

Snowbound!

Snowbound!

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Two people, just friends, find a new direction in life at a mountain cabin in Colorado. Mature content. If this isn't your cup of tea, then you can just skim over those parts.

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Snowbound! : Chapter 1

All good stories should start at the beginning.½ This particular story actually started about five months ago; back in June.½ I'd just graduated from college and was newly thrust upon the world as a neophyte geologist.½ Granted that this field isn't really in demand at the moment, but I felt that it had potential as the search for our dwindling supplies of energy continued.

I live in Colorado, specifically Boulder, and pretty much every weekend I head up into the mountains and, as the Australians say, go 'walkabout'.½ As often as not, I'd ask one of my friends to go along.½ Most of my male friends had given up on me, stating that taking long hikes up hills and down dales just isn't their bag.½ This left the distaff side of my friends.½ Little by little, they dropped out also until there was only one left.½ Her name was Nora.

We met in a rather unusual way at the Student Union cafeteria.½ I had just left the serving line and found a table when I noticed her for the first time.½ She was sliding a tray along and picking things from the various cold cabinets and shelves.½ She waited while the cashier totaled up her tray and then paid her.½ As she was lifting her tray, one kid swerved around another kid and wasn't paying attention.½ I saw what was about to happen but there was no way to warn her.

She spun around and the kid crashed square into her; cups, plates, utensils, and food went everywhere - mostly down to the floor.½ The kid, who was apparently in a hurry, tossed off a 'sorry' over his shoulder and disappeared through a swinging door.½ She looked down helplessly at the mess on the floor and knelt to pick up what she could.½ I left my table and stepped over to help.½ She looked up at me with grateful eyes.

"I wasn't close enough to get the license of that truck," I said.

She smiled, and then snickered.½ "It was a vanity plate: A-S-S-H-O-L."½ She spelled in response.

I started at her frank appraisal of the incident and then started chuckling myself.½ We cleaned up as much of the spill as we could and set the tray aside on a table.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.½ "I have quite a bit more than I need.½ You're welcome to share if you want.½ I'm Chet."

She looked at me again as I indicated my table.½ "Nora.½ Pleased to meet you, Chet."½ She stuck out her hand, but took it back immediately since it was covered with macaroni and cheese.½ "Sorry about that."½ She grabbed a handful of napkins and began cleaning her fingers as I guided her to a chair.½ She sat and put her elbows on the table.

I handed her the plate with my small piece of cake on it.½ "Split it with you?"

"Thanks."

I went about adding some more food from my lunch plate and poured her half a glass of milk.½ "If you want more, I can go get it."

"No.½ This will do fine."½ She looked at me again with those blue eyes.½ "Thank you."

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And that was how we met.½ Off and on then, throughout the summer we sort of dated.½ This means that we would name a place and a time, but if one or the other didn't make it, there were no bruised feelings whatsoever.½ We became very good friends as a result of this non-dating routine.½ Nora was a rugged individualist in every sense of the word.½ She kept herself in great shape with Yoga and other exercises, plus holding to a diet that balanced her caloric intake with her muscular output.½ In short, she loved to go hiking with me.

On one day trip I tried to express my feelings to her.½ I wanted to get a little more serious, but she didn't.½ Her attitude wasn't one of derision or anything like that.½ In fact, she actually kissed me - right on the lips.½ She also told me not to spoil things.½ This, I was sure, really meant that she didn't want to get serious with me.½ I gave up actively trying, but retained the hope that things might change in time.

I was encouraged a week later when she suddenly took my hand as we were sitting in my car.½ We had been to see a movie and just finished dinner.½ She'd seemed a bit pensive all through the meal and I asked her if there was some sort of problem.

"Not really, Chet.½ I've been thinking of what you said the other day.½ I may have acted a bit hasty when I answered you."

"Hasty?½ What do you mean, Nora?"

"I mean that I would really like to let us get closer, but I'm kind of afraid of that."

"Afraid?½ Of what?½ I've never know you to be afraid of anything."

"Well, I am.½ All my life I've been terrified of boys.½ My mother was really strict with me and my sister when we were very young.½ I wasn't even allowed to go out alone until I was fifteen.½ Before that, I had to bring my sister along with me."

I began to understand why she wouldn't want to commit to a relationship.½ She'd never really had a chance to have one before.½ "But, you're going out with me now, Nora."

She looked up at me.½ "No, not really.½ We are going out with each other, but not in the sense of a real, honest to goodness, date.½ We're just two friends who happen to do things together.½ I'm sorry, but for now that's the best I can do."

I let things drop right then.½ We still met from time to time, and I never brought up the subject again.½ I buried myself in my field work and didn't specifically invite her along on any more of my trips into the mountains.

In July, I bought (along with a local bank) a four-wheel drive truck.½ It wasn't big, but it did have a more powerful six-cylinder engine and, as an extra attraction, had a manual five-speed shift.½ This meant that if I included both high and low range, I had ten forward, and two backward, gears to mess with.½ I had to wait another month before I could add a four-ton winch on the front bumper.½ I'd never used one before so I asked around and found that there was actually a school set up that taught how to ride the high country and use the proper tools for it.

Two weekends later, and two hundred dollars poorer, I felt confident that I could go pretty much anywhere I wanted to go and, most importantly, get out of anything I could get in to.½ The rule of thumb at the school was *'don't get into anything you don't think you can get back out of.'*½ The summer waned and moved closer to fall.½ The leaves turned and I spent a week up in the high country taking pictures of the quaking aspens

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in their fiery fall splendor.½ Nora finally went with me on this trip so she could take pictures also.½ After our previous frank discussion we were the model of propriety.

I didn't attempt any fooling around.½ I sensed that if I'd tried that, she would leave altogether.½ She was her own person and, although she'd told me on several occasions that she liked me, never moved beyond that point.½ For my part, I was happy to have her along.½ She was bubbly, funny, and always knew when to stop talking and just stand and look at scenery.½ She and I were within a month of being the same age.½ Perhaps this is why we got along so well.

October moved into November and the days got colder.½ I'd received permission from the parents of one of my friends to use their little cabin in the mountains as a base camp for my explorations.½ I'd always maintained that somewhere up in the area I liked to haunt there was something of value to be found.½ During my years at school I'd managed to build up a pretty good set of tools and other items to do soil testing and mineral identification.½ It was going to be one of my last trips into the high country for the year.

I dared to ask Nora if she wanted to go.½ At first, she balked at making a two-week trip owing to other social events in her life.½ Over two of our non-dates, she finally relented and said she'd go with me.½ We made plans to share everything - cooking, cleaning, and all the other chores attendant with cabin living.½ I forewarned her that it was primitive and that even cell phone reception was very spotty; we would have to walk about a half mile across the hillside to even try to get a signal.½ She seemed okay with that and would take her phone anyway.

We sat at my kitchen table and made lists of all we would have to bring along.½ It was a pretty comprehensive list and would certainly go far towards filling the topper on the back of the truck.½ I decided to add a couple of firearms to the mix.½ She asked me why, and I told her that I needed to sight in my rifle again because I'd knocked the scope out of alignment.½ The pistol was just for plinking.

The big day arrived.½ I carefully loaded the truck so I could leave room for her stuff.½ I even added a large metal tub sort of thing that held four, five-gallon plastic jerricans of fuel.½ Fully gassed up, the truck could go around five-hundred miles on its two tanks.½ If they got used up, I'd be able to use the plastic ones for refueling.½ No problem there.½ I had a twenty foot logging chain, wheel chains, and a huge bumper jack.½ The spare was suspended under the bed of the truck so, in order to give me a little more ground clearance, I stood it vertically along the side of the topper.½ After a look around to make sure I hadn't missed anything, I fired the truck up, swung by Nora's house, and knocked on the door.½ "Yoo hoo, Nora.½ You ready?"½ I called.

I heard her voice from way at the back of the house.½ "Yeah!½ Come on in."

She was sitting in her kitchen surrounded by all sorts of camping gear.½ I began estimating how much room I had left when she interrupted my train of thought.½ "Not all of this is going, if that's what you're thinking."

Relief must have shown on my face because she smiled up at me.½ I responded with my 'who, me?' grin.½ "Never thought that.½ What are you taking?"½ I can start carrying it out."

"That, that, this, that, and those."½ She pointed it all out to me.½ I gathered it up and lugged it out to the truck.½ It was a tight fit, but I got it all in.½ She appeared in a moment carrying a knapsack that looked heavy.

"What's in there?"½ I asked.

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"Books.½ I want to catch up on my reading.½ I'm not going to be hiking all over the place like you are.½ I like the solitude."

"Sounds like a plan to me.½ Put them in behind the seat."½ Which she did.

I ogled shamelessly as she bent over the front seat.½ Our last few non-dates had made me start to wonder if there was anything I could do to improve our relations; to take them to the next level.½ Looking now at her well-rounded shape in those tight ski pants brought those random thoughts to the forefront of my brain.½ She caught me looking and frowned ever so briefly.½ I turned away and fiddled with the keys in the ignition.½ I felt her eyes on me.

"Were you just checking me out?"½ She asked softly.

Now, there are many responses to the question.½ Some are fairly sophisticated and involve a high degree of skill in their application.½ The best way to handle it with Nora is to tell the absolute truth.½ "Of course I was.½ You look very nice in your ski outfit."

Definitely the right thing to say.½ She broke into a huge smile and smacked her lips at me in imitation of a kiss.½ "Thank you.½ I bought it special for the trip.½ I bought some other stuff too, but it's buried down in my duffle.

Now that pronouncement had me really wondering what was up but I didn't comment on it.½ "Ready to go?½ House locked up?½ Did you put the cat out?"

"You know I don't have a cat, Chet.½ But, yes, all the rest is done.½ Are we going to stop and get some extra food?½ I hear that somewhere over there," she gestured vaguely uphill to the west, "is a storm coming our way."

"I heard that also, but I don't think it'll get to us for a while.½ We might get some snow up there though.½ I have two sets of snowshoes in back."

"You really do?½ My goodness, you think of everything don't you?"

"I hope so anyway."½ I fired up the truck and we threaded our way out of town.½ "Did you tell anyone else where we were going?"

"Yup.½ Ginny knows, but not exactly where though.½ I told her we were headed towards Winter Park and then up the hill towards Rollins Pass.½ Was that right?"

"Yup.½ That's where we're headed.½ I told a couple of people also.½ I also told them not to worry if they didn't hear from me for a few days - maybe even a week if we don't get within cell phone range.½ You?"

"Not really.½ Maybe I'd better give her a call."½ She said, pulling her phone out and punching in the number.½ I concentrated on driving while she told Ginny not to worry if she went out of communications for a while.½ "Yes.½ Yes.½ I know."½ Pause.½ "Uh, huh.½ Of course, silly!"½ Another pause, longer this time.½ "Absolutely.½ I hope so too.½ Bye!"½ She hung up and smiled over at me.½ "Ginny says for us to 'be good'.

"Well, that can mean many things can't it?"½ I shot her a glance out of the corner of my eyes.

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She thought a moment, and then said soberly, "Yeah, I guess it does."

We stopped in Golden to make a quick stop at a grocery store for perishables. I'd brought a foam cooler, but it wasn't very big. The cabin had what was called a food locker. It was a hinged cabinet on the outside wall that was not insulated. It was behind boards, but nothing else. In the cold mountain air, that was as good as a refrigerator. In winter, it could even freeze ice cubes. The boards were backed with strong stringers just in case a wandering critter decided it wanted to eat.

We were heavily laden so I just took it easy over Berthoud pass. We drifted downhill until we reached Winter Park. I topped off the fuel tank and we took a last minute potty break. Then we started up the mountain.

At first, the road was packed dirt with small, frozen, puddles here and there. We climbed rapidly about six or seven hundred feet following an old railroad grade. Actually, it was part of what was known locally as the Moffat Road. Trains used to come this way towards Winter Park over Rollins Pass from Rollinsville on the eastern slope. Now, all the tracks and ties were torn up and the Forest Service maintained the road. Snow began to fill the road where it had drifted with the steady wind.

"Is this going to be safe for us? I mean, I trust you completely, but will we be okay?"

I gave her a confident look. "Sure, Nora. No problem. Even if we hit snow, I can get through it."

"Okay." Just like that. The way she said it made me feel much better myself. I wasn't worried at all. I knew we'd reach the cabin just fine.

We came around a corner and I stopped. The road continued up the grade but there was a fence to our left with a locked gate across a side road. I unclipped my keychain from the ignition key and left the truck running. When I opened the door, we got hit with a blast of icy wind. She and I both shivered. "Wow! That's cold!" She said.

I grabbed my coat from behind my seat and slammed the door. Once I had the coat on, it wasn't so bad. The lock clicked open after I struggled with a frozen tumbler then I pulled the chain free and swung the gate open. Once I'd driven through, I got out and relocked the gate.

"Why'd you do that?" Nora asked. "Shouldn't we leave it open?"

"No. If we do, then someone coming up here might think it's okay to follow us. From here on, it's a private road - narrow as hell. Two vehicles can't pass each other except at special places. Part of the road is even one-way."

"One way? What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have to go up and around the nose of a hill and through a small valley. When you come back, you have to go down a draw and up a different hill. That's mostly because it runs along a big cliff. It'll be fun!" She looked apprehensive so I reached over and patted her leg. "No problem."

She nodded once, decisively. "I trust you, Chet. All the way."

We turned a corner and started up a north-facing part of the trail. Snow had drifted down into the cut and I began to kick out stones with my rear tires. I stopped and shifted into four-wheel. That cured the slippage. We continued climbing. The snow thinned a bit but there were still occasional drifts which

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we busted through.

"See that small rise over there?" I asked, pointing to our right.

"Yeah."

"That's where we're headed. There's another trail that takes off down that canyon and up the side of the hill. The cabin is about halfway up."

She squinted into the afternoon sun. "It's beautiful over there. I'm glad I came. Thank you." She pulled out her cell phone and frowned. "No signal at all. Will it get better?"

"It might. No big deal anyway, Nora. We've covered our bases pretty well. They know where we are. Ted knows exactly - since it's his parent's cabin. Come on, relax!"

She smiled at me and nodded. The cell phone dropped back into her bag. "Done!"

I had to slow down to a crawl as we negotiated a frozen creek. Summer rains had cut down the banks quite a bit. It was almost a foot drop off the bank. I told her to hang on, shifted into low range, and we edged down. When we reached the bottom, all four wheels began slipping on the ice until the front ones hit a patch of sandy dirt and grabbed. The front end bounced up over the far bank and then I edged the rest up.

"You're good at that. I can see the lessons helped."

I nodded, concentrating on the snow-clogged road, trying to stay in the ruts. We entered a relatively clear area surrounded by blue spruce and I sped up a little. I would stay in low range until we reached the cabin I decided. The road seemed to end when we reached a meadow. I stopped and surveyed the opposite stand of trees.

"Is this it?" Nora asked, shading her eyes and looking out the windshield at the vast area of snow and ground cover grass.

"Nope. We go across in a straight line from here to ... there!" I pointed at the small gap in the trees. I started across. We skidded a bit, threw up a bit of snow, and bounced a lot over small rocks, but we made it to another clear bit of road. After the stand of trees ahead, I knew that Nora might get nervous about the next stretch. I stopped once we left the trees. "We go down there."

"There!" She squeaked. "B-But there's no road at all."

"There is, but it's under the snow. No rocks anywhere. It's a small meadow and in the summer it's covered with wildflowers."

"Well, it isn't now!" She added unnecessarily.

I patted her knee again, shifted way down to first, low, and started down. We pitched over to about ten degrees and ground down the hill to the bottom. We didn't slip once. "We may have to winch back up that hill when we come out. I did once before."

"Is it dangerous?"

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"Only if the cable breaks.½ It can whip back and crack a windshield.½ I've never heard of a cable breaking and this winch is set up for eight-thousand pounds dead weight."

"Oh!½ Don't put it that way!"½ She cried, bopping me on the shoulder.½ She tempered her fright with a tentative smile though.

We continued across the slope and through several frozen mud holes.½ In summer, they were about a foot deep.½ Both Ted and I loved to hit them at about ten miles an hour and splash mud all over our trucks.½ It was a badge of sorts that anyone who cruised the mountains wore.½ It was silly, but, then we guys were filled with testosterone and bullshit anyway.

Around the last bend and up a small incline we crawled until she spotted the cabin.½ "There it is!½ Isn't it?"

½

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We had arrived at the cabin. "Yep. That's it." I said, driving almost to the front door. "Can you handle getting the light stuff out of the truck while I check for firewood and the like?"

"Sure." She pulled her coat out and slipped into it. When she opened the door and stepped out it was into about a foot of snow. "Yawp! That's deep." She said. "Pooh, right over the tops of my shoes. The first thing I'm going to do is put on my boots. In back, right?"

"On top, if I remember right. Want me to get them?"

"Would you?"

"Sure." I mushed around to the rear and lifted the lid of the topper. I located her boots and a thick pair of socks. I went around to her side and knelt in the snow.

"You don't have to do that."

"But I want to. Hold your foot out."

She did and I pulled her low-cut shoe off and added a wool sock over the first one. Then I unlaced her boot and eased it on her foot. When I laced it up to the top I did the same with her other foot. "Thank you, Chet."

"My pleasure. Now, scoot!"

"I'm scooting, I'm scooting!"

She got busy pulling items from the truck and carting them into the cabin. The front door was a bit sticky, but a well-placed bump with her hip freed it. I went around to the back and checked the wood supply. Ted and I had cut and stacked a lot of wood this summer just in case either one of us wanted to use it. It was still there. I unlatched the little wooden flap door above the stack so we could reach through and grab wood without going outside. They kept it latched against critters.

I decided to have a bit of fun with Nora. When she went back to the truck, I slipped in through the wood door and sat in the chair in front of the fireplace. When she came in she stopped and stared at me. "How the heck did you do that? I didn't see you come around front."

"Magic" I said. "We old mountain men have our ways."

She looked skeptical. "Yeah â right."

I pointed to the little wood door. "That's how."

"Oh. Funny guy. How about it, you 'old mountain man'? Care to make fire?"

I nodded and set about it. There were three huge Denver telephone books beside the fireplace. They were meant as fire starters. I used four pages to get the kindling going and then the dry pine took over. In ten minutes, the cabin was toasty warm. I finished helping Nora bring in all our stuff and stow it away on the rough shelves along one wall.

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She was fascinated with the cold box. "What about bears? Don't they bother it?"

"Bears? No bears around here this time of year. They're all asleep in their dens now. We don't bug them and they won't bug us." I drew a little water and fed coffee to the big cast-iron pot that hung over the fire. "Unless they smell their brother over there in that trunk." I pointed.

She got up and walked over. When she lifted the lid, there was a huge bear head with mouth agape staring at her. She shrieked, and then burst out laughing. "It's a bearskin rug!" She began hauling it out, spreading it over the hearth rug. "This is beautiful. So nice and warm" She sat down, and then lay back with her head on the head of the bear. In the light from the fire she looked delicious to me. Grabbing the arms of the bear, she pulled them crosswise over her chest, holding out one huge paw that still had the claws attached. "Rawr!" She growled.

Then she sat up and looked up at me, saying, "What?"

I guess I must have had some goofy look on my face because she suddenly got serious herself. "What are you thinking right now?"

Alarm! Alarm! You don't really want to know, Nora. Not with two weeks ahead of us here in the cabin. I brightened up and changed the subject rapidly. "How about something to eat? I cook a mean dish of chili."

She looked at me for a while and I began to get nervous. Then she smiled and got to her feet. "Sure! Which bag is it in?"

"Different bags and one frozen bit of Elk in the cooler."

"Elk? Really? I have only eaten that once. For the chili?"

"Yup. It adds some zest."

We busied ourselves making dinner. Our little moment in front of the fire was foremost in my mind the whole while. She seemed distracted also but that changed when she tasted her first spoonful of Elk chili. "Oh, wow! That's delicious!" She said with enthusiasm. "I'm going to want more of this."

