman among the bodies?"*

"No. Now that you confirmed what Sam was saying, maybe we need backup."

*"Take pictures and send them in. Let me speak with Sam."*

"Hold on. Sam." Alex handed the cell to Sam and took his binoculars to keep an eye on the area.

"Yeah?" Sam said. It was a long call and Sam said nothing, just listened. He hung up and handed Alex her phone back.

"Let's get back to your cozy shelter. Those White Knight women are causing a lot of trouble. We'll leave the bodies until CSI can send someone up."

"What about your place?"

"We're going to move from your place to my safe place," Sam said. "I don't trust SID to keep your place private."

Sam stopped at the water tower where they were going to enter the tunnel. Tracks that weren't theirs were around it. Both looked at each other.

"You count to ten and then enter," Sam said. "I'll enter from the cabin's remains."

\*\*\*\*

Elizabeth paced through each modular, returning to the monitor that showed views of the area. The snowfall had stopped and from what she could see was a burnt cabin and a woodshed with a big hole through it.

Alex had given her a gun, but she felt more comfortable with the Taser and stun gun for backup. If she had to shoot someone, she didn't want to have imprinted in her mind the damage a bullet did to any living being. No matter how much she hated someone, she wasn't going to do that to herself.

As she passed the monitors again, she noticed snow was disturbed around the entrance to the tunnel near the water tower. Quickly she ran to the shelter's lights and turned them off. It took a few moments for her to see the reflectors on emergency boxes and the tips of things to use for orientating oneself in pitch dark. She made her way to the center of the shelter where the small dot glowed on the floor, and faced where she thought was the blast door. As she held the Taser before her, lessons she had in self-defense flew through her mind. She had locked the blast door but from experience she knew if someone was determined to get in, she or he would. She blinked a few times, not sure if the glow tape on the tip of the blast door had moved or not. Something was materializing out of the tunnel. A red laser light moved around the room. Elizabeth fired at what she guessed was the bulk of the body. Instead of getting the expected drop of the laser light, it swung her way. Elizabeth moved away from the center of the room and hugged one of the thin walls. A puff, ping, and repeated pings accompanied by curses, had Elizabeth realizing the thin room separators were metal some bullets didn't go through. She pulled out the stun gun thinking a person dressed for snow weather wouldn't be affected by the taser. A body slammed her into the wall with so much force the breath was knocked out of her and apparently also her assailant, as she had made sure her attacker also felt the impact of the wall..

Both hit the ground.

A hand wrapped around Elizabeth's throat. She pressed the stun gun into the hand around her throat and pressed the trigger. Her attacker released her grip and Elizabeth rolled and again pressed the trigger on the person's hand that was reaching for her and gave a hard push against the person. Her attacker seemed unsteady, so Elizabeth struck the masked face with the handle of the stun gun. While her assailant was lying on the ground. Elizabeth ran to where a flashlight was in an emergency box. Her masked assailant was still lying on the concrete floor. Grabbing Duct tape, she quickly wrapped the unconscious figures legs and hands.

From their belongings, she selected a watch cap and pulled it over attacker's masked face, covering the eyes. Then she turned the lights on. It was something she learned from Bobbie Miles, her stalker. Quickly she felt along the suit and removed knives, guns, and more sharp instruments.

A tapping from the hatch that used to be hidden in the kitchen closet had Elizabeth running into the kitchen where she dumped the weapons into the sink, then rushed up the stairs. She could hear Sam cursing her. She unlocked the hatch and found Sam lying flat in the dirty ashes

and snow. Elizabeth stepped down the stairs to give him room to enter. "I tied up an unwanted guest," Elizabeth said, "Her weapons are in the sink," she said softly.

"That's good. But there's another one. She followed Alex in when she entered the tunnel. Turn the lights off and when Alex comes in, drop to the floor," Sam said then jumped over the railing and disappeared into the shadows. Elizabeth locked the hatch cover and turned the lights off. With her flashlight she went to wait near the woman she had taped up.