"You don't want to eat too much at once though. It has certain, um, internal effects that aren't desirable."

Her puzzled look told me she didn't know what I meant. "It makes you gassy."

"Oh. Okay. We definitely don't need that with all the cold wind outside. We can't open a window." She snickered.

"Right. Have another hunk of bread." I chopped off more for her to sop up the rest of her chili. When she popped it into her mouth, she burped.

"Oops. Sorry." She colored a bit. I burped also and we broke into laughter.

"We make a great pair don't we?" I said. "Before long we'll be burping and farting all over the place." That caused a renewal of our laughter.

We dipped a little hot water out of the big pot sitting next to the fire and washed dishes. This pot was filled with hot melted snow. I explained when I brought it in, filled to the brim, which if it wasn't simmering, static

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electricity in the dry air would cause all sorts of problems.

"Like what?" She'd asked.

I didn't say anything but, instead, scuffed my feet a little on the kitchen mat, and approached her. I neared the back of her hand with my finger and a huge spark shot out and zapped her. She jumped and rubbed the spot. "Oh, I see."

"Yeah. We need to make sure it is never empty and doesn't boil, just simmers and steams a little."

Dishes done, we kept our conversation light and cheerful, skirting around what was coming - a discussion of our sleeping arrangements. We had individual sleeping bags and there were two bed frames with ropes strung for support, but they were pushed very close to each other. I offered to move one further away when we first saw them but she'd said nothing in response. I asked again. "We can worry about that later, Chet. Put out that lantern and let's just sit by the fire right now." I readily agreed.

I sat quietly and turned my thoughts inward. My current state of celibacy had been running for going on four weeks now. I am a lover of the opposite sex, but sometimes I simply don't have the time for a mating dance. My current girl friend, not Nora but another named Tina, and I had had words back then and she spun off into another romance with someone else. I hadn't replaced her yet so when the opportunity to take Nora on this trip arose, I vowed to play it very cool and I was going to stick with that plan. It wasn't me that was going to make the first move.

I turned the knob on the side of the lantern and the mantel sputtered down to a soft glow, then died with a soft pop. I pulled the big bearskin around in front of the fireplace and sat down on it. We'd opened a bottle of nice wine I'd brought along and each of us had a glass. I sipped at mine while staring into the fire. I didn't turn when I sensed Nora coming down beside me. "Can I join you?" She asked softly.

With my hand held out to steady her, she sat next to me in a Yoga position. I haven't a clue how women manage to do that. I'm certainly not flexible enough to sit cross-legged like them with their ankles tucked under their butt. I'm sure that if I tried, my legs would break off at the knees. "Hi," I said, looking over at her.

"Hi." She replied, taking a sip of wine. "It's so quiet here that I can almost hear my own heartbeat. Shouldn't we be hearing the wind?"

"Most of the time it drops to nothing at night. Has to do with the heating and cooling of the mountains. It'll pick up in the morning."

"I just love staring into a fire. You see all sorts of things in the flames."

"Really? Like what."

"Oh, you're so practical, Chet. Don't you ever let your mind roam around and just let things happen?"

"Sometimes. Just now I was wondering why you agreed to come up here with me, alone, for two weeks. Tongues will wag, you know."

"Who cares? I don't. I'm old enough not to worry about what other people think. Besides, if I thought you were dangerous I wouldn't have come."

"Maybe I'm waiting for the next full moon to grow fangs and fur. What about that?"

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"Might be fun." She giggled and straightened out to lie flat on the rug. She crossed her legs at the ankle and leaned back onto my shoulder. She took another sip of wine. "But all good monsters have some sort of trigger that changes them. What's yours?"

I thought a moment, and then rolled to face her. "Don't know. Maybe it's wine, and when I finish this glass I'll ravage you."

"Oh my! Whoever would hear me all the way into the deep woods like we are?" She held up her hands in mock surrender; then snickered. "Help! Help!" She said in a tiny, high-pitched voice.

We stared at each other for what seemed like hours. I could see various emotions cross her face and be reflected in the firelight on her eyes. I would have given a load of money right then to know what she was thinking. Her smile faded into seriousness and she lowered her head to my chest.

I felt myself drifting in an almost dream state. I felt like I was standing across the room and watching the two people in front of the fire. It was an eerie feeling. I watched as his arm slowly began enclosing her shoulders and the palm of his hand caress her neck. I could feel it myself, but also see the other guy doing it. I set my wine down on the floor beside me. I'd had enough.

Sometime, about an hour later, I woke with a start. Nora was gone from my chest. A person cannot hide in a one-room cabin and she definitely wasn't here. From outside, I heard the door to the privy slam and then crunching footsteps approached the door. It quietly opened with only one small creak and Nora came into the room. I opened my eyes and watched her as she moved about; preparing for bed I assumed.

She removed her coat and hung it on a peg beside the door. When she began to turn towards me, I closed my eyes again. Satisfied I was still asleep she unbuttoned the top two buttons of her flannel shirt. The brightness of her white bra stood out in the darkened room like it was phosphorescent. Somehow, in a method known only to girls she managed to take it off without taking off her shirt. Firelight highlighted the swell of her breasts as she buttoned her shirt and turned to tend to her sleeping bag.

She stole another glance at me, cocked her head, and decided that I was still sleeping soundly. Carefully she unzipped my bag and pulled it off the bed to cover me. When she bent over I got a full view of her breasts only inches above me. My resolve began to crumble. Still, I argued with myself, to do anything now might ruin our whole trip. I stayed unmovable as she pulled the bag up to my neck. To my surprise, she bent over again and kissed me ever so gently on the forehead. "Goodnight," she whispered softly.

Chapter 3: Snowbound! - Chapter 3

I woke before dawn, pushed my legs into my very cold jeans, and clomped out to the privy without lacing my boots. The air was very crisp and cold; my breath fogged out in front of my head as I breathed. I looked up and estimated the time at around four or so. The moon had set a couple of hours ago, but the light shown by the stars was adequate for me to locate the tiny building.

When I returned, I very carefully opened the cabin door and crept back inside. The two logs I'd used to bank the fire had burned almost completely through so I added one more on top of them. The fire blazed up briefly and then settled down to a yellow glow. I hear Nora turn over in her sleep, making the rope springs creak. She appeared as a shapeless mass atop her bed. I pulled my jeans off and slipped into my bag shivering slightly with the cold.

The next time I woke, it was light outside and Nora was sitting in front of the fire gazing into it. I was facing towards her, so I just watched while she sat there. Part of her profile was in stark relief against the brightness of the fire and the other was in almost total darkness. I wished I was any sort of artist because she was certainly a study in black and white.

No matter how hard I tried to suppress it, a sneeze forced its way out. I muffled it, but she still jumped. "Goodness!"

"Sorry." I snuffled. "Got a feather up my nose. Sleep well?"

"Pretty good. I tossed and turned for a while until I got comfortable. I think one of the ropes under me might be loose. Can you check it for me?"

"Sure. Aren't you cold sitting there like that?"

"Nope." She held her feet out and wiggled her toes which were hidden by thick woolen socks. "Got my footies on."

"Your whaties?"

"My footies. They look like socks but have little pads on the bottom for traction. See!" She swiveled her legs around and showed me her feet. Sure enough, there were little black pads on the bottom. I'd never seen anything like them before.

"Are they warm?" I asked.

"Sure are. Especially when you hold them up to the fire. Are you going to stay awake or go back to sleep?"

"I dunno." I shook my water bottle to break up the film of ice that had formed in it then took a drink. "You hungry; or what?"

She looked back at me. "Oh, no reason. Just wondering if I should get dressed yet. It's so nice and warm over here."

I turned to look out the window. It was light out, but not full daylight yet. I brought my watch up to my eyes: seven thirty. "It is just half past seven so maybe I will get up. How about some scrambled eggs and bacon? I have some nice Canadian bacon."

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"Is that the round kind?"

"Yup."

"Wonderful! I just love that stuff. You get started and I'll change. Don't peek!"

I sat up and unzipped my bag. Lifting my feet out and setting them on the floor took willpower as the floor was really cold. I grimaced as I stood up and pulled my jeans on. I heard Nora moving around behind me and when I started to turn she hooted at me to stop. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a view of her back as she ducked behind the curtain. She was wearing nothing but a thin pair of panties. I chuckled.

"I heard that!" She retorted. "You weren't supposed to look!"

"Oh, sorry." Yeah, right.

The eggs were really cold and I was afraid they had frozen but when cracked into a bowl they were just fine. The bacon was another matter. I ended up using a sharp knife to pry the slices apart. When everything began to sizzle the smell of food brought Nora out from behind the curtain and into the kitchen area.

"Man; that smells great!" She said, sniffing the air.

"Grab a plate then because yours is first off the griddle." She held a plate out and I filled it with eggs and a couple slices of bacon. "Hot water over there for tea if you want it. Powdered coffee right here." I pointed at the table.

She made a mug of tea and sat down. Silence reigned supreme as she ate. I fixed more eggs and bacon for myself and joined her. Over her shoulder the sun was just breaking out over the crest of the mountain and long shadows were shortening along the ground. She looked up, saw me staring out the window, and turned around to watch also.

"You can almost see the shadows moving can't you?" She whispered.

"Yeah. It's kind of spooky, isn't it?"

"Like time has suddenly gotten faster; or some weird Disney stop-action video."

"Oh, yeah. I remember those nature things. Plants popping up out of the ground and flowers opening in seconds - stuff like that."

She stood, gathered up her plate and silverware, and dropped them into the wash basin. Since I was done, I did the same. I poured hot water and liquid soap over them and swirled a rag over all the dishes. When they were clean, I rinsed them, and set them on the table to dry.

"Well, what should we do today? Want to see the mine?" I asked, rubbing my hands on the dishcloth.

"Sure! I'd love it. Is it cold outside?"

"I'll check." I opened the door and stepped out to the porch. The wind, which had been mostly silent during the night, was freshening up, but it wasn't especially cold. "I guess it's around forty or so right now. It'll probably warm up a bit during the day. Dress warm."

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"Okay." She sat on her bunk and pulled off her footies to replace them with thick socks. Before she put her boots on I stopped her.

"Put a thin pair of socks under those thick ones and you won't get blisters if your feet get wet. One pair of socks will slide against the other and not your foot."

"Really? I never knew that. I'll do it." She quickly pulled the heavy pair off, put thinner ones under them, and pulled the woolen one back on. Then she stood and stepped into her boots.

I got dressed also in my denim jacket and hunting boots. Pretty soon we were ready to go. "I'll stick some stuff in my backpack so we won't have to come back here for lunch. Will you carry the water?"

"Sure." She picked up a couple of bottles and put them in her knapsack. I made sure I had the peanut butter and jelly along with a half-loaf of bread in a plastic sack. I opened the door and we left for the mine.

Walking was tricky through the frozen, crusty dirt in the shadows but when we reached the meadow it was much better. Nora stopped occasionally to snap a picture and, since we weren't in any hurry, I took the time to admire the scenery also.

"Chet? How close do you think anyone is to us right now?" She asked.

"What brought that on?" I asked.

"Just wondering. I can see what looks like smoke down the valley but I'm not sure. Is it?"

"Might be. There are a few cabins down that way. You're probably seeing the ground fog though. It'll go away in an hour or so when the sun hits it. Way over that way is Winter Park. You can't see it because of the mountain, but it's there."

"Cool. So we're really alone up here then."

"Sure are. That's the way I like it."

She came over and put her arm around my waist. "So do I."

Well, I thought, that certainly feels good to me. Things were looking up. "Ready to go?"

"Okay. One last shot." She aimed down the valley and clicked the shutter, and then put the camera back in its case. She handed it to me and turned around. I put it in her little day pack.

We started off again. The wind, such as it was, was in our face so I leaned towards her and said quietly, "If we are really stealthy, we might see some deer up here."

She nodded and began looking around as we wound our way steadily uphill. Nora spotted them first. Three does and a small buck stood under a little stand of aspens across a small meadow. When she stopped, I stopped. She raised a hand slowly and pointed to the animals.

They had their heads down and were grazing the sweet grass, occasionally pawing aside leaves and sticks. "They're beautiful," she whispered to me.

"Mule deer," I whispered back. "The buck has a pretty good harem this early in winter."

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"Harem?"

"That's what you call the females he has traveling with him - a harem. He's a little young to have one that big though. Some bigger buck will probably come along and challenge him pretty soon."

"So, he might lose one or two of them?"

"Most of the time all three will go with the stronger one. He ends up with nothing. But, he'll go looking for another buck he can beat and take his."

"In a way, that's kind of sad. Here this guy is, nice and happy with his wives, and some big bully takes them away from him."

"That's why they call it 'survival of the fittest', Nora."

"Well, I think it stinks." She looked at me with a level gaze. "Would you fight for me?"

"Absolutely! No doubt in my mind. He'd have to be a pretty big guy to take me. I've had some boxing and even a little Judo. I don't have horns though. Those he's sporting can be deadly, but, usually they are just used to push the other guy off balance or make him fall down."

The four deer finally heard us whispering and looked up. Since we weren't moving they didn't know exactly what, or who, we were. They remained stiff as statues until Nora lifted her hand to rub her nose. They saw this and scattered immediately; running and hopping down the meadow towards the protective trees beyond.

"That was really cool. Do you see things like that often?"

"Sometimes. Up where we're going I've seen signs of a porcupine. Maybe we'll see it today. They're really slow and nearsighted. If you're ever caught out in the woods in survival mode you can actually hit one of them with a stick."

"Ugh! I don't know if I could do that."

"You would if you hadn't anything to eat for a couple of days." I took her hand. "Come on, let's get moving. We're almost there."

We continued our hike upwards. After crossing a little slide area filled with scree, we went over a small ridge and saw our objective nestled up under an overhang of rock. The area I'd been digging into earlier this year was visible as a hole about six feet into the face of the rock. A more recent rock fall had dropped loose rocks and gravel into the hole. I'd have to clean that out first.

Reaching the mine, I squatted down and picked up a piece of the fallen rock and examined it. "Lead. Not the greatest ore, but still its lead. Did you know that sometimes lead will surround gold deposits?"

"Really! Is there any here; gold, that is?"

"I could probably find some here if I looked hard enough. A better place would be down in the creek below us. Rain and erosion would wash it downward. That's why all the miners panning gold in the stream are always looking upwards to find the 'mother lode'. That's what everyone wants to find. The actual source of the gold that's in the stream."

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Nora looked off into the middle distance with a dreamy stare. "Wouldn't that be something? Finding a whole bunch of gold up here."

"A lot of people over the last hundred years have been all over this area. Some got lucky with a small pocket of gold, but most of them didn't. You never know how big a claim will get. This one, for instance, was claimed by David's great grandfather a long time ago. It's been in his family all that time. Most of the original shaft has collapsed though. It used to go back about thirty feet or so."

She peered at the pile of rocks blocking the entrance. "Wow! All that way back into this cliff?" That's a long way. Did he find gold?"

"He found some, and it's still there in tiny pockets along the side, but he was throwing out the best part as rubble. He didn't know that this shiny crust, for instanceâ!" I pointed to a big rock with tiny black crystals embedded in the side. "â! Was actually pitchblende or uraninite. Uranium ore."

"Uranium! You mean, like, radioactive?" She said with a yelp. "Are we in danger here?"

I laughed. "No, not at all. You'd have to live here for years to get even as much radiation as an X-ray. A Geiger counter would only jump a little at this tiny bit of ore."

She seemed relieved at that and went over to a large rock and sat down. I bent and took off my backpack. I set it at her feet and began pulling out my tools; a rock hammer and a small folding shovel. "I don't have the tools I really need to work this claim, but until I reach the big rocks I can just roll them out of the way."

It was pleasant work; the gloves I wore were thick and protected me from the sharp projections and shards of granite rocks. Before long, I got a little overheated and took off my coat also. Nora was interested in what I was doing and asked questions as I pulled, pried, and rolled rocks down the hill past where she was sitting.

Around noon, she told me to stop. She prepared sandwiches and poured some sort of fruit drink she'd made in the cabin before we left. It tasted like cherry and was sweetened with just sugar. I felt my energy level coming back up with the food and drink.

Before long, after lunch, I had the hole down to about two feet or so. I had to be careful now or rocks embedded in the 'roof', or just above the hole, would come down on top of me. I spent quite a bit of my time wiggling those rocks to find loose ones to remove.

During one of my breathers, I noticed that Nora was getting a little bored. It was time to do something else I thought. "Say, how about going down to the stream and doing some panning? Might find some gold."

"Really? I'd love that!" She clapped her hands several times. "Is there any down there?"

"Very likely. It won't be much, maybe just some dust, but it definitely is gold. I didn't bring a true gold pan, but we can use the metal plate you used to put our sandwiches on."

I stood up, popped my back, and stretched tired muscles. In truth, I was ready to quit mining for today. Once we had all the tools packed up we started down the hillside. The stream was about four hundred yards downhill. We could hear it gurgling long before we could see it.

The spot along the stream that we hit had a small quiet pool behind a large rock. I told Nora that these pools were the best place to look for gold as it was heavier than the pebbles being washed along and tended to gather in the eddies in the water - especially behind big rocks - where the flow slowed down.

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So we set our packs down on the bank and I got out our makeshift gold pan. "This is how to do it." I stepped out and put one foot on a rock and bent down to gather a pan full of gravel. When I got back on the bank, I dipped it carefully into the water and shook it gently. Nora watched me carefully as I did.

Once in a while, I splashed dirt over the rim and replaced the water with still more water. Slowly, the big clot of dirt and gravel was reduced to a powdery waste filled with larger pebbles. I fished out larger rocks and pebbles as they came to the surface until only a thin paste of sediment and tiny bits of rock were left.

Nora, by now, had crowded close to me, head almost on my shoulder as she watched with fascination. Suddenly she pointed at a flash in the pan. "Is that gold?"

"Nope. Fools gold. It's called Iron Pyrite and looks like gold, but it's a lot lighter and it'll get tossed the next time I dump water. Real gold is way heavier than that and will stay in the pan. Watch."

I tossed more water out and most of the pyrite disappeared. There was still a small bit of gravel in the bottom of the pan though. I thought I saw at least a bit of color in it. Another pass might prove up. Very carefully, I added a bit more water and swirled it around.

"There!" I said. "That's gold. Those four flakes right there." I pointed to them in the bottom of the pan.

"But, they're not shiny at all. They look kind of, um, dull."

"Well, that's really gold though. In the wild, it is dull and not very reflective at all. Do you have something we can put this in?"

Nora rummaged in her pack and came up with a small glass pill bottle. She dumped the contents into another bottle and handed the empty one to me. I washed it out, added about a third of water, and then carefully transferred the gold flakes into the bottle. They floated down to the bottom.

"Gold." Nora said. "My own bit of gold." She smiled, capped the bottle, and hugged me. "This is so cool!" She chortled. "Can we do more?"

"Sure. Let me get some more gravel. This time you do it." I scooped up another pan full of mud and gravel and handed it to her.

"Like this?" She asked, carefully letting in some water and swirling it around.

"Not quite so hard, Nora. Just gently. The gold is heavy and won't get dumped if you carefully shake the pan. Now, see those bigger rocks?" She nodded. "Just pick them out with your fingers and toss them away."

She did as instructed, then resumed shaking and swirling the pan. Kneeling behind her, I put my arms around her waist, held her elbows, and showed her how to dump out the top water along with gravel and silt a couple of times and then let her proceed on her own. She was so absorbed in what she was doing she gave no reaction to my brief nuzzle on her neck.

Occasionally, she paused and inspected what was left in her pan. I leaned in and looked also. She hadn't spotted it yet but I saw what could be a tiny nugget about the size of a grain of rice. It stayed at the bottom of the pan every time she dumped more silt and gravel out.

"Should we be looking now for gold flakes?" She asked. "I can see some of that fake gold here and here, but not anything like the real stuff. Do you see any?"

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"Look harder. Wiggle the pan and look for bits that don't move very much."

She did and suddenly pointed to the nugget. "Is that one? It isn't moving at all and it's dull brown almost."

"Yup. You found it. That's a tiny nugget of gold. Very carefully, dump the rest of the water over the rim and isolate that nugget and those little flakes over there." I pointed to some bits she hadn't seen yet.

"Oh. You're right! That gold too, isn't it?"

"Sure is. I'll hold the bottle, you transfer the gold." I opened the pill bottle and she carefully lifted the nugget with her fingernail and dropped it into the water. There were four other flakes she transferred also. When the cap was back on, she gently swirled the container.

"Fantastic! I've found gold!" She turned and kissed me soundly on the mouth. It was a wonderful kiss; not sexual at all, but instead a happy kiss. She was really having fun panning for gold. I knew we'd be back tomorrow with a proper gold pan for each of us.

Chapter 4: Snowbound! - Chapter 4

By the time shadows were beginning to grow long and the air cooled down a bit, we had ten flakes and the nugget of gold in her little bottle. She asked me how much it was all worth and I estimated about five dollars or so.

"Really? That much for just this little bit? Why isn't anyone up here mining this then?"

"Lots of reasons. First is simply logistics. To get a full mining rig up here is expensive and when winter comes you can't mine anything under the ice in this stream without destroying it. Second is that there isn't enough here to make an operation pay for itself." I held up a hand as she started to say something. "Wait. That means that even though we found this much, look how long we took to get it." I looked at my watch. "About three hours - almost four - for just five dollars. It's just not economically feasible for a company to get up here for that amount of gold."

She nodded, looking a little deflated. She perked up when I added that private citizens have been known to take as much as several hundred dollars in a summer up here in these hills. "It beats sitting in Boulder and spending money. That's for sure." I said.

"Sure does. I'm getting tired now. Can we go back to the cabin?"

"Sure we can. Let me pack this stuff up and we'll go." I went around and gathered up the items we'd taken out of our packs and stored them. We both stood, dusted off our knees, and shouldered our packs.

Nora looked at the stream and said, "I'll be back," in a passable Terminator accent. I snickered and she began to chuckle. Soon the trees echoed with our laughter. She took my hand and we went down the trail back home.

"Bear to your left," I said.

She turned to me with a puzzled look. "I thought we came from that direction." She said, pointing right.

"Well â€¦ we did. But in this case I actually meant *bear* to your left." I said quietly, gripping her hand hard and tugged her to a stop.

She slowly turned and spied what I'd seen in a meadow across the canyon about a quarter mile away. A medium-sized black bear was ambling through the grass, heading away from us fortunately, and had almost disappeared into the woods. "Yikes!" Nora squeaked quietly. Gripping my hand even tighter. "I thought you said bears were hibernating now."

"I guess at least one isn't yet. We'll just stand here until it goes down that draw. Might even have a den over there."

We watched the bear as it sampled some bushes then went past the front row of pine trees. We could occasionally spot it as it passed through bare areas, but eventually it did go over the hill and disappear. "We can go now." I tugged on Nora's hand. Reluctantly, she started walking but kept her head turned towards the area we'd seen the bear leave.

We were silent for a while, but then she spoke. "Are we in any danger?"

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"I doubt it very much. That was probably an old female looking for her place to bed down. Once she finds it, she'll sleep for a couple of months and never leave the den. As long as we don't mess around over there we'll be fine."

She looked up at me, searching my face, and then nodded. "Okay. I trust you."

I squeezed her hand. "I sure hope so."

The silence around us was perfect. Even the wind seemed to die down as we walked along. A pine squirrel, annoyed by our passage, chattered from a tree and threw a pine cone at us. Nora jumped, and then laughed when she saw what it was. "Do they actually throw them, or was that an accident?"

"They really can toss cones. I've seen them do it. They use both hands and look like a basketball player making a free throw." She looked at me derisively. I put my hand to my heart. "It's true!"

Just then another cone dropped down at us. "See!" I said, pointing up. The squirrel was running along a branch above us and chattering.

Nora chuckled, "Well, that's just fine. Squirrels that throw stuff. Now I've seen everything."

I quoted from one of my favorite tee shirts: "It's better to bear arms than arm bears"

She stared at me for a moment and then broke out in peals of laughter. I joined in, snickering to myself. She certainly was a naïf out in the woods. I'd also like to be the one to teach her all I knew about living off the land. She was one special person.

We arrived back at the cabin just at dusk. The mountain had shielded the sun from us for the last hour so darkness was falling fast. I built up the fire, gathered some more wood beside the fireplace, and replenished the supply outside the little back door. We made privy calls and then fixed some dinner. This time we were having grilled fish steaks - frozen, but still good in a sandwich when heated; with mayonnaise, lemon, and butter added.

After dinner, Nora went behind the curtain and changed into her leotard again. She emerged, looking as good as she had before; which is to say really well. I gave a low whistle. She curtsied and gave me a dimpled smile.

She sat on the bear rug and lifted her feet into that impossible position again. "Thank you. Are you sure you don't want to do these with me?"

I grimaced. "Sorry, I just don't think I can do that sitting bit. I might try though in a couple of days. You go ahead and I'll read."

She lifted herself on her hands and turned towards the fire. I saw her in profile as she began stretching and pointing with her arms and fingers, back arched. This threw her breasts into stark relief against the yellow of the fire. They weren't large, by any means, but seemed very proportionate to her overall size. I watched her for a while and then turned to my book. If I hadn't, I would probably begin a little fantasizing and ended up on the floor with her - not necessarily doing her style of exercising. And that, of course, was out of the question at the moment.

I read a chapter or two but then my attention began to drift over to her on the rug. She was now lying flat on her stomach and alternately raising and lowering one leg at a time. As she lifted one, her same-side arm came

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back and she held the ankle with her fingers. The backs of my thighs actually began to hurt watching her do this. She stopped and laid flat on her face, doing deep breathing for a moment.

She must have felt my eyes. "Are you watching me?"

"Of course." No point in lying. "Much better than reading this old book." More truth.

She giggled. "Okay. I bet even you could do this next set." She rolled over onto her back and laid at attention, arms to her side and feet straight out with toes pointed downward. Then she lifted her arms until they were outstretched above her head.

Very slowly she lifted her legs, bent at the knee, until her knees were pressed against her chest; ankles pressed against her buttocks. Then she extended her legs straight up to the ceiling until her knees locked. She was the letter "L" now. She held this pose for perhaps ten seconds and then carefully lowered her legs to the rug.

Now, I've done lots of sit-ups and I know how much strain that puts on your stomach muscles. She did this without a ripple in her stomach other than a slight tension that I could see. I broke into a fantasy about having those legs tighten around my waist like that and pulling me down. And thenâ *Mental slap!* Foghorn Leghorn was shouting at me: *'Pay attention, boy, or you're going to be in trouble!'* I watched her do five of these repetitions in the exact same way. A slight groan escaped me.

"These aren't hard at all if you're trained to do them right. I wish I could get your interested, Chet. They'd really tone you up."

"Yeah. Probably would. I could stand to lose a pound or so. Those are almost like sit-ups. How come you don't have to have anyone hold your shoulders?"

"You don't need that because all the lifting is done with the hips." She demonstrated by lifting and dropping her hips several times. Another fantasy hit me. This could get really bad if I watched her much longer. I realized then that I would be unable to leave the table until my body relaxed a little. Fortunately, the chair across from me was blocking her view of the table where I sat. With a deft movement, I adjusted things until the pain eased somewhat. I announced I was going to run the truck for a while to keep the battery charged; *and I discharged*, I mentally added.

"I'll be back in a bit," I said, tugging my boots on and throwing my coat over my shoulders. She said 'okay' and I closed the door on her. I stepped through the patchy snow, cleaned off the driver-side door and got in. I'd parked headed in so I could watch the front door in case she came out. When I got the heater working, I did a little relaxing of my own. *'This is going to be a tough two weeks if I'm like this already'* I said to my reflection in the windshield. I knew I'd promised myself that I wouldn't be the one to make any quick moves, but just the same my life was going to be hard - pun intended - if I just stood there and watched from the sidelines. Maybe I should let her teach me the exercises. I already knew I could use them.

I left the truck running and eased the driver's door open. When I crept across the porch and peeked into the window I was stunned! Nora had removed her leotard and was now doing exercises in the nude. I tried to turn away, but my little head overruled my big head and I stayed. Groaning, mostly to myself, I finally, and reluctantly, turned away and went back to the truck cab.

I was sure she was listening for the truck to stop running so when I shut it off, I waited a minute before slamming the door so she could hear it. Then I went around to the privy just to give her a little more time to change into something besides skin. When I entered the cabin, she was behind the curtain. I heard water splashing. "I'm done now. Do we have anything to snack on?"

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I nearly blurted out my first response, which would have startled and/or shocked her if nothing else. "I think we have a box of Cheez-its somewhere. How about those and a cup of tea?"

"Sounds wonderful to me. Earl Grey, if you have any."

"Sure. My favorite also. Can do." I again reflected that this was going to be a tough twelve more days if something didn't happen - and soon.

She came out from behind the curtain in a wrap-around flannel robe two sizes bigger than her. She'd tied the belt, but left the buttons alone. I took the basin of water and threw it out the door while she sat down at the table. I fixed two mugs of tea and set the crackers down in front of us.

We talked about things happening in our lives back in Boulder while we crunched on the crackers and sipped our tea. She again asked me if I would at least try to do some of the exercises. Since she sounded so sincere in her asking, I decided that I'd agree. "Okay. But not some of those pelvis-breaking ones because I don't think I can do them."

"Maybe not right away, but if you stay with them I bet you can do them in a month or so. Especially if you and I go to the Yoga classes."

"I've already decided I'd like to do them with you, Nora. I'd be happy to go."

"Goodie!" She clapped her hands. "Want to try tomorrow night?"

"Sure, why not?"

She reached over and took my hand in hers and stroked the back with her fingers. "Remember though that this can be a real commitment, Chet. Yoga is definitely not some sort of weird exercise program. It's a whole way of life for some people. I'm not into it that much, but I do believe it will help my self image and how others perceive me."

I suddenly realized just why it was I was attracted to Nora. She'd hit it precisely on the head: she was self-aware. Even the first time I'd seen her, surrounded by broken dishes and an overturned lunch tray, she didn't panic, yell, or cry. She just stood there quietly until I came over to help her. Any other person, male or female, would have been really pissed off and perhaps start cussing, but she didn't. I knew right at that moment that I could use a healthy dose of self-awareness myself because I would have become unglued in the same situation.

"I'm with you all the way, Nora. I'll try everything you ask of me. I'm definitely hooked," *'On you,'* I mentally added, but didn't say it out loud. She looked up at me with those big blue eyes and smiled. I cleared my throat. "Um, what do you want to do tomorrow? Go back and pan some more?"

"That would be nice. No bears though!"

I laughed. "No, no bears. I will bring the pistol though just in case. I won't try shooting it, but the noise scares them away."

"That makes me feel much better. Thanks." She yawned behind a hand. "Oooh. Excuse me! I'd better get some sleep if we're going hiking again tomorrow." She seemed to hesitate in a half-stand but then continued standing. She bent over, put her arms on my shoulders, and pulled me towards her. I felt her lips brush mine in a soft kiss. "G'nite, Chet."

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She went over, unzipped her sleeping bag, pulled her robe off to reveal flannel pajamas, and slipped under the covers. After she moved around getting comfortable, and zipped up the bag it was only moments before she was softly buzzing in sleep.

I watched for ten minutes as she slowly inhaled and exhaled until I got sleepy myself. I banked the fire, stripped to my shorts and climbed into my bag also. I lay awake, on my back with my hands under my head, thinking about what might be and what could be if I just kept my cool and worked this right. I gave up after a while, whispered "sweet dreams, my love", and faded to black.

Chapter 5: Snowbound! - Chapter 5

Overnight, the fire had gone out. Either I had banked it a little too much, or the coals died sooner than they should have. Either way, it was cold - very cold - in the cabin. I lay back with my sleeping bag snuggled up to my chin and watched clouds of steam rise from my breathing. I turned my head and watched Nora. She was sleeping on her side facing me. As I looked at her, she opened her eyes sleepily. "Morning. Why is it so cold?"

"Fire went out. I'll get it going again if I gather up enough nerve to get out of this warm bag."

"Thank you." She burrowed deeper into her bag until just her nose was visible. "Wake me when it's hot again." She said in a muffled voice.

I learned a long time ago that the best way to get up on a cold morning was to just get up. I zipped the bag down, rose up to a sitting position, and dropped my feet to the floor. If I hadn't been wearing thick socks I'd have yelped, but as it was I just groaned. "Hee, hee. You need footies!" I heard from her bag.

Muttering to myself, I made it over to the fireplace and grabbed some kindling. There were just a few sparks left and, using four pages of telephone book, I managed to get a flame going. Within five minutes, there was enough heat to make it almost comfortable near the fire.

Ten minutes after that, I used the flat of my hand on Nora's rump. "Time to get up, sleeping beauty." I said. "Your breakfast awaits you."

"I believe I'll be served in bed this morning, Jeeves." She said haughtily.

"Okay. Two eggs or three? And would you like the shells in there with you, or just the eggs themselves?"

"You wouldn't dare!" She paused while I just stood quietly and waited. She finally gave in and peeked out from the bag. "Would you?"

I laughed an evil genius laugh. "Bwaaaaa haaaa haaaa!"

Her head appeared out the top of the bag. "Okay, okay. I'm getting up!" She grumbled, unzipping her bag. When she lifted her legs out to put them on the floor I got a great view of leg, calf, thigh, and hip; her pajamas had been pulled almost to the bottom of the bag and she was bare from ankle to midriff. "Whoops! Sorry!" She quickly stood and pulled her jammies up and her top down. A slow glow began creeping up from her neck to surround her ears. She wouldn't look at me. I gathered from her embarrassment that her nudity wasn't planned. "Any warm water yet?" She said through chattering teeth.

"Nope. Sorry. Almost hot though. I can see the steam rising over there." I pointed. She looked and said that it was warm enough to brush with. Using a cup, she scooped out a bit and went behind the curtain to brush her teeth and wash up. I'd done that earlier so I didn't need to.

After dressing, both of us felt a bit more human. I shoveled eggs and bacon into our dishes, made coffee, and poured some orange juice. Since it was a little frozen, it was strong. She made a face. "Ook. This is OJ?"

"Sure is. When the fire went out all the water froze. You have juice concentrate. Add some more water to thin it out." She did.

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We ate in silence, punctuated by the pops of the burning wood. After we'd washed the dishes we planned our day. We would go out, back to the stream, and do a little more panning. I knew where David's family kept their gold pans so I quickly went around to the little attached storehouse in back and got them. I told Nora we'd use them just like the plate we'd used the day before.

"You have to be a little more careful when you pour out the dirt and sludge with these pans. See? The wide edge will let too much flow out if you tilt it too far." I demonstrated with a little water from the teapot.

She nodded. "Got it. Are we about ready to go? Want me to make something to eat for lunch?"

"Are we going to make it a day?"

"Maybe. It depends on whether or not I find the mother lode." She smiled at me.

"You can never tell. Wouldn't that be something? Finding a multi-million dollar gold vein right here. Dave and his family lease pretty much this whole area so it would be on their land. I wonder if they have the mineral rights. If they do, they'd be rich. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"Sure would. Let's get going!"

We bundled up after I nosed around outside and looked at the thermometer in the truck. The temperature was hovering around twenty-five or so, but it should warm up in the sunlight. I strapped on my holster and put the pistol in it. Nora giggled. "All that's missing is your ten-gallon hat."

I held up a finger, opened the truck door, and reached behind the seat. I pulled out a genuine white Stetson and clapped it on my head. "Yup!" I said.

She laughed. "All good guys wear white hats."

The giggling subsided as we crossed the clearing and entered the woods. Our friend, the cone-bomb throwing squirrel, wasn't home or was still asleep as we passed his lair. Soon, we set our packs and tools down by the bank of the stream. A little bit of ice had formed, but I chipped it away with my rock hammer.

We rolled a log down to the bank and used that to sit on. It was much more comfortable than kneeling or squatting by the bank. I filled Nora's pan and then filled mine. We carefully began shaking them. Nora was an adept learner, picking out the larger bits of gravel and other unwanted items. Soon, she handed me her pan and I scooped a bit more water into it.

I was the first to find a few flakes of gold. Carefully, I used her tiny tweezers to transfer them to the gold bottle. Nora came up dry with her first pan. I went through two more pans before I found a small nugget about the size of Nora's first attempt.

Nora gave a squeal behind me. I quickly looked up, anticipating a bear or something but she was staring into her pan and pointing. There, in the bottom, sitting in a bed of sand, was a nugget about the size of a single peanut. I prodded it with my tweezers and then held it tightly and used my knife blade to score it. Sure enough, it was gold.

"That's about a twenty or twenty-five dollar nugget, Nora. Congratulations!" I said as I transferred it to the bottle. "Good find!"

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She was breathless as I capped the stash and handed it to her. She held it up to the sun and shook the bottle. The dull glint of gold winked back at her. "Gold!" She breathed softly. "Who would have thought it?"

I knew she was hooked now. We continued panning, occasionally finding a flake or three, but nothing as startling as her nugget. I stepped over the big rock in the stream and fished out a new pan of sludge from under a different rock in an eddy behind a fallen log.

My first nugget was half the size of hers, but still a good find. If we kept this up, we'd pay for our trip out here. I had to take the pan out of her fingers and practically force her to eat lunch. She stood and stretched her back, raising her hands high over her head. When she brought them down, they were around my shoulders. Her face was inches from mine.

"Thank you for asking me to come here with you, Chet. I'm having the time of my life." She then gave me a kiss like no other kiss she'd ever given me before. Her fingers played with the hair at the back of my head and I could feel her tongue tentatively sliding along my lips seeking entry. We stood there in that clearing for long minutes, just holding one another, and stopping occasionally to breathe.

Finally, we broke apart. "Whew! That was something." I told her. "You've never kissed me that way before."

"That was before we were rich!" She said with a smile. "Can we do that again? I think I liked it - very much."

We kissed again; pulling each other tightly together with our arms. Finally, her cheek slid past mine and we just hugged. I was about to open my mouth to say something about how nice this was, when she suddenly pulled back and dropped her arms to her side.

"Sorry. I-I got a bit carried away there." She stammered. "I didn't mean to, um, kiss you that, er, hard, butâ" Her voice subsided into a soft whisper.

When I could get control of my own emotions, I took a deep breath or two. "Nora. I enjoyed that very much. I wouldn't trade that moment for anything in the world. I liked kissing you. In fact, if you'd let me, I'd do it again."

She tilted her face up to me. "That's just fine with me." She whispered, closing her eyes slightly and puckering up. I bent forward and gently kissed her; no tongue, no force, just a tender kiss. I began feeling the pressure against my chest from her breasts which seemed to firm up a little. She was beginning to respond - and so was I. I broke away and looked her in the eye.

"Maybe we'd better stop right here, Nora. Before things get out of hand."

"Do you really want to? Stop, that is?"

"No. Not really. But we have a while to go here and I was just wondering if this might â" um â" be a complication neither you nor I had anticipatedâ" My voice trailed off as she continued staring into my eyes. She raised a hand and put a finger on my lips.

"Shhh." She moved away from me by about a foot. "You're right. Let's just see how things play out, shall we?"

I had to agree with her. Right now, we were both pretty vulnerable. I could give in to my thoughts and perhaps blow the whole deal. If I made any really aggressive move, it might just scare her back into her shell. Today, after that kiss just now, I felt like I'd seen past her resistance to our carrying this friendship we had to a higher

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level. I liked what I saw but I was determined not to be aggressive at all costs.

I cleared my throat and picked up my gold pan. "Want to look some more, or shall we have some lunch?"

"I think â lunch. I made us some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and we each have a bag of chips. Let's find a place where we can sit in the sun."

We looked around and chose a nice flat rock which had been warming in the sun all morning. She sat opposite me and spread out the little towel as a tablecloth. I pulled the sandwiches out and set one before each of us, then added the bag of chips. I lifted my water bottle and toasted her. "Cheers."