If it were Alex coming through the blast door, wouldn't she have the code to let herself in? she thought.

"Elizabeth?" Alex's voice from behind the opening blast door was bland. "I'm coming in. Don't shoot."

Elizabeth shined her light at Alex as she stepped past the door with her hands held above her head. Behind her was another figure holding a weapon pointed at her head. The mask and Ghillie suit made it impossible for Elizabeth to identify the person but she dropped to the ground with her hands over her head, leaving the entire place in darkness.

Alex ducked when the pressure of the automatic against her head left.

"I'll be back," Sam said as he brushed by Alex to chase after the intruder that ran back out of the tunnel.

Alex gave Elizabeth a hug then turned the lights on.

"Are you alright? Who is this?"

"Our first uninvited visitor."

Alex picked up her weapon and studied Elizabeth's tape job. Alex took Elizabeth's hands in hers.

"I don't like your type of vacations," Elizabeth said.

"This is not my version of a vacation," Alex said.

Keeping their prisoner in sight, Alex logged onto her PC to send emails to everyone that needed to be updated and to check her mail for an answer from CSI, Dr. Mandy Sherwood. There were over a hundred emails in her mailbox. For the last three days she hadn't been keeping up. While her mail downloaded she accessed the cameras. The cameras that were still working showed it was snowing again. She glanced at Elizabeth who was making tea. She glanced back at their prisoner and noticed she had moved.

Alex got up and looked at her closer to make sure the tape was still securing her. She needed to strip her down to be sure she didn't have any weapons.

"Elizabeth, do you have your Taser?" Alex took it from Elizabeth and pressed it against the skin of their prisoner until she could see limbs slump.

Quickly, she cut the tape from around her wrists and ankles then began to undress their prisoner. Under her Ghillie suit was a bullet proof vest, then her shirt and pants. Weapons were taped to her body, knives and small caliber pistols.

"It's Carol Jones," Elizabeth said.

Sam returned, keying in the code to open blast door. As he opened it, he announced himself, "I'm okay and fully armed. The other got away on a snowmobile. So, we have Carol." He went into one of the trunks and picked out thermal underwear. "She'll be better off in this."

She was retaped dressed in thermals twice her size.

"How's it look out there?" Elizabeth asked.

"Snow white and plenty more falling. Were you able to get an answer?" he asked looking at Alex.

"I logged onto my email but didn't get a chance to read much because I noticed our prisoner was inching around."

"It's good you keep her eyes covered," Sam said.

"That was Elizabeth's idea. Pretty good for a writer, huh?" Alex grinned at Elizabeth.

"I'm getting déjà vu feelings here. WK and assassins," Elizabeth said. "She has one of those tattoos on her wrist."

"I have some contacts that can check and see just who knows about this shelter and can do something to close this WK threat," Sam said.

Alex sat in front of her PC and opened the first email Mark had sent the day they came up to the cabin. "Trouble, trouble. What's with all the names?" Chief Harper identified Carol as Patty Bobbie Jane Miles Chasley – Bobbie's sister. Ozzie Bobbie June Armstead Miles, Bobbie Miles wife was the leader of a group of four other women that came to Northern California to seek vengeance for Bobbie's death.

"When members take on a mission they'll get a tattoo and add the leader of their clan's name to theirs. Bobbie wasn't married when I lived there," Elizabeth said.

"Maybe he needed to be married," Alex said.

Elizabeth sent Amanda an email.

"We'll need to set up a tent for the teams that will be up here. Then lock this place down so whoever on the team knows about this place, can't drop in." Sam gave a large yawn.

"You need to get some sleep. You can plan it all in your dreams. We'll take the first watch of her and the entrances," Alex said.

. . . . .

"She knew the combination. Someone said something," Alex whispered to Elizabeth.

"There are no secrets. For that matter, they may have consulted a psychic," Elizabeth said.

"I'm going to do another check on our prisoner then we'll fix something to eat."

"How about going home?" Elizabeth asked.

"How about going into San Francisco and for the remaining days, be treated to spa, massages, lavish dinners..." she leaned over and kissed Elizabeth.

"Cabin fever?"

"Big time."

"Where are we going to get a big tent and where are we going to put it?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know. Sam will fill us in."



## Chapter 8

### *Day Four in the Mountains*

Beating the feeble sun's morning light, Ranger Gray Horse drove his snowmobile with a trailer full of supplies to the Fletcher cabin before driving to Alex and Sam's snow camp. Sam, Alex, and Elizabeth had set up two tents late at night so when people arrived questions wouldn't be asked on where they stayed until help arrived.

*"This is Ranger Gray Horse calling Bear and company. Come in."*

Sam grabbed up the radio, instantly awake. "This is the Bear, come in Ranger Gray Horse."

*"Good morning. You should be hearing my approach soon. I stopped off at the remains of the Fletcher cabin and took some snapshots for ATF. If you don't have coffee I have a nice big thermos to share. Over."*

"That will be very nice. I hear you now. Over and out."

Elizabeth and Alex, tired from the previous night's setting up a cold camp and winding down from all the excitement, crawled out of their tents at hearing Sam's radio."

"Morning, Sam. I can see his lights," Alex said. Yawning wide she started to cough from the cold air in her lungs. "How's the prisoner?"

"Morning, Alex. She's due for a potty break. When it's light enough for me to see that's all she's doing she'll get her break."

"Did I hear coffee?" Elizabeth asked. "Good morning, Sam."

"Good morning, Elizabeth. It's nice and clean out here," Sam said.

The lights on the snowmobile lit up the three as Gray Horse parked his ride.

"Good morning all. You have a prisoner?"

"Tucked in a sleeping bag wearing only thermos."

"I drove by the Fletcher cabin," Ranger Gray Horse said. "Not even the cement base is left. It looked like a professional blew it up." He shined his light at the remains of Alex's cabin. "Not like here. You have most of your cabin walls. Just gutted?"

He handed a thermos over to Elizabeth. "I can see you need a pick-me-up." While the three shared coffee Ranger Gray Horse examined the remains of Alex's cabin closer. "Not done by the same person."

Sam and Alex joined him with their own cups of coffee. Alex didn't want to try Ranger Gray Horse's version of coffee and had warned Elizabeth of its strong taste. They stepped up the cement steps to get a closer look with three flashlights shining over the skeletal remains. "You have something we can work with. We can clean up most of the mess and put the tent up so that the water pipes and toilet can be put to use. You'll need someone with plumbing knowledge to fix those pipes but your toilet being what it is, is useable. I've brought two portables with me, considering all the people Agent Briscole said will be heading up here."

"So what kind of tent did you get for all these people we're supposed to entertain?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's the standard EHBCS. That's an Emergency Home Base Camp Setup to you folks. It has most of the necessities for a mobile home office and with power generator. It's one of the quieter generators, but up here, it's still noise so I have the insulator we can encase it in. I have a coffee machine, considering all the people coming up, but it draws a lot of power, so if you plan on using power tools too, it's one or the other at the same time."

They cleared the interior of burnt furniture and wood paneling that showed cement walls behind them. The cannon shell put a hole through two walls and the roof was burnt so the tent was going to be within the cement walls. The bathroom facilities made it through the explosion and fire. The water pipes were frozen so they didn't have everything in the tent. Once the tent was set up, Sam and Gray Horse left to check Sam's cabin. When they returned it was noon. Gray Horse made them lunch on the cooking stove - MRIs. Everyone but Elizabeth passed on his coffee. When they finished lunch, Ranger Gray Horse took his leave. "I don't want to be anywhere in hearing distance of this mix and match group. Good luck and your prisoner, you better find another way to keep her quite because she's been working on that tape pretty good now."

He handed them plastic ties most law enforcement were using. It was harder to bite through or pick the lock of metal handcuffs.

Sam looked up at the sky. "They better be becoming soon. It's going to be dark and chances of them running over evidence will be greater."