"Cheers," she toasted back. As we munched, I couldn't help noticing that a small flush had spread up both sides of her neck and was just now creeping up each earlobe. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking about at the time, but it certainly had her stirred up. She kept looking up and catching me watching her. I guess I was making her nervous.

I stood up and walked a short distance away and picked up a rock on the ground and pretended to study it carefully. I needed time to get my emotions under control also. In the last half hour she had gone from 'just a friend' to something a little more intimate with overtones of actual desire. Chucking the rock aside, I affirmed my previous decision. I would let her make the next move - no matter what.

I finished my sandwich, polished off the chips, popped the bag, and put everything in the sack it came from. "Back in a sec. I'm going to check behind those bushes over there."

She wrinkled her brow. "Why? Ah. Oh!" She flushed again. "Okay. I should probably do that too. You first."

After passing out of sight, I went behind a big tree and took a leak. When I got back to our rock Nora was gone. I heard her crunching through the leaves and breaking twigs a little ways away. I caught one glimpse of her red knit cap behind a tall row of bushes. It disappeared for a moment and then popped back up again.

She came back and announced "You guys have all the luck. It's a real pain for us girls out in the brush. Do they have poison ivy up here?"

I laughed. "No. Nothing like that up here. Just â well, nothing like that."

"What? What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say snakes, but they are definitely in hibernation during winter. I've only seen one the whole time I've been coming up here."

"Rattlesnakes!" She looked startled.

"Don't worry, Nora. They aren't around now. Going back down to the stream?"

"Yup. I'm determined now to find a really good gold nugget. You coming?"

I held up my camera. "I thought I'd go take some pictures for a while. You've got the hang of panning; just go for it."

She smiled at me, picked up her pan, and went downhill to the spot we'd picked out. I sat on the rock and watched her for a while and then wandered off in search of things to shoot.

Chapter 6: Snowbound! - Chapter 6

At streamside, the sun was past prime now and began to sink. Shadows were very black against the brightness of the yellowed dead grass and the deep green of pine trees. The Aspens had lost their golden leaves so they stood starkly with bared limbs in little patches. I framed several pictures and moved on until I came to a little meadow with a thick patch of bushes with red berries. As I sat there on the ground I saw a Blue Grouse fly up into the tree hanging over the bush.

Watching carefully, the Grouse hopped around as it closed on the bush. With a final flap of its wings it settled to the ground and began snapping at berries. I took a lot of shots of that Grouse as it dined. Finally, it gave up and took off.

I circled around some more, crossing the stream way below where Nora was panning and worked my way back upstream. She popped into view as I came over a rise. I stopped and crouched down to watch her. She was bent down, focused entirely on her pan, shaking it carefully and fishing out bigger rocks. I took a lot of pictures of her, kneeling in the sun and panning for gold. The glint of a hair clip flashed occasionally as she moved. Damn! She was beautiful.

Deliberately stepping on a stick, I came into view. She didn't look up at first, but then heard me walking on the rocks. "Hi! I found only one small nugget this time. Should we try somewhere else?"

"I don't know, Nora." I said as I walked up to her. "Did you go out by that rock?"

"Yes. Almost fell in too." She wrinkled her nose in mirth. "That wouldn't have been good."

"Nope. Water is really cold right now. Even the fish are sleeping down in deep holes. Let me see the poke."

"The what? Poke?"

"That's what you call wherever you store your gold flakes and nuggets; a 'poke'. I haven't a clue why. Maybe it's because they 'poked' their gold down into it. In old days it was usually made of deer or elk hide and had a drawstring on it."

She held up the bottle. It had quite a few more flakes but some, I saw, were really Pyrite. I'd get rid of them back at the cabin. She stood and worked the kinks out of her back which made for interesting movements of her chest. I tried not to look, but failed.

"Better gather up stuff. It'll be dark soon."

She looked around and saw the long shadows. "I guess I've been too busy to notice. Yeah. We'd better be getting back."

She held out her hand and I put the poke in it. She carefully put it in her pack and tied the lid down. We policed up the area and headed back down the trail. We didn't see anything on the way until we reached the cabin. We pushed the door open and caught a chipmunk on our table chewing a hole in our pancake mix box. He caught sight of us and scooted across the table, made a flying leap for Nora's bed, shot across the spread and disappeared behind it.

"Poor little guy. He was just hungry. Can we leave something out for him tonight?"

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"Not unless you want a horde of them descending on us for freebies. Remember: 'if you give a mouse a cookieâ'"

"â 'He'll want a glass of milk'," she completed. "I loved that story when I was a kid." She pointed at my camera. "Did you get any good pictures?"

We sat down at the table and I broke out my camera and we paged through my pictures. When we got to the ones of her, she looked at me and smiled. "Why waste all that time on me?"

"Because I wanted to. You're a good subject. Good color, nice contrast between brown hair and tanned skin, and very photogenic. I can delete them if you want."

She held up her hand. "No. Don't delete them. When we get back, can I have some of them?"

"Sure. No problem. Say! How about a nice juicy steak tonight? With potatoes and corn?"

"Sounds delicious. You cook the steaks and I'll peel spuds. Deal?"

"Deal. They're right over there in that string bag hanging on the peg. I think the peeler is in that drawer over there. I'll get the steaks."

We split up. She got the potatoes and stood at the dishpan and went to work, dropping the peeled ones into a pan of water. I unwrapped two big steaks and held them up. "How about these?" I asked.

She looked at them and licked her lips. "Yummy! Just right. I like mine pretty rare; is that okay?"

"Okay? It would be a sin to have them any other way. I like mine very rare also." I clanked around in a storage shelf looking for our steak holders. Finally, I held up two of them. "Got 'em."

I took a couple of minutes to get the holders hinges open. They had long handles on them so you could hold them over a fire. Carefully, I brushed Crisco on the wire grid to keep the meat from sticking. Then, turning the holder flat, I lowered the top part onto the lower and clicked the little latch. The steaks were now trapped between the grids for ease of cooking in the fire. But, I had to wait until the potatoes were almost ready.

Twenty minutes later, Nora checked the boiling potatoes. "About five minutes and they'll be ready. Go ahead and start the steaks."

I nodded and set the holders up near the fire. Not too close, but close enough to sear them first. Soon, the smell of good food filled the cabin. I didn't know about Nora, but I was getting really hungry. She called me from the table as she started mashing the potatoes; adding a tablespoon of butter and some milk to them. "Whenever you're ready," she called out.

With a plate under them to catch drippings, I carried the first steak holder over and set it in front of Nora. That accomplished, I went back for mine. Soon we were sitting opposite each other, digging in to our meal. Silence reigned supreme as we savored it.

At almost the same exact moment, we each picked up our bone and began gnawing on it. "Great minds think alike," I said, waving the bone at her.

"Yeah." She managed to mumble around the bone. "This is really great. A good idea, Chet. How many more steaks do we have?"

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"Two more apiece, I think. We'll save them for later. Okay?"

"Sure. Fine by me." She stood and gathered up the plates and put them into a dishpan with hot water. All we had was the plates, silverware, and the pots so cleanup went pretty fast. Nora went over to the bear rug and lay down on her side facing me - her head on the skull of the bear. She lifted the muzzle and pointed it at me. "Grrrrr!" She growled.

I smiled and came over to lie facing her. We just watched each other; nothing moving but the occasional blink. "Did you know that the firelight makes your eyes glow with little sparks?" I finally said to her.

"Yours turn almost yellow." She countered.

"That's the beast in me. But, after a meal like that, I can hardly move, much less eat anyone." I smiled.

She smiled back drowsily and then rolled over onto her back, wiggling her toes at the fire. "This is really the life, you know. Being able to just hang out with a friend and not have to do this or do that to any timetable at all. I'm not even going to do my exercises tonight!"

"Really? I thought you did them almost religiously. If you're like me right now, I'm too stuffed to move much less do exercises."

She lifted her arms and reached for the ceiling, arching her back. "Yeah. I'm just too comfortable right now to move."

The two of us lay there, side by side, and just talked. She asked me where I'd grown up and what I'd done as a younger kid. I told her about my firecracker incident that nearly blew down a friend's garage. I added that making a big firecracker is harder than it looks. Luckily, all we'd done was disassemble his dad's workbench in a spectacular fashion. She laughed and told me a story of her first infatuation.

We alternated tales of our childhood until we both grew drowsy and decided to call it a day. She went behind the curtain first, and then I followed. When I emerged, she was already in her bag, top up to her neck, with just her face showing. She pursed her lips. "Kiss goodnight?"

I bent down and kissed her gently. She moved slightly and the top of her shirt opened a little. Her bare shoulder was uncovered along with a bit of her rib cage. The slight swell of her breast was visible. I have no reason why I did it, but I bent further down and kissed the line of her collarbone also. She gave a soft moan and pulled my head down, pressing my lips harder against her skin.

The heat coming from her was incredible. I was off-balance in more ways than one. My conscience told me that I'd better quit right now or there would be trouble ahead. Her grip eased a bit and I rose up about a foot, looking steadily down into her eyes. "Wow." I said softly. "What brought that on?"

She closed her eyes and turned her head slightly. "I don't know, Chet. I *really* don't know!" Tears began running down her cheeks. Her lips quivered and she snuffled. "Yes, I guess I do know. I'm so confused right now. Part of me wants things to be as they were before, and the other part wants to see what's around the bend ahead. I'm all messed up." She wept silently, pulling her arm over her eyes and turning away to shield me from her. The top of her bag fell away, showing me more of her breast. I was sure she was unaware of it, so I just pulled the material up and covered it again. Good move; bad move, who knew?

I was at a complete loss here. I wanted to comfort her, to let her know I had as many doubts as she, but didn't have a clue how to proceed. My silence, perhaps, was the best move at this point. I patted her arm and rose to

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add another log to the fire. While I was poking into it with a stick, I heard her composing herself behind me.

She sat up, blew her nose into a tissue, and sat there with her head hanging down, back to me. Her shirt was pulled out of her pants and I could see the bumps of her vertebrae down her back. She shook her head, making her shoulder-length hair flow from side to side.

"Are you all right?" I asked softly.

She lifted her shoulders and dropped them. "Maybe. I don't know. I was going to do something and then I lost my nerve. Please don't think badly of me. I have so many hang-ups right now I don't know what to think. I can sort them out. Please be patient. I'm not teasing you. It's just that I'm just not sure of what I want." She stood and went behind the curtain but emerged again quickly; this time with the buttons done up. She smiled at me. "I'm sorry." She repeated in a small voice.

I wanted to rush over and throw my arms around her, but figured that would be precisely the wrong thing to do right now. Better to let her sleep on it. Just the same, my heart ached for her. I understood exactly the conflict she was going through because I was doing it myself. I was sure that each of us wanted desperately to move forward and take the next logical step in our relationship - love; or at least a much closer relationship than 'like'.

She finally lay back down and zipped up her bag. She didn't turn to look at me when she whispered "good night", but I answered her just the same.

I lay awake for quite some time examining my own feelings now that I knew how she felt about our relationship. Should I make the first move? Or, had she just made it? My mind awash with conflicting thoughts, I finally fell asleep.

Something woke me in the middle of the night. I had no idea what time it was. A soft mewing sound was coming from Nora's bunk. As I listened, I realized that she was crying into her pillow. I ached to help her with whatever was troubling her, but my damn caution got in the way. Until she subsided, I lay there listening to her sobs. Being a 'good guy' was really tearing me apart. Finally, the pauses between the sniffing stretched out and she was back asleep.

Chapter 7: Snowbound! - Chapter 7

At five in the morning I woke slowly. The fire had gone out, but the coals were still producing a bit of heat. My toes had grown cold which is why I was now awake. I stretched and felt my joints creaking and crackling as I did. Quietly, I unzipped and drew the bag off me and slipped into my boots and heavy coat for the run to the privy. The door creaked as usual when I opened it but Nora didn't wake up.

I re-entered the cabin and shucked my coat and boots then crawled back into the bag to warm up. Finally, after mentally kicking myself, I got back up and put several logs on the fire and puffed it to flame with the bellows. Suitably warmed, I again got into my bag and fell back asleep.

The crash of a pan to the floor brought me out of my slumber in a hurry. I glanced at my watch and was startled to find it was now seven thirty. Nora was bustling around presumably fixing breakfast. At the moment, she was struggling with the huge cast iron skillet. It was way too heavy for her to handle properly. "Wait, Nora. Let me help."

"Good morning, Love." She sang out. "Sorry for the noise." She called everyone 'love' at times; very British. I tried to read a special meaning into it today though. "Oh, damn! Why won't this thing behave?"

"Normally, it gets put right over there on that flat spot on the fireplace iron. We only use it when we have six or eight people to cook for. Use the smaller one down in that little drawer." I pointed.

She pulled the smaller one out of the drawer and hefted it. "Okay. That's much easier to use." She cracked a few eggs into the skillet and put it on our camp stove. "Want bacon?"

"Yup. Thanks for fixing breakfast. I'll do dinner if you want. How about some more Elk chili?"

"Mmm. Sounds good to me." She paused, getting my attention. "I'm really sorry about last night. I had something I had to work out."

"And is it now resolved?" I asked.

"Definitely! Now I just have to do it." She said enigmatically, smiling at me.

"Okay with me then. You can do anything you want, Nora. You're a big girl now."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Yeah. That was part of the problem and now it's part of the solution. Sorry. I'm being kind of cryptic."

I looked steadily at her. "Hey, it's your decision. Have at it."

Silently, I gave myself the hope that her decision involved me or, more specifically, the two of us. I would give her plenty of leeway to do whatever it was she wanted to do.

I stood and went over to the cold locker to pull out my pistol. "You want to do some shooting today? Looks like a nice day outside. Plenty of sun."

"Well, okay. I'm not much with guns, but I would like to see what it's like."

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On the way out to check on the truck, I strapped on my gunbelt and holster, put the pistol in it, and clapped my hat on my head. "How do I look?" I asked.

"Like a real cowboy. Can you do a fast draw?"

I put on a serious face. "I never mess around with guns, Nora." I said soberly. "When we get outside after breakfast we'll do some target shooting."

The truck appeared fine but I ran it for a few minutes to check for sure. Once back inside the cabin, the air was filled with the aroma of bacon.

We silently ate our meal and washed the dishes. When we were dressed for the cold outside, I led Nora over to the bare patch up against the hillside we had always used for target shooting in the past. I started my lesson.

"Guns serve a purpose and should never be taken out to just play with them. That's rule number one. But hereâ" I handed her the gun, butt first, barrel aimed to the side. "It's loaded but the hammer is down on an empty chamber. This means that you have to cock it first to let go with the first round. It'll be heavy, so be prepared for that." She nodded slowly and took the weapon.

I showed her how to point the muzzle down at the ground and pull back on the hammer. I pointed out the rotation of the cylinder. "See; there's the round getting ready to fire moving into position. As soon as you get the hammer all the way back, it will make a click. Then it's ready to fire. Never point it at anything, or anyone, you don't intend to shoot. Okay."

She nodded again. I turned her by the shoulders and told her to aim at the big tree across the clearing. "Aim right at the big knot about six feet up from the base and hold the gun steady. Because it's heavy, be ready for it to try and drop. I'll be right behind you so don't worry. When it goes off, don't flinch."

After several deep breaths, she raised the gun to eye level, pointed at the tree, and squeezed the trigger.

BOOM!

She practically dropped the gun when it went off. "Ow! That stings! She handed the gun back to me and shook her hands. "Did I hit it?"

In truth, I didn't notice if she'd hit it so I suggested we walk over and check. I holstered the gun and we went over to the tree. About three feet up and slightly left there was a huge chunk of bark that had been ripped up by the slug. I pointed to it. "There! That's where you hit it. Pretty good shot for a beginner."

"Can I do that again?"

"Sure. Let's go back to the truck."

We went back and I again handed the pistol to her. She correctly held it, pointed down, until I told her to take aim. She had to use both thumbs to pull the hammer back but she did. With just a small tremor in her elbow she took aim and fired. This time, a big chip of white wood the flew off to the left about a foot away from the knob.

"That is so cool!" She was clearly excited. "One more?" I nodded.

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Again she fired. More bark flew off, but on the right side about two feet down. If that had been a man, she would have wounded him with all three shots. I didn't mention that though. She turned back to me. "Now you."

I took the gun, steadied into a two-handed stance and did three rounds rapid fire; or, as rapid fire as you can get with a single-action pistol. It appeared that nothing had happened. "Did you miss?" She asked. I shook my head.

We went over to the tree and she ran her fingers along the grooves she'd cut into the wood. "Where's your holes?"

"Right here, here, and here." I pointed to the triangle arranged at the top and both sides of the knob spaced about two inches apart. It was impressive - and lucky - that I'd done that well.

"Wow! That's pretty good shootin', Tex." She drawled.

"Shucks, Ma'am. Twern't nothing." We laughed at ourselves.

The two of us walked back to the truck and I showed her my two rifles. She looked through the scope on the 30-06 and was amazed at how well it magnified things. I told her it was a 12-power scope. That meant that things were 12 times closer than in reality. She looked again, and then handed it back to me. I slid it back in the gun case and re-stowed it. "If you need it, the ammo is right in this box." I tapped it with my finger. "Just pull this lever and it springs open."

"Okay. I hope I never have to, Chet. I'd like to learn how to use a gun even though I don't like them."

"We'll see about that, Nora."

"I'm going to go back into the cabin. Would you mind going out alone today? I want to tidy up our stuff and put some of it away. We're going to be here for a while longer and it's getting a bit cluttered."

"Sure. I don't mind. I'll be gone about two hours." I looked up at the bright spot where the sun was hiding behind a small cloud. "Around lunchtime I guess. See ya."

She put her hand on my arm and turned towards me. We looked at each other for ten long seconds. I got the strangest feeling that if I'd moved just one inch towards her she would have kissed me - or I her. "T-Take care."

I patted her arm. "Sure. I'll be careful."

We turned away from each other and I started walking. I mentally kicked myself for not at least attempting to kiss her, but in reality, it might even have brought back her old fears right now. I didn't know that for sure, but just maybeâ€¦

Walking along the rough track, occasionally veering off to check game trails to the side, I headed towards the old mine. When I got there, I found that our previous efforts had been undone by a small rock fall. Some of the overhead rock had collapsed into the original entrance but I was going to clear it out again.

So, I set to the task of pushing, rolling, and prodding rocks downhill. It was hard work, and I became a bit overheated. I paused to open my outer coat and let the sweat evaporate a little. Steam rose from me and when it let up, I closed the coat again and continued.

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Eventually, I managed to uncover the slabs of rock that contained the color of the original ore: lead. I also found traces of copper and zinc, but not much. This particular mine was primarily a galena mine with its distinctive block-style formations. I found a particularly good piece the size of a small egg and pocketed it for Nora.

Two hours passed rapidly until I was about three feet into the hole. I could see the main vein along the top and side but I could also see that it would play out soon the deeper I went. This is the reason they gave up before. I thought that maybe the seam would pick back up again after a person got through the severe fold in the path of the vein. But, I didn't have the tools with me to give that a try. I'd need to blast to do that. Next summer I'd come back and do some real mining.

I went back to the cabin. A nice shimmer of heat was issuing from the chimney. It wasn't smoky at all. In fact, it was almost transparent. She'd apparently learned long ago to keep her wood dry. I snickered at my alliteration to wood and how she knew what to do with it. Damn, I thought, I was really getting horny. I hoped I was strong enough to survive the next two weeks because I sure didn't relish having to take her back early because of something stupid I'd done.

The cabin was spotless when I entered. I stopped to knock the accumulated dirt off my boots before coming in further. On further reflection, I opted instead to just take them off. I left them inside the door on a piece of newspaper. The cabin smelled wonderful to me. "Lucy! I'm home!" I called in a fake Cuban accent.