While they waited for their guests, Sam spent a lot of time alone with Patty, talking in low tones to her.

"Just what do you think Sam is doing? Talking her out of being a bad girl?" Elizabeth asked.

Alex moved her chair closer to the heater in the tent. "I wish they would hurry up and get here. I want to finish off our vacation in hedonistic comfort in San Francisco."

"I believe you're getting your wish," Alex said.

They all stopped what they were doing to listen to the sound of a buzz that as it intensified changed to a familiar sound of a herd of snowmobiles. They hurriedly dressed warmer and stepped out of their new tent. It looked like an army was descending with powder and exhaust flying and the noise decibel nearly deafening after the silence. When the engines cut, the following silence had Alex worried she had gone temporarily deaf.

As the men and women dismounted and removed their goggles and masks Alex was surprised Mark wasn't among them.

"Hi Mandy. You must be bored to have made the trip up here yourself," Alex said.

She made a disagreeable noise. Four of her staff were with her and began removing supplies from the trailers their snowmobiles were pulling. They were intending on spending some time here, Alex thought. Sleeping bags were among the things they lugged into the tent.

"I asked for Dr. Sherwood to be here," Amanda said. "Hello, Alex, Elizabeth. Glad to see you two survived. Was this your cabin?"

"Yep. I think the cabin held up pretty good. It was built to withstand a fire not a missile."

"Hello, Sam. You have a prisoner for us?" Amanda asked. He nodded.

They all walked into the tent where the chill factor was noticeably different. Not just sleeping bags but sleeping cots were being setup quickly by Mandy's team. Backpacks were tossed on the cots. Alex looked over at the agents, wondering where they were going to sleep. More cots were lugged in and were set to the side.

"These are Agents Rucker and Simson from ATF, this is Agent Parker and Logan from SID. Agent Smith and Walker are with the FBI. That's Sam, Detective Alex Addison and Ms. Elizabeth Duke. I'm leading this investigation. Before we start, do you have coffee and an outhouse where we won't freeze while relieving ourselves?"

"The restroom facilities are in that corner. If you didn't bring toilet paper, a ranger that dropped all this off did."

"I'll make the coffee," Mandy said. She pulled from a backpack resting on a newly set up cot a box of coffee filters."

"I'll get this, Doctor," Bernard, one of Mandy's staff told her.

When everyone had a shot at the porta potty and at least one cup of coffee, Amanda rolled out a map of the area and made plans how to divide the group up to gather evidence in the fading light.

"Alex you're heading up group one and you drew the short straw so you get the first body. Your team is Agent Simson from ATF, Agent Parker from SID and Agent Walker from FBI and...Dr. Sherwood, your team?"

"Bernard you lead Alex's group taking Lisa and Tom." Dr. Sherwood looked at the others around the table. "My CSI team leader heads the collection of evidence. You listen to him. If you think you know better, say so. If Bernard disagrees, he's the lead. If you still disagree, get me over the radio. We'll have cameras recording everything and everyone will get a copy. We need to get going. We have maybe two hours of light left."

Amanda turned to Logan. "Set up camp. We still have one escaped shooter," she added in an undertone. "Bernard your team gets one snowmobile with trailer. Load what equipment you'll

need. Logan you get the snowmobile with our equipment. Elizabeth, can you help him setup tents? Sam, I'll ride with you," Amanda said.

Alex's team didn't have far to go to collect evidence around Johnnie Hoehl's frozen body and stuff his Ghillie clad body into a body bag but his remains were too cumbersome to carry on foot with the weight of his body that the two carrying the bag kept sinking hip deep into the uneven surface under the snow.

From one of the trailers left behind Logan began to unpack tents and equipment Elizabeth recognized as surveillance equipment. He efficiently set up three additional tents that could sleep four people. He and Elizabeth took turns checking on the prisoner. Cots, sleeping bags, tent warmers, flashlights, porta potties with a privacy curtain, and sleeping bags were left in each tent. The sound of skies on icy snow had Elizabeth looking up from the tent flap she was tying in place.

"It looks like tent city," Lisa said. "Excuse me." She unlocked her ski boots, removed her pack, and hurried into the tent. Elizabeth waved at Agent Logan who was checking the parameter then she went to see how their prisoner was and Lisa.

Lisa came out of the toilet area and went to her pack. She turned on some music from her iPod, then hooked it to speakers, turning the volume up. She then went to the camping stove and lit the pilot.

"They'll want hot water and coffee to thaw out on," she said. She looked back at their prisoner and said in a low voice that the music covered. "We found an abandoned snowmobile. The Feds didn't let us look to see what was in the saddle bags. The ATF and FBI agents drove it to look over the other cabin." She yawned and shook her head. "Sorry, I need a coffee fix. We've been working long days since the poison ivy outbreak."

"Did someone cut branches of ivy for firewood?" Elizabeth asked.

"That was one suggestion but no. We found two tubes of urushiol oil in a mini-van the Brisbane police sent to our labs, along with explosives. The woman you have tied up belongs to a group called the White Knight. According to the rumors, she and her friends have been smearing that oil on all sorts of things the public would touch to cause panic. They've arrested the woman driving the van, a nineteen year old and a nasty one to handle," Lisa said. She looked over at Patty again. "I guess they all are. When we were processing the van vehicle, we all had to

wear thick gloves and oxygen masks to make sure we didn't get any of the oil on us or inhale fumes if the oil heated up."

"We stripped her of her clothes and found knives and guns. No oil. Alex bagged her clothes and set it around here somewhere."

At that moment Alex and the CSI team returned.

"Hi, Hon," Alex said. "We're home."

Bernard and Tom chorused in a sing song voice, "We're home...and hungry. Is the coffee, cocoa and tea ready?"

Bernard looked exhausted. Considering he had to manage the Fed agents too, it didn't surprise Elizabeth. While the others used the toilet and made their own beverages, Alex came over to give a hug and kiss to Elizabeth.

"You've been busy setting up a small tent town out there," Alex said.

"I'm glad you're back. I don't like watching Carol or is it Patty, alone," Elizabeth said. "I mentioned to Lisa we have her clothes bagged but I forgot we left them in the shelter."

"What are my chances of sneaking off to the woodshed unseen?" Alex asked.

"Nill. With the cameras that the agent placed all around here, this place is covered," Elizabeth said.

"Well, Sam and I will have to figure out how to huddle for privacy in the woodshed while ..."

Elizabeth shook her head as she was speaking. "We're all suspects about those deaths and therefore we'll be kept separate. Isn't that how it's done?"

"Well, they aren't separating us now," Alex said, trying not to look around. "But you're right."

Elizabeth laughed, and hugged Alex, trying to dispel anyone from thinking they were conspiring to hide something.

Alex clicked on her radio. "Amanda, Mandy, Sam. Anyone? Come in."

*"This is Amanda, what's up Alex?"*

"Are you all heading back here to tent city, or are you taking a look at Sam's place too?"

*"Dr. Sherwood and her team are heading your way. No more light for looking for details. A few of us are looking over Sam's cabin. He got off better than you, though in this fading light, not much to see."*

"Lucky him. He can get a second pair of thermos since he gave his to the prisoner and a clean change of clothes. We'll start boiling water for dinner."

*"Sam said he hadn't thought of that but it's a good idea. Don't start dinner until I get there. I have a surprise for us all. Anything else?"*

"Nope. I like the sound of the surprise. Over and out."

Alex looked over at Elizabeth. "I hope it's a Genie surprise."

"Alex, why do you think all surprises are Genie dinners?" Elizabeth said.

"Because Amanda would have stopped in Sunrise to see how Claire and Genie are. Genie will send something up. Darn, I hope there's enough to share."

"What are we going to do with her?" Bernard asked.

"Nothing. Tomorrow morning the FBI will have a van to take custody of her. The agents will take turns watching her tonight."