She was bent over the table, facing away from me, fiddling with a stash of bowls. "Hi. Hungry? I made us some grilled hot dogs." She was wearing a woolen pull-over sweater and a western-style denim skirt. When she moved, it swirled around her calves.

"Famished. Let me wash my hands." I said, turning rapidly away from her to the sink. A tin bowl of hot water sat there steaming. "Is this for me?" I asked.

"Yes. Go ahead and use it." She replied. "Then toss it outside." I did, and then I did.

She passed me a plate with three hot dogs on it and a couple of buns. The condiments were already on the table. There was even a small dish of chopped onions and a plate of tomato chunks. "I'm afraid we forgot relish though. Sorry."

"No problem," I said through a mouthful of hot dog. It tasted delicious and I told her so. She beamed down at me, fished two more dogs from the hot water, and sat opposite me. When she bent over to sit, the top of her shirt fell open. No bra. She caught me looking and I flushed.

"Are you going back out again this afternoon?"

"I guess so. I've already uncovered the original opening and even found some ore to boot. Wait." I hopped up and dug into my coat to hand her the ore. "This is lead ore - actually called cubic galena. I think it's pretty when it gets shined up."

"Oh! It is pretty. Is this for me?"

"Sure is. It's worth maybe a buck and a half."

"Really? Is it because it's so heavy?"

"Probably. I don't know for sure though."

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We chatted during lunch. I complimented her on how neat the cabin looked and she beamed. I noted that she'd brought in more wood through the little trap door and asked if she needed me to move more cut stuff closer to the door on the outside. She said yes, so I promised I would. The bear rug was rolled up into a fat, furry log in front of the fire. There was a blanket down under it. A book lay to one side. She'd been reading in front of the fire.

"What are you reading?" I nodded at the book.

She blushed and stammered a reply. "Ah, it's a, um, sort of a romance novel." I smiled. "Now, don't start laughing. I like them!"

I held up my hands in surrender. "Hey, I like them too. Especially the real bodice rippers."

She goggled at me. "Guys call them that too?" She dissolved into giggles and snorts. "Bodice rippers." She shook her head slowly from side to side.

Maybe a bit of levity would be good now. "We have the perfect makings of a real bodice ripper right here you know. The two of us, alone, out in the wilderness in a very private cabin, maybe snowbound, etcetera, and etcetera."

"True, but we're not snowbound." Ever practical she was.

"But if we were, you'd have to admit we could write about it." I said it in a lilting tone, but she lost her smile and looked pensive at me.

"Do - do you really think so, Chet? Do you think of me that way? As a bodice to be ripped?"

So there it was. Out on the table, so to speak. I debated many possible answers to that question and finally decided, again, that honesty was the best policy with Nora. "Not quite the way it came out, Nora. If I were to rip a bodice, yours would be the first I'd rip. I know we're good friends but every time I see you I see you in a slightly different light. I know about your bad relationship, you told me once, and I can respect that, Nora. But, you're very attractive and you've managed to attract a well me."

She stared at me, emotions playing across her face. She suddenly did something completely unexpected and lowered her head to her hands then burst out crying again. This time, I jumped up and moved around the table to stand behind her. I've always been at a loss when it came to crying girls. I'm such a dummy at things like that. I put my hands on her shaking shoulders and rubbed the back of her neck with my thumbs.

She eventually stopped crying but didn't raise her head. "Are you okay, Nora? Did I say something wrong? I'm an idiot when it comes to women so please excuse me."

"No," she said, her voice muffled by her arms. "You didn't do a thing wrong. It's me. I've wanted so badly to have you put your arms around me and hold me; not as a friend, but as a lover. I finally screwed up enough courage to say I would go up here with you because I really wanted to be to you." She gave a short laugh. "To see if I had the courage to do something about it. I'm so sorry, Chet, if you think badly of me. I'd understand if you wanted to take me right back down the mountain." She paused. "I know what guys call girls that do what I'm doing and I really don't want to be one."

It was time for me to come clean. "Nora." I said, patting her on the shoulders. "Sit up a moment." I pulled her up and sat down next to her on the bench, legs outwards. I took her chin in my hand and pulled her around to face me. I used my knuckle to lift a tear from her cheek and tasted it. Salty. They were real tears.

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"I didn't ask you along because I only thought of you as a friend. I asked you along because deep in my heart I thought there might be a chance we would actually get much closer. I've been attracted to you from the first time I saw you at the Student Union two years ago. You in your yellow dress, standing next to the fallen tray of food that guy made you drop. I clearly remember myself thinking that you were the most beautiful girl in the hall."

I continued, softly, looking from one of her misty eyes to the other as I talked. "Now that you know how I feel about you maybe it's you that wants me to take you back down the hill. I may have overstepped the boundaries we seem to have set between us as to how we act with one another so I would understand that. I'd understand if you even got angry at me. Just say the word."

She seemed to soften right in front of me. With both arms she reached around my neck and hugged me. "No; I'll be fine now. Let's start with those words and go on from there."

A huge surge of relief enveloped me. I pushed her back at arms length and looked directly at her. "I promise I will never knowingly hurt you at any time, Nora. I like you way too much to do that. I knew you liked me, and we have fun together, but I always thought that you never wanted to me really get serious with you; that somehow it would cause problems. Now I know there is hope for me - for us."

She squeezed my hands and looked up at me. "I just don't want to be hurt again. I have to go slowly."

"Slow is good. I'll be here if you need me. You call the shots now."

Later that afternoon, when I'd come back from my second trip to the mine, she seemed to have changed somewhat. Gone was the reticence I'd always felt whenever we got physically close to one another. There was no barrier now. She came over to me after I took off my coat and removed my boots and put her arms around me. I stroked her hair. "This is a nice change. I like it."

She took my hand and pulled me to the fireplace. She had arranged pillows and the bear rug so that we had a place to sit and eat. She'd fixed spaghetti with a great-smelling sauce. We sat and she served. We ate in silence, which was unusual for us. I tore off a chunk of bread, dipped it in the olive oil, and fed it to her. She did the same for me. It was very domestic; done with no shyness, or pretension. When she started to remove her hand, I kissed it.

She had changed into a soft form-fitting sweater and a pair of buckskin colored sweat pants. She had a pair of thick socks on. That was all. No makeup. I felt very roughly dressed next to her. "I should probably change into something a little less uncomfortable shouldn't I?"

"If it would make you feel better - go ahead."

I stood, cleared off our dishes, and put them into the dishpan to soak. Then I drew some hot water into our wash basin, grabbed some fresh sweatpants and a flannel shirt, and ducked behind the curtain. I washed up as best as I could and completed dressing.

Nora had finished the dishes and put them in the rack on the end of the table to dry and then slid down to the other end. She looked up from her book. "Hi. Come sit with me."

No invitation was more welcome than hers. I sat, but on the bench across from her. I was still conflicted about things we had said before. I wanted her to have every opportunity to think about what she'd said; well, actually, what we'd both said to each other. "Got any more books down there?" I asked.

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"Sure. Pick one." She leaned over and pulled several from her bag to fan out in front of me. I scanned the titles and then the front covers. One in particular looked like one I could read. It showed a rough-looking guy standing in front of a timber mine portal holding a six-shooter in one hand and his arm around a very buxom blonde with a shirt stretched tightly across her chest; several buttons missing. The title was *'The Gold Rush'*.

I lifted the book up and thumbed through it. To me it looked like a standard western with ripping bodice overtones. "I'll take this one." She smiled at me.

"I thought you might."

"Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Just a hunch."

I chuckled and began to read. We were silent for around an hour, reading our books, until I asked if she wanted some coffee. She said that she did, so I heated some water and added powdered coffee to two mugs. "No cream; tad sugar, right?" I said, setting the mug down in front of her and pushing the sugar jar across the table.

She looked up and said "yes. Thank you". She pursed her lips and blew across the top of the mug. I have never wanted to kiss anyone as much as I did when she did that. I found myself unconsciously puckering my lips a little as I watched. Fortunately she didn't see me do it. She took a sip. "Just right."

Chapter 8: Snowbound! - Chapter 8

We continued reading and slurping coffee from time to time. I got engrossed in the rather thin plot of the book. Apparently, in the timeline before the book began its story, a gang of bad guys had killed this poor girl's dad when he tried to defend his mine against them. She and her mother did their best to keep the ranch and mine going just between the two of them.

In rode Handsome Stranger, whose name you never really find out until chapter three was Brett; with two 't's. In the following two chapters he finds all sorts of ways to comfort the young daughter - mostly by 'watching her lithe body covertly' and 'allowing her to see his manly chest' everywhere possible around the ranch. I was surprised they didn't end up on the sod roof while he was 'comforting' her.

Now, when I told Nora I read these things, I wasn't being entirely truthful. My mother used to read romance novels all the time. When I started getting curious about girls I happened to find one while I was in the bathroom. It had a really lurid cover on it so strictly in the interests of curiosity you understand, I picked it up and scanned it.

I was a fast reader. I could read a whole page in about thirty seconds. But, the spot I happened to open was at the beginning of a scene of seduction. It took me five minutes for four pages. In those five minutes I had built up a ferocious erection. Hey! I was only fourteen at the time; I could get stiff just looking at the bra advertisements in the newspaper. Thus started my interest in romance novels.

Anyway, I continued to sit at the table and read. When I was about halfway through the book it began to get dark outside. Apparently Nora hadn't noticed it yet even though her head had dropped closer to her book. I startled her when I asked if she needed more light. She looked up and squinted at me.

"Oh. I guess it is getting dark." She smiled at me. "Time for dinner yet?"

I looked at my watch. "Nope, not yet. It's only five fifteen." I stood, stretched, and walked to the window to look out. It was still a nice day although clouds were forming down the valley; but not directly over us. "But if you're hungry, what do you want? We could have hamburgers, or canned ravioli, or something else. You pick."

She stood and rummaged through our storage shelves and pulled down a family-sized can of ravioli. "How about this? We can have it with some of that wonderful bread and a little wine."

"Sounds good to me although 'a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and ravioli' doesn't scan that well."

She snickered and feigned tossing the can at me. "Oh, that's horrible. Give me a pan for this."

I handed her a pan from the sideboard and she proceeded to open the meal and spoon it out into the pan. I went over to our cold locker and pulled out the bread bag. You had to keep bread and the like inside plastic bags or it would dry out in just a day. Quickly, I chopped off a couple pieces for each of us and rebagged it.

She was busy stirring the pot when I came up behind her and put my hands around her waist. She hummed and leaned back against me. I put my chin on the top of her head and said, "Bowls or plates?"

"Bowls, I think. This is a little too messy for plates." I got two bowls and set them beside the stove. I remained behind her while we waited for the meal to heat. She didn't say anything, but when she turned around she had a very soft look on her face. "I like being next to you." She said quietly. "We get along well don't we?"

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"Of course we do." I said, rapidly sitting down and distributing silverware to the two place settings. I had to sit or it would have become obvious that I also liked being next to her. "I, um, just thought I should set the table." Yeah, in a pig's eye you liar; you were sporting wood.

Once the meal was heated and put into our bowls, Nora sat down opposite me. "I hope you like it. I slaved for ten whole minutes making it." She said with a smile.

I lifted a forkful and tasted it. "Ooh, that's awful!" I made a face.

"Isn't either!" She countered, tossing a piece of bread at me. I caught it, buttered it, and took a bite. "You're right. It's food for the Gods. Want some grape nectar with that?" She nodded.

I poured some wine into her glass and then some in mine. We touched rims and drank. My eyes never left hers. Silently, she extended her glass and I touched it again with mine. "This is more romantic than every dinner we've had before I think. Canned ravioli, bread, and wine will be my favorite meal from now on."

"It could get pretty boring though." She said, ever the practical person.

"Yeah, I suppose so." I agreed. We bent to begin eating.

Nothing was said for a while as we enjoyed our meal. She gave me a second helping and took just a little more for herself. We ate that, polished off the bread, and pushed the dishes away. I reached across and took her hands in mine. "That was a great meal, Nora. You did well. Let me wash the dishes while you go over and soak up some fire."

"You talked me into it you silver-tongued devil." She rose and went over to the bear rug and sat down. I finished the dishes, all two of them, plus the pot, and went over to join her after setting them out to dry. She had her book in her lap but looked up and smiled at me as I sat down beside her with mine. "Just a quiet night tonight?"

"Yup. Can I have another glass of wine?"

"Ah-ha. I anticipated that request, milady and fetched it from yon table." I grabbed the bottle beside me by the neck and poured her a glassful. I touched up mine. I was going to make this my last glass just to guard against me doing something I may regret later.

We read in silence broken only by the crackle of the fire. I got up and tossed another log on and messed with the poker until I was satisfied, and then sat back down.

I was about halfway through the book now. Seems Brett had managed to run off all the bad guys but one. But this one rode off with a slug in his leg vowing to take retribution against Brett and 'that spitfire gal'. Where do these lines come from? Brett and the gal were now hunkered down in a small cabin next to the mine opening. I presumed her mother was in a back room guarding another window.

The bad guy disappeared around the far butte and they heaved a sigh of relief. This caused Brett to also see that her chest was doing a bit of heaving. He began to do his best to calm her. It took him three pages, but he finally eased her anxieties, so to speak. They were 'lying quietly in a dream state' and I was stiff as a board. I set the book aside and got up - very carefully - and put on my coat and boots. It was time for a visit to the privy. I figured, rightly, that a good blast of Arctic air would solve the problem.

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When I got back ten minutes later, Nora hadn't moved; but my book wasn't exactly in the same place I'd left it. She seemed to be concentrating on her book pretty hard and didn't look up at me, but I knew she'd peeked at what I was reading. Maybe it was my imagination but I thought she had a tiny smile at the corner of her lips. "Cold out there?" She said.

"Not bad. Wind has dropped a little. Maybe twenty degrees or so. It'll get cold tonight though." I took my coat off and hung it up, then pulled my boots off and padded over to my part of the bearskin. I lay back with my head propped up on a pillow and continued reading.

Nora stretched her legs out straight and arched her back reaching for the ceiling. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she ran through some short floor exercises. With seemingly no effort at all, she tucked her legs into each other and pulled the soles of her feet on top of her thighs. I actually flinched at this.

"What? Oh, this? You could do it too you know."

"Not without a winch to get me into it, and another one to pull me apart afterwards. I just don't bend that way. I don't even want to try it."

"I didn't either at first. It just takes training and a lot of stretching. I bet you could do it in under a month. It's one of the first things Singh teaches his students."

"Singh?"

"Yes. Singh and Saree. They are from India and teach my Yoga class. We get together once a week at his house and take instruction. I think you'd like it too. I don't have a partner and it is much better with a partner."

"What does the partner do?"

"Helps the other one into difficult positions, coaches, and like that. Actually, it's a lot of fun. Want me to show you some positions?"

"Ummm, maybe later." My hips were already beginning to hurt just watching her; it looked most painful.

"Let me get out of this skirt and sweater and into my leotard. All the women in the class wear leotards and the guys wear shorts. Not much else."

She stood and walked over behind the curtain. It fluttered here and there as she pulled her clothing off and threw it on her bed. I heard the snapping of stretched elastic several times and when she appeared again she struck a pose with one hand on her hip and a pout on her lips.

"That's a really fine looking leotard you have, Nora. I like it." And I certainly did. This one was a light brown with a shimmer wherever it was stretched tightly - which was most everywhere.

She dimpled, curtsied, and sat back down. This time she was facing me. I couldn't help it; my gaze was captured by the swell of her breasts as they shifted in concert with her movements to sit down. Before she caught me, I managed to tear my eyes away and was looking at her face. She smiled at me and settled down into that cross-legged stance again.

She began stretching one leg outwards in front of her and then the other. It was repeated several times and then altered slightly to include both legs as she leaned back on her palms. Soon she was pointing her toes downwards but lifting her legs, bent at the knees, towards her chest. It was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen

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a girl do. And she was fully clothed; albeit a thin skin, but fully covered.

"Now watch what I do." How could I not?

She closed her eyes, composed her face into a neutral mask, and began stretching her arms out from her shoulders parallel to the floor. She brought them forward and put palms together in front of her. Finally, she brought her hands to her face as if she was praying. This was done over a period of about thirty seconds. She reversed the process, paused, and then began anew.

I tried manfully to keep my eyes on her moving hands but I finally strayed away and downwards. Her leotard was stretched tight everywhere. Now, I've seen naked women before that hadn't titillated me this much. Nora, the innocent, was not doing it for eroticism, but for the sake of the exercise. I did my best to keep from springing a woody, but failed miserably.

Trying to be extremely quiet and slow, since I was only a few feet from her, I did my best to ease myself into a less painful area of my jeans. At last, it was situated so that I felt a little better. My attention went back to Nora.

"Now, I combine the two." She demonstrated what she meant by lowering her elbows to her knees and bending over to touch her forehead to her arms. From this position, she reversed all her previous movements until she was sitting very straight with arms outstretched. She repeated the whole evolution three times. She was winded, I was terminally tumescent.

"There. That takes a lot out of you when done right. Now, do you want to try? You can skip tucking your feet under each other until you get more limber."

"Well, like I said. I'd be interested but maybe later. Right now, I'm a bit tired from all the walking I did today." Not to mention my straining woody. "I can see that the exercises are pretty strenuous."

"It is if I did it right. I don't have my book here except for just a small one to study. I left the big one back home."

"It looks to me like you've learned the lessons well, Nora." I looked at my watch. "Damn! Ninety minutes?! You took an hour and a half for those exercises?" I was completely amazed that I could have watched those movements for ninety minutes with such rapt attention. I was going to have to join this group of Yoga enthusiasts.

"Is there an opening in your group for another seeker of enlightenment?" I asked seriously.

She made a face at me. "Are you making fun of me, or are you interested?"

"Absolutely serious, Nora." I held up my hand with three fingers extended. "I think I may have found the perfect way to manage myself and my emotions. Do you think there is; room, that is?"

"When we get back I'll ask. I'm pretty sure there will be though. You can be my partner then. Will that be all right with you?"

"Of course it is. I wouldn't have it any other way." I paused, and then snickered. "Does this sort of thing always give you the munchies? I'm starving."

She laughed at that. "Yes, it does. Help me up and we'll see about fixing something."

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Pulling her to her feet would prove to be difficult at this exact time. While she worked her knees to the floor and then took a moment to unwrap her feet from them I quickly stood and adjusted myself again. With care, since her legs were still weak, she used my arm to pull up the rest of the way. She stood in front of me and I put my palm against her cheek. Lust, always at the back of my mind, stayed right there.

We turned to the kitchen area. I just sat on the chair by the table. She was still wearing her leotard, and it was doing some shimmering in the firelight, but as long as she was comfortable with it so was I. It was warm, cozy, and certainly isolated. We weren't about to have anyone come barging through the door.

She broke out some nice cheese and crackers. I pointed to the little bottles of wine I'd brought and she selected one. The two glasses we'd drunk just before our session was the last of the big bottle. Slicing a bit of ham into chunks, she placed the whole plate on the table and sat down opposite me.

I studied her face. It wasn't 'pretty' in the sense of driving guys wild or turning them to stone but it did have a certain thing that I couldn't name; 'maturity', maybe. No, not that - she wasn't any older than I. She looked up at me. "What?"

"I was just trying my best to find the perfect compliment I could make about you. I've had several female friends, most of them you already know, but none of them were as completely candid as you. It sounds nutty, but I think it's a good thing to know we get along so well."

"That doesn't sound nutty at all. You have no idea how many times I thought about crossing the line that I'd created for myself. I'm not, um, adventurous, I guess. I wanted to stay near you because I've liked you all along. Right from the same incident you mentioned - the tray of food on the floor. Everyone else laughed and clapped but you were the only one that even offered to help me. And then you disappeared right away."

"That was right before Easter break. I went back home for the holiday. I did go look for you before I left, but I didn't even know who you were."

She smiled at me. "Well, we'll certainly get to know one another on this trip then won't we?"

"I guess we will." I smiled back. I'd better head this conversation into a safer area. "You mentioned a book before, is there something I can study? To kind of get the basics of Yoga?"