The sound of returning snowmobiles from two different directions had the two looking out the tent. Dr. Sherwood and her group arrived and the three in the tent went out to help unpack whatever needed to be brought in. The four bodies were secured in one tractor.

The agents that went to look at the Fletcher cabin had also returned. They were directed to their tents.

"It sounds like the others are returning," Alex said. "Leave it to Sam to know a short cut."

They looked as tired as Bernard did. The two FBI agents removed Patty from the tent and by the sounds of the snowmobile, they all guessed wherever they were going, it wasn't to be in a tent.

"The FBI want to question her right away," Amanda explained. "Finding the two sniper bodies near Allan Watts, they want answers now. According to the FBI, of the five that headed here, there are two of the five still loose."

"Who were the snipers?" Alex asked.

"Don't know. Their fingerprints aren't in the Fed database. If they're from a Mexican Cartel it looks like the feud between the Jaded Amulet and them is on again."

Amanda pulled out a pack from her backpack. Alex immediately recognized it as Genie's from the House.

"Tell me that is what I think it is," Alex and Elizabeth said simultaneously.

"It's from Genie," Amanda admitted. "She was baking a turkey dinner with a new recipe and when she heard we all were headed up here, she packed it all up and had me come and pick it up." Amanda smiled.

"Our good fortune. So, when can we leave?" Alex asked. "I'll have two days left of vacation and would like it in a nice hotel with plenty of choices of how to be pampered."

"I second that," Elizabeth said.

"You do know that there is another storm, don't you?" Mandy asked.

"Are you all planning on staying through the storm?" Alex asked.

"No. We're going to see what tomorrow looks like and if it's not favorable to gathering evidence, we're headed back home with what we do have," Mandy said.

"I have a flat tire. If you can lend a hand, as soon as it's fixed, we're headed out, too," Alex said.

"A flat?" Amanda said. "That was your vehicle in the parking lot where we parked our vehicles? We'll take a look at it before you do any repair." She looked at the four agents, SID and ATF that were sitting around the table. "We'll be staying provided the weather doesn't turn too bad. When CSI leaves, we'll take up residence here."

"What are you looking for?" Alex asked.

"The rest of the stolen weapons Lonnie Hoehl reported. We only recovered two shoulder cannons, a sniper rifle and two handguns. Of course, we don't know if Lonnie Hoehl is lying to get insurance or because he doesn't want to tell us what he did with the other AR rifles that have been modified. There's still treasure out there somewhere."

"I like the treasure here," Elizabeth said. She moved the cut slices of reheated turkey from frying pan to plates that were handed to her. Mandy had a big spoon she added stuffing and buttered vegetables. Alex helped herself with a generous portion of cranberry sauce. "Too bad the FBI agents aren't getting some of this."

"I'm not. Portions would be less for us," Logan said.

"How did you survive the blast and fire to your cabin?" Agent Simson asked.

"By not being in the cabin," Alex said.

"A good decision," Amanda said.

"Uh huh." Sam nodded. He took another sip of his coffee.

"So, where are you going to stay, Sam?" Alex asked.

"Around. What are you two going to do?"

"Finish our vacation in San Francisco."



## **Chapter 9**

### *Day Five - No Rest for the Weary*

Alex got up and dressed for her turn of walking the perimeter of their camp. The setting brought back unpleasant memories of her military life. Sam had joined her when she stood too long in one place, deep in thought.

"Are you up for a good reason?" Sam asked.

Alex grimaced in her ski mask, grateful there wasn't much of her showing to give away her returning fears of being somewhere her aunts had warned her would not be good for her health.

"Just thinking," she said.

"I smell coffee. I'm sure everyone wants to leave at the earliest light," Sam said.

Elizabeth was up, drinking coffee and with Lisa's borrowed netbook, typing quickly at something.

Mandy joined them, securing her knitted cap over her wild hair. "What's it like, early birds?"

Amanda joined them with two cups of coffee. After sitting down she slid one cup to Mandy who hid a wide yawn behind her gloved hands.

"One foot of new snow and it's still falling," Sam said.

"We'll pack up then. It's too cold in here and out there and the continuing snowfall will further obscure our work," Mandy said. "After breakfast we'll leave, unless you don't have a decent morning meal for us."

"We only have MRIs that came with the stove and tent," Elizabeth said, smiling too widely.

"You just want to get out of here as soon as possible," Lisa said. She sat next to Elizabeth and pulled on knitted cap and gloves. "No heat?"

"It's colder out there," Alex said.

"We ate the only edible food, compliments of Genie last night. No left-overs."

"In that case, we'll pack up while another pot of coffee is being made." Dr. Sherwood didn't need to repeat it. Her four assistants began packing up their bedding and folding up the cots.

Amanda went out to check on the four agents in their tents.

Tired, cold and grumpy people drank coffee and helped the CSI team pack their equipment into one of the trailers.

"Don't you want to wait for the morgue van?" Alex asked.

"It's going to take a while for us to pack up everything into the trucks in the parking lot. By then the morgue van had better be here or we're going to be flipping to see who stays with the bodies."

"You're joking, aren't you?" Amanda said.

"Of course. I'm expecting the van at dawn to be waiting for us. Rain or snow."

"Or, one of us will be back joining you for an MRE lunch," Lisa said.

"With bag and baggage," Bernard said.

"Logan will follow you and make sure Alex's SUV is okay," Amanda said.

"Does that mean you'll help replace the flat tire?" Alex asked Logan.

Dr. Sherwood's walkie talkie interrupted them.

*"Dr. Sherwood, come in."*

"On time," she said. "This is Dr. Sherwood, Eric. Where are you?"

*"Thirty minutes from you. We have a 10-50 with five vehicles involved. Highway Patrol wants us to stand-by. They're waiting for the emergency crew to finish up retrieving bodies and for another ambulance in case they find another live person."*

Mandy sighed.

"Why are they keeping the morgue van there?" Lisa asked, concerned it was going to be her that ended up having to stay with the four bodies since she was the newest member of the CSI team.

Mandy called her office to see what was going on. It wasn't time for the day crew so a tired voice came on the line. He hadn't heard of any accidents or the call for a morgue van, which didn't mean there wasn't a call in. Mandy gave him directions to call the Highway Patrol and then call her back.

"Am I the only one here that feels something isn't right?" Elizabeth asked.

Amanda looked over at Sam. "Sam, have you heard from those FBI agents that took our prisoner?"

"No. But they don't have any reason to call me. Wouldn't they call you since you're leading this team?"

"I would think so, but I haven't heard a peep." She glanced at the other agents. "Any of you heard anything from that duo?"

"No. But why would they call us? They have what they came for." However, the ATF agent pulled his cell out and put in a call. Amanda called another number. Both hung up at the same time.

"Nothing to report," he said.

"They haven't reported in to our office either. It's annoying to have to play babysitter." Amanda called another number. "Hi, this is Amanda. Can you find out what's going on with the FBI and our prisoner? They left with her last night." Amanda was quiet nodding her head as she listened.

She snapped her phone shut.

"No FBI report has been submitted from Walker and Smith to us but there seems to be a lot of activity going on in the local FBI office."

"What's that mean?" Elizabeth asked.

"Anything. We still have two loose WK assassins and no sign of the two agents and their prisoner," Sam said. "You're on their hit list too, Agent Briscole. They were expecting you to be here."

"Where did you hear that?" she asked quickly.

"From my conversations with our prisoner. Patty is here to avenge her brother's killing. She told me that his wife is the leader of this operation. She plans on returning with a grand killing to make her claim for an important place in the family leadership."

"You got that from her?" Alex asked surprised.

"Talking is good therapy."

The two ATF agents exchanged looks. "Did she tell you anything about where they stashed the weapons that were stolen?"

"She said they were staying in one of the cabins along the crooked path."