"Sure. Let me get it." She hopped up, flashing me a nicely rounded turn of hip in the process. I practically salivated when she bent over and fished about in her zipper bag. It was going to be extremely difficult for me to keep my mind down the dictated path here (excuse the play on words). One misstep and I'd be out on my ass.

She came back and sat down. The book she held wasn't very thick, but when she turned it so I could see it, I saw the printing was very fine and looked as if it had been copied several times. I skimmed a few pages and did some reading at various spots. It didn't really seem like an actual textbook, but more of a guide. It showed small pictures of various positions - some virtually impossible for me - and a section on techniques.

"Oh, I wish I'd brought my big book with me. All this little one has is two pages of positions, but they're very small and hard to see." She flipped to the back of the book. The tiny pictures were barely an inch square and indeed very dark; not very good reproductions at all. I could only make out a couple of them. Both looked pretty difficult. One standing and one leaning against a wall, I think.

"Tell me about this Indian couple. Are they local to Boulder?"

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"One of them is; the guy, Singh, but Saree is just over from India. He changes girls about every six months and they go back as instructors themselves."

The way she explained it sounded logical to her maybe, but to me it just sounded like maybe a sex club. A private club to be sure, but a sex club in general. I kept this to myself. At least nobody had put the moves on her at the meetings. "You said 'partners' before. But you came single? What then?"

"I did the exercises and positions, but without help from my partner. Some exercises are not done by just one person. Some take two. I just never did those. Why? Are you interested in this?" She looked up at me, with an expectant look on her face.

"I might be. How much does this guy charge?"

"Nothing. Not a penny. We meet at his house and he takes care of everything. We can bring a bottle of water if we want."

This seemed too good to be true to me. I wondered if he was filming the sessions. If it was in fact free, then he wasn't in it for the money that's for sure. "And he doesn't do any sex stuff, just the Yoga?"

"Yes. Just Yoga, but he will also teach Kama Sutra. This is done in private sessions with just four people present; the two instructors and the two students. It's all soft candles, floor pads, and incense. Until he messed up, I took Ted to two beginner's sessions. After the third we tried one exercise and he didn't want to do it right and just kept bumping his hips into me. He walked out on me after calling me that horrible name!" She paused and sobbed gently. "That 'Cock teaser' name. I cried for hours after that."

What an insensitive asshole, I thought. Even if he didn't believe in the process, he could have played the game at least. I knew what the Kama Sutra was and it seemed a very good way to really extend simple 'you like me, I like you, let's get it on' encounters into long-term permanence. I mean, after all, look at how long I managed to keep my erection before. Given my normal head for sex, I wouldn't have lasted ten minutes - fifteen at best - before having to do some sort of tension release. But I'd lasted ninety minutes! Now that I'd found her, I wasn't about to let her go. She was too good for me.

"Nora, I'd like to be your partner. I'm kind of a roughly-hewed guy and this sounds like a great way to round off my edges. I want to learn the right way to please a woman; specifically, you."

It was the right thing to say. She gave me a huge smile and then leaned over the table and kissed me. Not a little peck, but a huge smooch that I felt all the way to my toes. When she finished, thirty seconds later, she said she was happy with my decision.

This was fine with me because I was as relaxed as I was going to get tonight. I stood, tidied up the table, and took her hand to pull her to her feet. I think it's time for bed, Nora. Each in our own little cocoon too. I have a lot to think about. My mind, my 'center' as you say, is overloaded right now. Let me sleep on it. Okay?"

"Sure. I was going to suggest it myself anyway. Besides, I have to make a run outside."

"I do too. You go first." I held out her coat and wrapped it closed around her. She was virtually naked, but covered from head to mid-calf by the coat. She'd be fine. I patted her on the back as she went past me. She smiled and blew me a kiss.

When she came back, I went; dressed the same way she was. I came back to find her sliding into her sleeping bag. She'd pushed the beds together, but we still had individual bags. While I tended to the fireplace, she

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snuggled in deeply, hugging herself tightly and shaking all over. "Brrrrr. This bag is really cold."

"It'll get warmer as you lay there." I slipped into mine and zipped up. Before I closed it all the way, I leaned over and kissed her again. She kissed back. "Goodnight."

"Sweet dreams."

Chapter 9: Snowbound! - Chapter 9

I woke the next morning in slow stages. First, I became aware of an arm pressing against my hip. I'd rolled onto my side during the night and Nora had moved as close as she could and still be on her bed and in her own sleeping bag. I lay there, listening to the slowly dying fire crackle occasionally as the last bit of pitch exploded. I must have drowsed off for a moment because the next time I opened my eyes it was slightly brighter outside, but not much.

Judging by the light, it was around six; no watch, so no clear estimate of time. Who cared? Nora stirred behind me, unzipped her bag, and stretched out full length on her back. Then she scooted over next to me again and hugged me.

"Good morning, Chet." She said, fiddling with the zipper on my bag. She succeeded pulling it down a ways and slipped her hand in to rest it on my chest.

"Wooo! That's cold!" I said sharply. "Warn me next time."

"Oops. Sorry." She wasn't. "So. What'll we do today? More walking around or what?" I didn't answer right away so she pulled one of my chest hairs. Hey, it was progress. Two weeks ago she wouldn't have dared to do it.

"Ow! What?"

"Answer me, Silly. Are we going to do some more sightseeing?" She pulled her hand back, unzipped her bag completely, and got out. She skipped over the cold floor to the window and looked out. "Oh, no!" She said in a loud voice.

Alarmed, I jumped up and went to her side. Snow was falling thickly, swirling around, but falling hard. The trees on the other side of the clearing were only dim shadows. Visibility was around thirty feet or so. The truck was a fuzzy square mound in front of the cabin with every horizontal surface covered in snow. It looked to me that almost a foot had fallen already.

"Wow! I guess the storm came over the mountain last night. We'd better grab stuff we might need from the truck while it isn't too deep. I also need to string a rope from the porch to the privy or we'll get lost." She looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "I'm serious. If visibility goes down, you could miss your target and go wandering around in the weather. Dress up!" I commanded, smacking her shoulder lightly. I watched her as she retreated to her duffle bag for warmer clothing and sighed to myself at what might have been.

It took us an hour to rig the line and shovel a path to the privy. I assigned her the task of taking the rest of the groceries from the truck bed to the cabin. She slipped once and fell into deep snow. She came up sputtering, but laughing. No harm done. I grabbed the two rifles and set them inside the cold box. I figured the moisture wouldn't get to them there. Before we were done, it had gotten darker even though it was still morning and noon was a ways off. The flakes fell even harder.

All the provisions were now strewn around the cabin and the two of us put things away wherever we could. We held a conference and decided that sleeping in front of the fire would be much more practical and warmer, so we stacked clothing and other items on the beds. We rolled up our sleeping bags. I reflected briefly that I could spend the rest of my life sleeping next to her warm body (but cold hands). I could do a whole lot worse.

"Whew!" She exclaimed. "That's tough work. Why am I so hungry?"

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"Because we haven't had breakfast, Nora. Want me to fix something? Cold cereal, maybe?"

She shuddered. "Too cold. I'm really hungry, Chet. Some bacon and eggs again?" She asked, batting her eyelashes at me.

"Sure. Go sit!" I commanded, pointed at her side of the table. She moved off, grabbed her current book, and then sat. I busied myself cracking eggs and peeling bacon off the slab and then laying them into the pan. I glanced at her from time to time, but she was engrossed in the book and never looked up. She turned pages occasionally. I finished making our meal and sat it in front of her.

She reached for utensils and dug into her plate; smacking her lips like a starving person. I made the conclusion that perhaps hard work, or exercise, might just tend to make her hungry. I filed that information away.

Pushing her plate to one side, she returned to the book. I cleared things off, dropped them into hot water, and dumped soap over them. "Nora?"

"Ummm?"

"That must be an excellent book. Any more bodices being ripped?"

She snickered, but then drew serious. "Yeah. The hero and heroine just slipped into a bathtub together. Hot water and lots of bubble bath." She laughed again. "Very slippery, like seals."

"Mmmmm, bubble bath." I said in my best Homer Simpson's donut moan.

She chuckled and stood. "We had better see if there is anything else we need to do. It's still snowing."

"Yeah." I rose, thinking that I'd forgotten something; and then I spied the little wood door. "I know! I need to push more wood closer to the door so we don't have to go outside for a while. Back in a little bit." I dressed up and went out.

The snow was about two inches deeper now. The trench to the privy I'd plowed was filling, but not fast. It was paved with flat stones and they were keeping the snow from packing hard. I really didn't need the ice though. It was bad enough to be making tracks for the privy without falling on your ass. I made a mental note to warn Nora.

The stack of wood was in five rows, each row about half a cord. At the rate we were burning it I judged it would last for about a week. After that, I'd have to chop some more. I busied myself for half an hour, restacking the wood to just below the door. From inside a person could reach all the way down to the ground so the stack was about two feet tall. I could always come around and pull more down. I tucked the tarp back over it to keep it as dry as I could. Most snow in Colorado, especially at this altitude, was very dry and powdery, but the covering wouldn't hurt.

When I got back inside, Nora was pottering around the room picking up stuff. She was wearing something different than what she wore outside. It appeared to be a simple, white muslin shift. It was also apparent that she wore nothing under it but her. I watched with admiration as she bent, lifted, stretched, and squatted to put things away.

She turned to face me and cocked her head to one side. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

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"I just realized that aside from total female nudity, seeing you in that shift is really sexy." Whoa! Careful guy. Let's not get carried away.

"Oh, this? It's an old thing I just threw on." She put an arm behind her head and struck a pose. "Do you really like it?"

"Yes, I really do. Come over here and let me see you up close." She moved towards me, hips moving from side to side, breasts bobbing slightly as she walked. When she passed between me and the window, the cloth became translucent; her body highlighted in dark behind the whiteness of the shift. She came closer; to stand right in front of me. I spun around, my back to the tabletop and reached up; put my hands on her hips to pull her forward. She put her hands on my shoulders and looked down at me and then she bent down and kissed my forehead. She giggled softly. I looked at her with a puzzled look. "What's so funny?"

"Things seem to have changed a bit. I feel much more comfortable with you now that I've straightened my head around. I sense in you that you've noticed it also. I've stopped guarding what I'm going to say in fear of giving you the wrong impression. My mind is made up now. Just think. We have over a week left to spend with each other. Whatever will we do? We're snowbound now. Remember you just joked about it the other day and now it's come true! Are you a wizard?"

"Nah. Not a wizard, just a regular guy. I'm sure we'll think of something to do." I stood and went over to stand in front of the window. I peered out and saw the truck sitting there, re-covered now in about three inches of snow. "Getting deeper, but I think the snow is letting up. You'd think it was late afternoon by the light wouldn't you?"

She came over and joined me, putting her arm around my waist. "Yeah. It sure is pretty out there though. I hope nobody gets worried about us."

"They shouldn't. Everyone I know knows I'm a good woodsman and you told everyone not to worry if you were out of phone contact for a while. There probably isn't any one of our friends who doesn't know we just wanted to be alone. Stop worrying."

"I'm not especially worried. I have a man to protect me." She looked up and pulled me towards her. We looked at each other. "And, he's all mine for a while."

She left me by the window and rummaged into her bag. She pulled out a new novel, and sat back down at the table to read.

"You're right. We have all the time in the world." I said quietly, thinking of the line James Bond uttered in the movie and then quickly erased it because he'd uttered that after his new wife had been killed in a drive-by shooting. And that led me to firearms; and that led me to what I'd forgotten to do before. Funny how a chain of thought can work.

I dragged out my pistol cleaning gear and went to work on the revolver. I shucked out the spent cartridges and saved the unfired ones. Then I disassembled the whole thing and began wiping it down. As I cleaned, it struck me that, except for the few modern trappings, the two of us could be in a setting from a hundred years ago. Instead of a truck, I'd have a horse and instead of a book, she'd be knitting or something like that. Just an old rancher and his wife killing time; waiting out a snowstorm.

Time passed.

She closed her book with a snap. "I just realized that I was having trouble reading. What time is it, actually?"

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"Haven't a clue. My watch is over there on the bed." She walked over and glanced at it. "What time is sixteen thirty-five?"

I chuckled. "That means its four thirty-five."

"Wait, the minute hand is okay, but the hour hand isn't in the right position for four o'clock. Oh, where six is supposed to be is twelve. What kind of screwy watch is this?"

"I bought it in Germany years ago. It's a twenty-four hour watch. It takes a whole day for the hour hand to go all the way around. That's why there is a twelve at the bottom and a zero-zero at the top. Six in the evening is eighteen-hundred and that's over where nine should be."

"Well, I say the watch is weird. Somehow, though, I think its fitting."

"What? You're saying I'm weird?" I said with a smile.

She flushed. "No! That didn't come out right. I meant that you're very exotic and worldly so that having a watch like this fits you."

My turn to color. "I think you're very mysterious too, Nora." She returned to the table, sat, and bent forward. The movement pressed her breasts tight against the muslin. Damn! She was unbelievably sexy, and probably didn't even fully realize it. She paused in thought and then reached across and unbuttoned the top three buttons on my shirt.

"There. You look more rugged with your shirt open." Her forefinger probed my chest hair.

"No pulling!" I admonished, leaning back a bit. "That hurt before!"

She snickered and faked a big pull. "In fact, why don't you just take that old shirt off? It's plenty warm in here now."

In fact it was, warm, that is. She was generating a little heat just by playing with my chest hair. I let her do it for a few moments, and then changed the subject by asking her what the book was about. "I bet it's another bodice ripper."

"You'd lose then, wise guy. It a book of poems."

"Poems?" She was continually surprising me. "You read poems also?"

Her eyes widened. "Do You? What kind."

"I read a whole lot of Shakespeare when I was young. Not exactly poems, but similar; the Sonnets. I had a girlfriend when I was fifteen who loved his stuff. I memorized whole verses for her. She later dumped me for the guy who played the lead in Romeo and Juliet. I was heartbroken. I didn't have another steady girlfriend for almost a year. That's about ten years in ten years. God, I was a lonely kid."

"I know what you mean. I was an ugly duckling. I had braces, glasses, and was kind of short until I reached high school. The braces came off and I got contact lenses. I grew almost five inches between my sophomore and senior year. I scared boys off though because of my attitude."

"Attitude? I haven't seen any attitude at all."

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"I wasn't bossy or anything like that. I was just plain scared to get near boys. My mother was really strict and told me some of the most awful tales of what they would do to me. Not simply what they were *capable* of, but what they *would* do. Big difference."

"Sure is. I wonder if that's why the two of us hung around with each other. I was determined not to make some horrible mistake and scare you, and you were staying away from me because of what I might do. Gosh. Parents can be really uninformed, can't they?"

"Really. So here we sit in a cabin miles from anywhere, snowed in to boot. Just the two of us. I've discovered that mostly everything I was told about the opposite sex was wrongâ"

"And I've discovered that I was wrong about you all along." I finished.

I took her hand in mine and rubbed my thumb into the cleft between her index finger and thumb. "I'm sorry."

She smiled at me. "No need to be. Not your fault. We're here now, together." She closed her hand around mine and squeezed. No other sounds but the popping of the fire and the almost subliminal hoo-ing of the wind around the eaves.

I stood up and pulled my coat on. "Where are you going?" She asked.

"If you're going to have your bubble bath, you'll need lots of water. We're surrounded by water, but it's not in liquid form. Let me get a tubful of it. We can melt it by the fire."

"Surrâ Oh. I hadn't thought of that. All the water we need isn't it?"

"Yup." I pulled the tub out from under the bed. It wasn't very big, about half the size of a normal bathtub, but it was pretty deep and had rounded sides. It would be perfect for her. I moved the bear rug and set the tub right in front of the fire then I picked up the two buckets and went outside to scoop snow.

It didn't take long to fill it. Even as I dumped the last bucketful the snow already in the tub had started softening. I refilled the two buckets the last time and put them very close to the fire.

I sat back down by her at the table and we watched water melt. Not very exciting, but in my case I was already seeing her naked in the big tub. The two buckets melted very fast. I poured them into the slush of the big tub and went out to get more; which I put back near the fire.

Nora had gotten up and was over by the bed fishing the bubble bath out of her bag. I had the sudden thought her bag was like the luggage bag carried by Rufo in Heinlein's book *Glory Road* - larger on the inside than the outside. "I have no idea why I brought this. I guess I was thinking a 'summer cabin' but maybe one with running water." She smiled.

To my amazement and with no hesitation or embarrassment whatsoever she turned her back, lifted the shift over her head, baring her body, and went to the tub. I was wrong; she was wearing panties. She stuck her toe in and announced that it was still cold. I picked up one of the buckets, which was beginning to steam, and poured it into the tub. "Now try." I said, trying my absolute best not to stare.

She did the toe thing again. "Warm, but not hot. How about the other one?"

"In a minute. Will that be deep enough?"

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"Probably. What if I splash water?"

"No problem. That's bare wood and tile up close to the fire. Water will dry up pretty fast. Just don't dump all of it."

"Okay." She said. I lifted the hot bucket and added it to the tub. She pronounced it 'just fine' and dumped in a handful of salts and splashed them around. A respectable amount of bubbles formed. I smelled roses.

"Mmmm. Smells nice. Roses?"

"Yeah. I love roses." I filed that bit of information away for later and went to refill the bucket again. When I returned, she had a towel wrapped around her. Maneuvering the towel around, she stepped towards the tub and prepared to get into it.

Daintily, like the famous painting of the Fairy contemplating a pond from a rock, she settled down into the suds and hot water. Her head went back, arms up on the rim, and knees sticking up. "Ahhhhhh, that feels good!"

I watched with a view from behind as she sensuously pulled up handfuls of suds and rubbed them up and over her breasts. I could almost feel the bubbles myself it was so effective. She turned at the sound of my coat zipper going up. "I just thought that it might be nice if I shoveled off the path to the privy again. We may need it tonight." I jibed at myself. '*Chickenshit!*'

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Probably a good idea."

"You just stay there and look desirable, I'll be back in a bit." I smiled at her, pulled on my gloves and cracked the door, slipped through, and pushed it shut. My little head said '*well, that was stupid. Why did you do that?*' My big head told it to shut up; that she needed some privacy for a while. It was going to be a long night.

The snow, although deep, was very light and fluffy. All I really had to do was lift it clear of the trench and the wind blew it to the side. As I shoveled, I reflected on just how the rest of this trip might play out now that we'd each lowered our defenses somewhat. I don't think either one of us really wanted a non-stop sex adventure. I couldn't speak for her, obviously, but I knew I probably couldn't handle it. Our very first encounter, should we get around to it, might prove to be very intense. If it got much better than that it would be tough to handle.

While I shoveled, my thoughts bounced around in free association. When I finally reached the privy, I'd reached a decision. I would continue to let her make all of the advances with maybe a bit of encouragement on my part. I definitely didn't want to turn into the same guy that she'd just left. She was serious about her Yoga studies and I should be also. I'd heard a little about this Kama Sutra thing that she talked about. I even saw some of the illustrations from it on the Internet. Those pictures were far better than the tiny, murky shots in her little book - if that's what they were. In fact, I'd gotten a bit stimulated just looking at them.

I also wondered about this Singh guy. What was his angle on this? Why did he replace his partners so often? Was he actually just acting as an instructor, or was it more basic? Nora's description of him and his latest helper girl, Saree, didn't actually come out and say that they were completely nude, but she inferred it. Were they nude all the time, or just in the special sessions after class? I'd pretty much decided that Nora could talk me into going to Yoga classes with her. It just might be instructive. I'd heard strange things about the Indian subcontinent. Articles on the web described guys who could keep an erection for hours, women that did continuous orgasms for half an hour; things like that.

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In my younger days, I once tried to keep a morning erection, but the best I could do was forty-seven minutes. It would be glorious to have an erection stick around for two hours. I never actually found out, from any source, if that length of time was spent in contemplation or in actual use.

I used the privy, then put the shovel over my shoulder and walked back to the cabin. Very tiny patches of light began showing through the overcast and the wind, while never very high, began dropping down somewhat. Either the storm was abating, or this was a small lull. If just a lull, we would get more snow overnight.

The pile of wood needed tending to. I restacked it with more wood handy to the little door and tossed the tarp back over the rest. When I turned to face the forest, the rapid movement of a snowshoe rabbit got my attention. Now there would be a great dinner for us. I wondered if she'd ever had rabbit before.

Quickly, I went over to the door and eased it open. Nora was still sitting in the tub. Her eyes followed me across the room and when I reached into the cold closet and pulled out the little 22 rifle she looked on with alarm and asked me what I was doing.

"Ever had woast wabbit?" I said in an Elmer Fudd accent.

"Um, no. Why?"

"I just saw one and maybe another. The woods around here are full of them. I just thought it might make a good dinner for us."

"A rabbit!? How do you fix them?" I noticed that she didn't say 'oh, how cruel to shoot bunnies' or, more to the point, 'ewww'.

"You can roast them over the fire, make stew, or pan fry them in flour or cornmeal. They taste great. We have them all the time when we go Elk hunting."

"I don't knowâ"

"Ah, come on. Be adventurous!"

"I thought I was being adventurous when I agreed to come along with you for two weeks," she smiled up at me. "Actually, roast rabbit does sound good in an exotic sort of way."

"Atta girl! I'll be back in a bit." I started to close the door.

"Chet!" She called. "Could I have some more hot water?"

I went over to the fireplace and picked up the last bucket which had been heating and then dumped it into her tub. Most of the suds had evaporated, which left an awful lot of scenery to admire. "You look scrumptious." I grinned down at her.

"Go shoot your rabbit, Chet," she said, making 'go away' movements with her hands. I laughed and closed the door behind me.

Chapter 10: Snowbound! - Chapter 10

Locating white rabbits in snowfall is very difficult if it is still falling. But, when they move around, and leave tracks, it's easier. But, when the tracks get filled up right away, it's harder again. I located one set, but they petered out under a tree. I've always wondered how the hell a rabbit can go under a tree and all the prints show is the rabbit arriving. No prints leaving, yet there is no rabbit under the tree. They gotta be walking backwards in their own trail or climbing the tree and leaping to another one. I pictured flying rabbits leaping off limbs at their prey.

Another set began at a large rock and went around behind it. I leaned over the top of the rock and saw a form moving under a bush. I'd always been careful to make sure of what I was shooting at before firing so I sighted in and waited. Forty yards away, a nice fat snowshoe hare crept out, digging down through the snow for forage. He paused and I fired.

Snowshoe rabbits don't seem to have a real central nervous system. When I hit it, it just thrashed around trying to run. I waited until the movements got weaker and then stepped around the boulder. The rabbit spotted me and tried running again but, since it was lying on its side, it made no progress. I pulled out my knife and finished it off.

Thinking that there was no real reason why I should subject Nora to a grisly skinning and cleaning session, I went back to the front porch and did it there. I grabbed a couple of split logs and stretched the skin out to freeze. Carefully, I cut up the rest into manageable pieces that looked more like chicken parts than rabbit.

When I got back inside, Nora had left the tub and was now behind the curtain. "I'll be out in a minute!" She called to me. "I heard a shot. Did you get one?"

"Yup. A good one too. We can make rabbit kabobs if you want."

"What?"

"Kabobs. You cut up vegetables like potatoes, peppers, carrots and the like and alternate them on a spit with meat. Then you roast them over the fire. No dishes if you do it right. How does that sound?"

"Yummy. I'm starved. You need to wash up? I saved some hot water."

I waved my hand towards the door. "No problem, I can get more. In fact, I'd better toss the bathwater right now." She came forward to help but I told her I could do it myself. With a tight hold of the handles at each end, and a clean jerk and lift, I cleared the tub from the floor and carried it carefully to the door. She rushed over and opened it for me, staying back from the cold wind whistling through it.

I tossed the water off the end of the porch where it could turn to ice and not make things dangerous for us. The aroma of roses remained on the wind. When I came back and slammed the door she was sitting at the table engrossed in an old cookbook she'd found on the shelf.

"It says here that rabbit needs to be cleaned with water before cooking. I have a pan here so how do we wash it? Not with bubble bath water I bet." She said with a twinkle in her eye.

I laughed. "No. The best way is to just soak it for a while in salted water and let the fire dry it off. I'll cut potatoes if you'll do the tomato and peppers." I frowned, trying to remember if we even *had* any peppers. "Just make them about a quarter-inch thick. Neatness doesn't count."

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"Okay." She rummaged in our food box and pulled out two large potatoes, a tomato, and sure enough, a green pepper. I handed her a knife and she went to work. I sliced potatoes on the other side of the table.

We were quiet for a while, busy with the fixings for supper. Nora had changed into another shift, which made me wonder just how many of them she had with her. This one was made of denim and was cut square across the chest with inch wide straps running over her shoulders. There were belt loops at the waist, but she wore it with no belt. The hem came to just above her knees. I damn near cut off a finger when she leaned over for another pepper and gave me a complete view of her breasts. I was sure it wasn't intentional, but it got my attention.

"You look very clean and scrubbed, Nora. I like that dress." *'Excuse me while I roll my eyes back up my nose'*.

"It's a shift, and I like it too. It's fun being up here with just the two of us. I don't have to wear all the trappings I would normally have to down in Boulder."

"I can just imagine the scene if you did." I smiled at her. Even for Boulder, that outfit would be provocative. Up here, it's just practical.

She grinned at me. "And I feel really slinky in it too. Very sexy."

"You are definitely that!" I said with emphasis. "Shall I, as they say, slip into something more comfortable?" Twirling an imaginary moustache.

"You could if you wanted to. How about that terrycloth robe over there?" She pointed to the one on the hook beside the bed.

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll wash first, and then change." I went over, drew a pan full of water, added a little liquid soap, and went behind the curtain. I pulled off my shirt and ran a washcloth over me. I debated about getting down to just bare skin but then decided I would. My boots were already off, so I pulled off my socks and then my pants. I turned my back to Nora and took off my shorts.

"Need any help?" She asked, scratching at the curtain. I jumped at her voice. I hadn't heard her move closer.

"Nope. You just tend to your knitting." I called back. She giggled.

I finished up washing and grabbed the towel in case she came around the curtain. As I dried, I said, "I think the rabbit has soaked enough. I'll toss the wash water and set the table." I wondered if I dared to wear just the robe, but then remember how much of a hair trigger I had and decided to play it safe. Jockey shorts and not boxers. Dressed finally, with sash tied, I came back from our dressing room.

I picked up the pan and simply heaved the water out the door. It broke up in the wind before even hitting the ground. The sky was overcast again, but the snow seemed to have stopped. I remarked on this to Nora.

"Good. How deep is the snow now?"

I looked back out and gauged the new snow on the truck. "Around eighteen inches I'd guess; maybe more."

"Will that become a problem â getting out of here?"

"No, probably not. We might have to winch through a couple of places, but we'll get through. Maybe tomorrow I'll snowshoe up the hill and try my cell phone."

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"Can I go?" She asked brightly. "I want to check in too. You said you'd teach me how to snowshoe."

"You're right, I did. Okay, we'll both go."

She clapped her hands and hopped on her toes. This did interesting things to her chest, and she saw me watching. She giggled and slowly moved her chest from side to side, watching my eyes track the movement behind the thin cloth. I couldn't help it; it was in keeping with the Guy Code.

"Damn, you're beautiful, Nora. I really can't figure out why I hadn't realized that earlier."

"We've been through that, Chet. Yesterday is history. Now is now, and we have each other right here; tomorrow can take care of itself." She turned practical. "Let's fix the food."

We rummaged around and came up with a can of cut green beans to augment our meal. I put them in a pan and set it on our little gas stove at low flame. She went over and hung the skewers over the fire on the little hooks bent from a coat hanger long ago. We sat on the bear and watched the meal cooking. I had my back against the small footlocker and my legs stretched out in front of me. She sat between my legs and lay back against my chest.

"Gosh that smells good," she said, licking her lips. I bent down and kissed the top of her head.

"You smell good yourself." I said as I slid my hands down her arms.

She reached out and pulled my hands up to wrap around her chest, pulling my arms up under her breasts. I could feel the heat passing through the cloth from her. I was counting beats of her heart with my left arm.

"Your pulse is accelerating," I said softly. "Do you like this?"

"Of course I do." She responded, pulling me tighter around her. "But, shouldn't we be turning the spits a little?"

We released each other. "Yeah, we should. She got to her knees and leaned forward to turn the kabobs. This stretched the fabric over her fanny tightly, drawing my eye.

"Are you looking at my butt?"

"No, of course not." I said without an ounce of sincerity. "But if you want me toâ!" I reached out and lightly patted one cheek. "I wonder what Singh would say about butt pats."

She gave a peal of laughter. "I have no idea. Probably in favor of them though. Now, unless you like burnt food, I think we're about ready to eat. Go set our places."

Reluctantly, I rose and did as she asked. One plate on either side of the table. I seemed to be having trouble with the front of my robe. The colder air away from the fire seemed to be taking care of it however. Nora didn't appear to be aware of it; unless she'd felt it while we were sitting down. I hadn't thought of that.

We took our seats and began our meal. She tasted her first rabbit, pronounced it 'really great', and finished her entire kabob. If I hadn't been keeping pace with her, she would have finished mine also. "Any more rabbit?" She asked.

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"Nope, sorry. They don't have a lot of meat anywhere but the upper legs and across the breast. I can go shoot another one if you want."

"Now? It's dark outside." She said, and then shifted into a sing-song voice. "You'll shoot your eye out!"

That made the both of us laugh. Her tastes in movies paralleled mine. That was a quote from one of my favorite ones. I really identified with that poor kid - even though he was growing up in the thirties.

I peered out the window. "Looks cold. The snow has stopped too. Hey! I can see stars."

"Really?" She came over and stood behind me, looking over my shoulder. "Wow! There's thousands of them. They're all so bright up here."

"No other lights around. In the summer we used to sleep out under the stars. Even in summer though we had to use sleeping bags. It gets cold at night in August at this altitude."

She nuzzled the back of my neck. "Did you ever bring anyone up here?" She asked quietly. "You don't have to answer that though. I was just wondering."

"A few. Just some of my male friends. One time there was a girl up here with us though. She complained about everything. She'd come up with another guy in his truck. He got so pissed off at her that he took her home."

"What's not to love about this place? I think it's wonderful. Have I thanked you for asking me along?"

"Are you serious? I should be the one thanking you. The last few days have been incredible." She hugged me tightly and nibbled on my earlobe. I should have probably told her that that one thing really turns me on. I closed my eyes and hummed a low note.

"Shouldn't we be getting the bear ready for night?"

"Yeah. We should. I'll go throw the bags on top of the bear and bank the fire."

"Let's both go over in front of the fire and meditate. I haven't done that yet today. I try to meditate at least once a day."

She took my hand and we went the short distance across the room to the rolled up bear rug. I pulled it out and spread it on the floor after I'd added a couple of logs to the fire which blazed up for a moment, highlighting her skin tone as she waited with eyes downcast. The amber light had turned what skin I could see to a deep bronze.

The denim of her shift rippled as she knelt and faced me. There was no way she could miss my excitement but it didn't seem to bother her though. She paused, licked her lips, and then continued talking. "Singh and Saree used to wear just a little clothing. His favorite was a kind of open jacket with muslin trousers. Saree wore a one-piece wrap-around sort of scarf, or sash. When he began his lessons, he talked in low tones; Saree, kneeling beside him, would demonstrate the various meditative positions."

"But he never put a hand on Saree?" I asked, kneeling in front of her. Our knees touched.

"No. Never. Sometimes, Saree would remove her wrap, or whatever they call those things, so she could bend easier. Sometimes, during a very close exercise with a partner, a guy would, um, get excited. Even some of

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the girls would get a little warm and take off some clothes if they had more than a leotard on."

"Did you ever? Take off any clothes, that is?"

"I did, once. I pulled my leotard top down to my waist. I was really warm and just didn't think anyone would mind. Several other girls had their tops off."

Now, more than ever, I wanted to be a part of that class. "I going to love being your partner, Nora."

She dimpled. "Thank you. Maybe now the two of us can attend some of his after class sessions too. That would be much better I think."

"Do you really know what happens during them?"

"No, not really. When the main Yoga lesson ended, all of us, except for one couple, had to leave. I never got to stay because I didn't have a partner."

I thought about this. They could have been copulating like minks in heat after she left. But, somehow I doubted that. This Singh guy sounded like he was on the level. With me as her partner, maybe we would sometimes be allowed into the inner circle. "We'll have to go, you and I, me as your partner, Nora. How about that?"

"That would be very nice, Chet. I'd like that." She smiled at me. We leaned into one another until our lips barely met. We kissed. She relaxed into an upright posture, but didn't wrap her feet around each other. "Here, try this posture. Straighten your back and sit directly on your heels, toes under you."

I did as she asked,

"Now, close your eyes and make your spine as rigid as you can. Straighten up, very tall."

I straightened up, making my vertebrae pop loudly. "Ow!"

"That's the point, Chet. You're supposed to stretch. Raise your hands above your head and try to touch the ceiling."

More bones crackled and snapped. With each noise I could feel myself relaxing. She began keeping her voice in a monotone, encouraging me, instructing me; but she never touched me. I felt my excitement change into something more like relaxation or, perhaps, a detached state. Her voice seemed to surround me.

She told me to bring by arms down very slowly, extended to the side. As they came down, they seemed to resist movement like they were passing through thick water. It took a harder force to lower them. Sweat broke out on my lip. "This is really difficultâ!"

"Don't worry. Keep pushing and will your arms down. Concentrate on the command from your center. Send the command out."

I envisioned my center (whatever that was) and then imagined it to be doing as she said - commanding my arm down. It worked, they lowered to my side.

"Good! Now, stay within your center and try to think of nothing. Clear your mind. Draw within yourself. Imagine a compact ball with you at the core." Her voice was hypnotizing me it seemed. It was so soft and

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persuasive that I would have walked into the fire if she'd told me to.

"Chet." She said softly. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Lift your arms and put them on my shoulders."

I felt myself moving outwards. At the touch of her skin, my eyes flew open and I stared at her. "Th-that was really something. I felt like I was in a trance for a while."

"Look at the fire. It's gone down again. You've been sitting there for an hour since I had you put your arms down."

"An hour! But, it was only minutes since you did that."

She shook her head. "No. You only thought it was minutes. It was a full hour. Trust me."

"I do trust you, Nora. Fully and completely." The tables had turned. Now I was telling her that I trusted her.

"It's the same with us in class. We trust Singh and know that he will teach us properly."

Wow, I thought. A guy with that kind of power could really make a name for himself almost anywhere in the world. I had to ask: "You said once that Singh knew guys that could hold an erection for hours. Is that true?"

She dimpled and blushed a little. "I think so. I heard one of the girls that got to stay with her partner after class tell another girl that. Is that important?"

I could hardly lie to her. "Yes, that's important. Until I came up here my maximum time was around thirty minutes from necking to dressing. I think it would be awesome to be able to hold on for that long and provide pleasure to a partner at the same time."

I couldn't believe I was sitting here, on a bearskin rug, with a virtually naked girl, in front of a fire, talking about this, and not being primed to launch. Last month - hell, any time previously in my life after puberty - that would have been impossible. I used to get disturbed just watching girls in class crossing their legs.

"I bet Singh could teach you - us - how to do it." She shivered once. "I'm a bit chilly."

Carefully, I rose to my feet. Blood rushed back into my legs and I stumbled a little but caught myself. I added a couple of logs to the fire and stirred it with the poker. When I had it going again, I sat back down, and then lay on my side with my head on the bear's head.

Nora came over and knelt next to my ribs. She began to play with my chest hair again. "I like this. It fascinates me. I wonder why women don't have chest hair."

"They used to I guess, way back when. Pretty much everyone did."

"Ugh! I can't imagine me with chest hair." She pivoted until she was lying on her back beside me, hip to hip. I stared at the ceiling and watched the shadows dance around. She shivered slightly again.

I turned to her. "Are you still cold? Maybe we'd better pull a cover over us."

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"No. I'm not cold. I was just thinking of everything we've said and done to reach this point in our lives. It's so pleasant and warm right now." She put a hand on my shoulder and rolled up next to me. We were face to face. She kissed me and I kissed her back. "I don't want to meditate tonight. I just want to love and be loved. We've been nipping at the edges of something for a long time and now it's time to put a name to it. Chet, I'm pretty sure I love you; do you love me back?"

Well, that was pretty straightforward.

I said nothing but reached out and grabbed the edges of the rug behind her and flipped them over her, then did the same behind me. We were cocooned in warm, soft fur three inches thick. There was no way Nora could have not felt me trapped against the warmth of her stomach.

We lay very still, listening to our own heartbeats. "I love you," she repeated softly.

"And I love you, very much." I responded; not really surprised that I actually meant it.

She laid her head on my shoulder and nuzzled my neck with a kiss. "Sooooo comfortable!" Her voice trailed off. She remained silent for long moments and then began a soft buzz. I was astonished, but she'd fallen asleep.

I put my arms over her shoulder gently and held her. We were still pressed together tightly, warming each other, loving each other, an hour later. I had never before felt more at peace than I did right this moment.

During the night, I felt a cold draft as Nora moved away and stood up. I heard the rustle of the cloth curtain and then she returned to lie back down, facing away from me. She pushed herself tightly up against the length of my body. Even after being uncovered, she radiated a vast amount of heat. Carefully she pulled the rug back over us. As sleepy as I was I fell asleep again almost immediately without saying anything.

Chapter 11: Snowbound! - Chapter 11

We woke in the morning with strong sunlight shining through the window. We had moved around during the night, but were still entwined around each other. Carefully, I disentangled myself and got up. Nora stirred, but didn't wake up.

I eased a couple of logs on the fire and then encouraged it into life with the small bellows next to the fireplace. Once flaming again, it began to heat the room. I set a pan of water on to boil and brushed my teeth. During the whole evolution, I kept the robe tied tightly around my waist, trying to keep away from the drafts.

While I padded around in my thick socks, I watched the sleeping Nora. The warmth of the newly built up fire had caused her to throw the bear cover mostly off. She was lying on her side, facing towards me, with her arm folded under her head. It was apparent that when she had gotten up it was to add a light sweater over her shoulders. I sat down and took the time to watch her sleeping. Her upper leg was bent so that her knee touched the rug out in front of her. This pose reminded me of a set of extremely artful black and white pictures I'd once seen in a Paris museum.

I dragged out the skillet, selected some eggs, and peeled off several slices of bacon. When I cracked the first egg, Nora jumped a little. Then she woke in stages. First, she stretched languorously, like a big cat might after a deep sleep; then looked around and saw me watching her. Her eyes opened wider and found mine. With no awkwardness at all, she smiled. "Good morning, Chet. Did you sleep well?"

I smiled back. "Absolutely. You are so warm, Nora. Your metabolism must really be working hard."

"I've always been warm like that. I think I get it from my mother. She used to tell me the same thing when I was young and she'd let me sleep with her once in a while. I'm really sorry I fell asleep on you. It wasn't a very nice thing to do to you was it?"

I smiled ruefully. "I didn't mind. To tell the truth, I fell asleep right after you did."

"Still, I know how much I affected you and that wasn't right. I guess maybe I was still having second thoughts. I promise that won't happen again."

"Nora. Whatever you do, or, more importantly, don't do, with me is just fine. Whenever you feel comfortable with a situation is when I'll respond. I don't know what you went through with that other guy - and I don't care - you are in total control here. Most guys, me included, have that reaction when close to a beautiful, nearly nude, girl. It'll happen again no doubt. You are the one who gets to choose to either ignore it or not. Your choice; not mine. That's the difference between me and that other jerk."