"I know where that is," Amanda said. "That's where Bobbie and his militia had stayed when they were up here to pick up Elizabeth."

"One of Patty's jobs was to provide them with cold weather gear and information," Sam said.

"What's Murphy's role in all this?" Alex asked suddenly seeing Murphy in a different light.

"We didn't get into that," Sam said.

"I don't remember exactly where it is. Can you take us there?" Amanda asked Sam.

"Sure, but you have to be quiet and sneaky. In this weather, we just might be able to surround them before they shoot us, but it's going to take a while to recon the area and make sure they don't have traps around it. If they've been here for about a month, scooping the place out and making their plans..."

"A month?" Agent Logan asked surprised. "Our Intel is they've been gone from their neck of the woods for a few weeks."

"Even if it's been a day they would have the place surrounded with traps," Amanda said.

"She might have been bragging but it makes sense that they had someone up here giving them information," Agent Parker said. "They're as serious as Jihadists."

"We can ask Ranger Gray Horse if he's seen anything, but he would have said something when he delivered supplies," Alex said.

"When those five women caught my attention, I gave a heads up to someone in DC, then I followed one of them because they gave me an itch," Sam said.

"This car pileup and not getting word from the FBI agents has us all jumpy," Agent Rucker said. He glanced at his partner, Agent Samson and he nodded in agreement.

"Are you suggesting we just stay up here?" Dr. Sherwood demanded.

"No. You need to get the evidence and bodies back to the lab and we may be acting paranoid but until I see all five in jail, locked up where they don't have access to a key..." Amanda turned and looked at Elizabeth, "I still will be looking over my shoulder."

Elizabeth nodded. "They are a persistent lot."

"Let's get the CSI team packed and moving downhill," Amanda said. She dialed a number and stepped to one side of the tent for a conversation.

"Let's go," Dr. Sherwood told her group.

Agent Parker was assigned to watch the encampment while everyone else headed to the parking lot. Sam elected to stay behind and cover Agent Parker's back. Sam was more interested in watching the exits to the underground shelter, guessing that would make an ideal place for the White Knights to hide out in or the lone and elusive assassin.

Alex rode behind Logan and Elizabeth rode behind Amanda on the snowmobiles. The agents spread out to investigate the area for any disturbance.

Alex and Amanda checked the CSI trucks for tampering while the others loaded their snowmobiles, trailers and equipment. The CSI team was nervous.

"Do you want to wait for an escort?" Amanda asked.

"How long is that?"

"Twenty minutes if the traffic is light."

They all looked up as a helicopter approached.

Amanda clicked on her walkie-talkie, inserting the earpiece.

"Roger that," she responded. She looked at Dr. Sherwood, "They'll watch over you until the Highway Patrol escort meets up with you. The crash has been cleared but your van has been sent back down the mountain with bodies from the accident."

"No problem. We found room for the four bodies. If we hurry, they'll still be frozen by the time we get to the morgue."

"We'll follow you to the main highway, then head off to San Francisco where it's warmer and less dangerous when locked in a room with a sauna," Alex said.

"Rub it in, Detective, but we'll get you when you get back with enough cases to let you know how much we missed you," Mandy said.

The trucks loaded and her SUV tire changed with Elizabeth sitting in the driver's seat warming up the engine was Alex's incentive to cut short any more conversations.

The procession of two trucks pulling trailers with nervous CSI staff and Alex's SUV was only a slight relief to the group. Whether it was real or imagined, they were all looking forward to a safe return to somewhere safe. At the highway they parted company. Elizabeth took a back road the crew for clearing the snow parked their vehicles. The road they cleared from here intersected with the road the skiers used to get to the other side of the mountain, and onto the main highway where they could drive to San Francisco.

"Did you remember to turn off your cell?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes. We have one week to decompress." Alex grinned.

"And no peeking at your emails from work, any work?"

"On my honor. I keep picturing a room with a sauna and all sorts of small restaurants to visit and grow just a little fat."

End