Nora took a moment to take my speech in. She responded with a grin and a chuckle. "You've always been considerate of me, Chet. I can't remember ever feeling uncomfortable when I was with you. There have been a few times when I've noticed your 'um' reaction, as you put it. But you never made me feel like I should respond in any way. I've always thought of you as a true gentleman."

I was at a loss for words after that. I just nodded and smiled a crooked smile. "Thanks."

I stood and went back over to the gas stove. "Want some breakfast? I'll get it cooking right now."

"Sure," she said, rising to her knees, hugging the rug up to her chest. "Let me go put on something a little more substantial."

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She dropped the rug when she stood and nonchalantly walked across the room to slip behind the curtain. I continued cracking eggs in the pan and adding bacon to them as they fried. Nora pulled the curtain aside and appeared in a light blue flannel night dress. It had tiny yellow flowers across the low bodice (eminently suitable for ripping, I reflected to myself with an internal grin) and fell to just below her knees.

"How's this?" She asked, twirling around in a circle.

I smiled at her. "Not as good as before, but certainly more practical if you're going to be around popping bacon in a pan."

She laughed. "Yeah. There is that, I guess. Can I help?"

"Nah. I'm just about finished here. Sit down and I'll get the toast."

"Toast? We have toast?"

"Sure," I pointed to the fireplace. "Over there on that flat piece of iron." I walked over and put the four pieces on a plate. "If you'll get the butter, we're ready to eat."

She grabbed the butter and a knife then sat down. I served the bacon and eggs, and then dealt out two pieces of toast each. We fell silent, each with our own thoughts, while we ate. Occasionally we caught the other with a glance and smiled. I thought to myself that not making an aggressive move last night was absolutely the right thing for me to do.

We finished our meal and she went behind the curtain to change into her day clothes. I did the same over on my side of the divider. We talked to each other while preparing. I told her that she should probably dress for snow because we were going out. I'd promised to take her snowshoeing and I meant it.

We dressed warmly, in layers because one gets warm shuffling along in deep snow. Soon, we were ready. I opened the door to find that the wind last night had drifted a little snow against it. "Better we shovel out the path to the privy first - and we should probably use it before we go." I said, not very subtly. "It's far more comfortable there than out in the wilds."

I shoveled while she went, and then she shoveled while I went. Since it was just drifts, the work proceeded rapidly. I led her over to the back of the truck and opened the lid so I could grab our snowshoes. Mine were larger than hers but not by much. I tossed hers on the snow. "Get on with one foot and put your heel into that little cup at the back, then wrap the straps around the front of your boot and tie them. Not too tightly because if you fall you don't want to break a leg. It's sort of like skis, but not exactly because these won't release quite as fast."

She complied, with my help, and I tied mine on. "Now watch me." I shuffled through the trampled snow over to a clean patch about two feet deep. I was able to hop up on top and then shuffle across it without actually lifting my feet at all. "Now, just lift your foot a little and sort of slide it forward just above the top of the snow." I called.

She looked doubtful but began to tentatively shuffle across in my footprints. She reached the clean snow and made a creditable attempt to jump up like I did. She didn't quite make it. The tip of her shoe caught the edge of the snow. "Ahhhhhh!" She'd done a three-point face plant in the snow.

Fighting the urge to give her a horselaugh, I went back and helped get her on her feet again. I wiped snow from around her parka hood. She began laughing. "I guess it takes some skill to do that after all. I'll listen

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now. Show me again."

While I coached her into a few steps, I told her it was like trying to walk with swim fins on. You had to lift your knees high and give a little hop. I helped her a bit until she was comfortable doing it herself. "This is fun!" She cried. "Where are we headed?"

"Up the hill a ways to see if we can get cell phone reception. Did you bring yours?"

She patted the zippered pocket at the front of her parka. "Right here. Let's go!"

I started off, breaking trail for her. She followed, but not too close as I was causing loose snow to be blown in her face. "When we get to those trees, the wind will drop. The snow isn't as deep in there either."

We slogged through drifts and across almost bare spots for about ten minutes. I signaled a rest on a big log. "We'd better rest a bit here. You're not used to this and it makes your legs really sore."

"I can feel it, but it isn't too bad. It's nice to rest though."

We sat in silence, listening to the wind sigh through the trees. I pointed to another snowshoe rabbit, totally white, that had come out to feed on some sweetgrass stalks. "Very pretty," she responded quietly. "Is that what we ate?"

I nodded. "I have the pelt on the porch. Maybe I'll get another one and we can make mitten liners for us. Their fur is really warm. Ready to continue?"

She nodded and I pulled her to her feet. We proceeded along an old logging road for a bit and then I started to climb up a small ravine. We both found it tough going, but finally reached the top which opened into a large rounded meadow. The snow was much deeper here but she had learned how to snowshoe now. I looked back at her, which was a big mistake because I didn't see the small log under the snow. I tripped over it and did a face plant also.

I came up sputtering and hooking snow out of my collar. She was almost in hysterics laughing at me. I smiled ruefully. "Karma is a bitch isn't it?"

"Yeah. Can I lead?"

"Sure. Just go across between those two pine trees and we'll pick up another logging skid. We go about a half-mile beyond that and get on top of a small knoll. We should have reception there."

"Great!" She shuffled past me and began breaking trail. She turned out to be pretty good at it. I was always being surprised by things she did. I don't know why I initially thought of her as being helpless. Now, as I followed her wiggling, shapely, fanny across the snow I was once again happy we'd solved our 'who was going to admit they loved the other first' dance.

We reached the knoll without further mishap. I removed my snowshoes and helped her with hers. They stashed nicely under a big pine tree. Hand in hand, actually glove in glove; we went up the steep slope until we were on top. I pulled out my phone. "Two bars!" I announced.

She felt around until she located her phone, pulled it out, and turned it on also. "Pooh; I only have one bar, but the service is there I think." She punched a couple of buttons and held it to her ear. I did the same.

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I was calling my friend David to tell him I was fine, but snowbound. He finally answered. "Yeah? Chet? Is that you? How's the little trip? Any snow?"

"You wouldn't believe it, Dave. We got almost two feet last night. It's sunny now, but it could snow again. Could you check the web and see if anything is heading our way?"

"Yeah. Just a secâ"

He came back and said that it looked as if we'd have a couple of days of partly sunny and then another small storm might hit. They were predicting that there would only be a couple of inches over nine-thousand though. We were just at ten-thousand. "Hey, man. I heard you took Nora up there. You corrupting her morals?" Subtlety was not in Dave's repertoire.

"Ask me later Pal, when I get back. If anyone wonders, we're fine and will probably stay here for the full two weeks. In any case, I'd hate to try until some of this blows off."

"Yeah. Did you get that winch installed?"

"Yup. I know how to use it too. We'll be fine. See ya."

"Yeah. You lucky dog. See ya." He hung up. I heard bubbly girl-talk behind me and, shamefully, I pretended to still be in conversation but I was listening to Nora's conversation.

She and Willa, her close friend, were discussing something that was causing peals of laughter. "Yes, he did!" Nora said and then listened a bit longer. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?" A longer pause, then "yeah? Uh huh. Willa! What a thing to say!" She began laughing again. "No. He did shoot a rabbit though. It was delicious. We made kabobs." He voice got louder. "Kay-bobs. Those things on a skewer." She laughed again and listened for a bit.

"Wait! I missed that â Willa? Willa!" She shook the phone. "Rats. Lost the signal. No, wait. My phone is dead! I thought I had a full charge." She turned to me.

"I have a vehicle charger, but I bet it won't fit your phone. Want to use mine." I asked her.

"Nah. I told her right at first I might lose the signal. She won't worry. I passed all the stuff I wanted to. She thinks we're chasing each other around the cabin naked. She has a dirty mind."

"Um. Well, I suppose that could happenâ" I raised one eyebrow.

She colored nicely despite the cool wind. "Well, she does! What we're doing is research and meditation." She held a serious face for about ten seconds and then it began to crack. First a smile, then a repressed snicker, and then a big guffaw. Within seconds we were both hanging on to each other and laughing our fool heads off.

"She'll never know from me how close she guessed the truth." Said Nora.

"Nothing will pass my lips about it either," I vowed. "Let's start back."

"Can we try without the snowshoes? We've already made a trail."

"Sure. I can carry them for us."

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"I'll carry my own. No problem." She and I slid down the knoll on our butts and poked about under the pine tree. "Hey, this is pretty nice under here. No wind at all."

She was right. There wasn't any wind able to get through the thick branches. We could see out, but it couldn't get in. She unzipped the front of her parka. I did mine also and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. She laid her head against my shoulder and I put my arm around her.

"Actually, it's almost warm in here."

"Has to do with the green around us. The sun hits it and warms the area behind it - us."

She was silent for a while. Her hand crept over and took mine. She rubbed my fingers with hers. "Chet? Are you really comfortable with all we've said to each other lately?"

"Sure I am, Nora. You've always meant a lot to me. Even when we first started to hang around with each other I thought you were very special. When you said what you said last night I felt like a big weight had been taken off my heart. I was always on guard when I was around you. I didn't want to do a single thing that would cause you discomfort. I guess that because of this, you thought I was not interested in you. But I was. I wish we could recapture all the time that's gone by before; we'd really be an item by now."

She looked up at me and kissed my chin. "Well, all that's gone now. We can make up for it. The time isn't really lost; it's just going to make the future more intense - at least for me. I feel so \hat{a} so liberated since last night it's almost scary. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep us together."

She kissed me again. This time on the lips. We held tightly to one another, oblivious to everything around us. Despite the heat she was putting out, she shivered.

"Are you getting cold?"

"Yes. A little. Shouldn't we be getting back?"

"You're right." I said.

After crawling out from under the tree we faced one another and our arms slid in to hold each other tightly under our coats. We kissed. "What a wonderful way to spend an afternoon in the woods." I offered.

"Definitely. We'll have to do this again. I like the open air. I can't imagine so many things I've missed out on by being afraid to go out with guys. This trip with you has opened my eyes considerably."

"Well, we can't do this all the time or we'll never get back to Boulder." I smiled at her.

"Yeah, but we can try, can't we!" She laughed and turned to pick up her snowshoes. "Let's go. I'm really hungry for some reason."

Chapter 12: Snowbound! - Chapter 12

We threw our snowshoes over our shoulders and went back down the trail. When we came around a large rock, we were face to face with a very large bull Elk. He was just standing there in the trail looking at us. To her credit, Nora didn't scream or anything but did suck in a huge breath. We froze in place, waiting to see what this guy would do.

In some instances, Elk will charge, especially bulls during rutting season. This one was a bit mellower. With the nonchalance of being way bigger than the two of us put together, he snorted and then ambled down the trail. With unbelievable grace he stopped beside a log and did a standing broad jump right over it and thumped to the ground; then disappeared from sight. We heard him crashing through brush, breaking twigs in his path.

"That was incredible! What a beautiful animal." Nora exclaimed. "I wish I'd brought my camera."

"Yeah. Me too. He knew it wasn't hunting season or else he'd have been long gone after hearing us come down the trail."

"Do you think he was watching us?" Said Nora, wide-eyed.

"I'm sure he was."

I took her free hand and we went on down the trail towards the cabin. We were passing through the last band of trees when I heard a horse whinny. Strange, I thought. Who'd be up here on a horse?

We saw a very nice looking black mare tied to our porch railing. She was wearing an orange vest around her neck and had what looked like an official saddle blanket. When I got closer I recognized the Forest Service logo. "That's funny; this isn't Forest Service land here. I wonder who it is. Hello, our cabin!" I shouted while opening the back of the truck to put our snowshoes inside.

The door opened and a ranger came out holding a mug. It was Ranger Dan. I'd known him for years. He almost always stopped by the cabin just to chat in the summer. I hadn't seen him around in winter though. "Hey, Dan! Long time, no see." I greeted him as we shook hands. "Great weather, huh?" Nobody bothered to lock their cabins up here. If they wanted in, it was easy. Repairing broken locks wasn't. Besides, in an emergency anyone could get inside in a hurry.

I introduced Nora and they shook hands. "Yeah. Got some snow I see." Real men don't mention just how much snow there is around but just that some fell. We could be up to our ass in snow but just report some dusting.

"Yeah. We were just up on the hill checking in. Nora's cell phone died."

"It's the cold that does it. The batteries get cold and lose their charge." He changed subjects. "I saw some really big bull tracks over there a ways," he said, pointing through the trees. "Was that you guys up on 'shoes?"

"That was us. Yeah, we saw him," Nora said quickly. "He was really big with lots of spikes on his horns."

"Antlers, Nora. Seven points," I added, using the correct terminology.

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"Huh. Don't usually see them that big around these parts until winter settles down in the high country." Dan said.

"I thought we were in the high country right here." Nora said, with a puzzled look.

"Well, you are, but they hang around way up there just below the tree line at around twelve or twelve and a half. They lose forage and come down lower to eat. That storm probably just pushed this one down. He'll go back up if the weather holds like this. I borrowed some hot water and coffee."

"No problem," I said. Come on back inside. What brings you over here?"

"I'm keeping an eye out for a guy we think is poaching. He was last sighted over in my jurisdiction leaving the scene of three cows he'd downed."

"Cows?" Asked Nora.

"Yes, ma'am. That's what you call female Elk; cows. This guy killed three of them. That's against the law - especially since it isn't hunting season yet. My area is strictly bulls only also. This pissed me off - 'scuse me - made me really mad."

Nora waved her hand in a 'it doesn't bother me' manner, and then said "I guess that would piss me off also if I was with enforcement. Any sign of him here?"

"Not really. I spotted your smoke from the far hillside and wondered which of you would be up here now. You guys are nice and cozy in there aren't you? It's a nice cabin." He turned to me. "You gonna chop up some more wood? How long you plan to stay anyway?"

"Another week; if the weather holds."

"It might. We don't see anything coming over from Idaho or Utah right now, but you never know about California."

I snickered. "Yeah, you never know about them over there." I had lived there for a while and I knew they were nuts.

Dan set his mug down, and stood. "Time for me to hit the saddle again. I've got to get back to the trailer before dark. Want me to stop by if I get back in this neck of the wood again?"

Nora spoke up before I did. "Sure, Dan. We'd love to have you. Maybe next week?" I watched a little flush creep up Nora's neck. I knew what she was thinking.

"Maybe a couple of loud shouts from the woods?" I said, smiling at Dan. He wasn't dumb. He knew Nora and I were enjoying each other's company and might not want very sudden visitors.

"Yeah. I could do that. Thanks much for the coffee, Chet. You take care now, Nora. Don't overfeed him or he tends to get fat." He poked me in the ribs.

"I'll have to watch that then. Have a safe trip. I hope you catch that guy."

"We'll get him. Bye, ya'll." We followed him through the door and watched while he mounted up. I patted the horse's nose before he reined her around. He waved as he passed into the trees again.

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"Well, that was cool. A real nice guy. Have you known him long?"

"About ten years. He's the only Game Ranger for this whole area up from Winter Park to the Divide. It's a big responsibility and he takes it serious. That poacher is in real trouble if he gets caught."

The large wind-up clock on the sink showed it to be a little past two in the afternoon. No wonder I was so hungry. Missing lunch, and the great workout on the snowshoes, had built up quite a desire for food. "Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah! Want me to fix something?"

"Sure; a bit of something with two slices of whatever." I grinned at her.

"Wiseacre!" She stood and went over to the food box. After rummaging around, she held up a jar of peanut butter and one of jelly. She raised her eyebrows in a question.

"Sure, that sounds good. I'll cut the bread." I pulled a loaf of uncut bread from the cold box and picked up our long knife. With care I sliced off six thick pieces of the rough bread. Nora and I both liked our bread sliced naturally and just a little bit dry on the outside. My favorite was French bread. This was rye and very good.

I put the sliced bread onto two plates. Nora brought over a table knife and the butter plate to add to the peanut butter and jelly already there. We concentrated on making our sandwiches. I went and got two sodas from the cold box and popped the tops. Nora said "thank you," when I handed hers to her.

We munched in silence, savoring the nutty taste of the sandwiches. From time to time we took sips of the soda. She was sitting opposite me - our usual position - and every once in a while we would catch each other just looking. Finishing up, I gathered the napkins and tossed them on the fire. "What now?" I asked. "Want to go out again?"

"I'd like to, but I got drowsy sitting here in the warmth. You go if you want though. I'll be fine. I'll read another bodice ripper and attack you when you get back."

"Ooooooh. Kinky! I like that." I responded, pulling my coat on.

I decided that maybe it would be a good idea to have some sort of sign that both of us would know just in case this poacher showed up. Doubtful, but it could happen. "Nora. When I come back I'll hail the cabin. If you say 'nobody here but us chickens' I'll be very wary. Remember, Dan is chasing an actual criminal. I do not want to scare you. There's hardly a chance in hell this guy is anywhere near us but you never know. Understand?"

"Y-yes. Is there any real danger?" She asked timidly.

"Nah. None at all, really. I can stay here if you're worried."

"No. I'm not worried. You go and run around. I'll be fine. I might even take a nap." She yawned in punctuation. "Sorry."

"Okay. I'll be back around four or so. I have my watch." I slid my sleeve up to show her. "Bye."

"Bye."

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I closed the door firmly and crunched off the porch to the yard. I spent ten minutes brushing all the snow off the truck. If anyone came around, it would be better to have the truck showing signs of use - even though there were no recent tire tracks. There was also my CB antenna on it so that showed we were in communications. I mentally shrugged. She'd be fine.

The direction I picked followed Dan's horse tracks for a ways and then I peeled off up a small game trail. This one led beneath a rocky cliff that eventually came to a little hidden valley. It rested under a concave shield of rocky cliffs and indentations. In the summer, it was a perfect place to have a nice fire and cook small game we'd killed. This winter, there seemed to be very little snow gathered inside it. In fact, back near the back of the hollow, the grass was still green; flattened down where the deer had bedded down, but green.

I sat on a rock and looked out over the huge valley that eventually led to Winter Park. I could see haze off in the notch where the Interstate highway pushed through the pass. Closer were the occasional plumes of smoke from little houses and camps. Between them and I were just the expanses of green pine and white snowy meadows. It was beautiful. I began to get introspective as I rose and continued my hike.

The change in relationship between Nora and I had began to run through my mind. Even as late as a month ago I would hardly have figured that she and I would be as involved as we were now. I couldn't believe just how much of an apparent change there was in her in that short amount of time. There was also the thought that this burst of romantic activity was simply a reaction to finally find someone to share it with. Both of us had been circling around the issue of how we felt about each other for some time now. This trip had provided the catalyst and nature had simply run its course.

I wouldn't have traded this time with her for anything in the world; and there was no doubt she was enjoying her newly discovered attitudes and feelings. I knew I was enjoying them. As I walked along I began to wonder if maybe I should slow things down a little. Nora herself told me that this was all new for her and, as such, it wouldn't do to go overboard right at first. In fact, it could be the very newness that was attractive to her right now. Whatever her motivations, I was all for them.

The trail forked up ahead of me. I could continue down the spine, circle back at the same elevation or I could drop into the little valley and climb back up. I gave consideration to the amount of snow that may be in the valley and decided to play it safe and stay up high.

It was cold however; blowing snow from across the ridge and an unfettered wind being stopped by nothing but me. By the time I got to the start of the spine, I was really cold. I paused long enough to pull my thick wool scarf from my day pack and wind it around my neck and across my face. That was much better.

Visibility came and went. Fortunately I had covered this area pretty thoroughly in the last few years so I was good as long as I didn't go up, or down, the grade. The cabin was around the bowl though a big batch of trees. I was pretty thankful when I saw the thin plume of smoke being whipped from the top of the chimney. "Hello the cabin!" I called out.

Chapter 13: Snowbound! - Chapter 13

"Come on in and have a cup of tea!" Nora shouted back. Apparently she was alone. I reached the porch, stamped my feet to remove most of the snow, and opened the door. I had just removed my second boot when Nora handed me a steaming mug.

Now, I'm not a real tea drinker. My mom was, and I got familiar with the brands she liked. This one was Jasmine. "Mmmm, Jasmine. Smells delicious."

Nora stood open-mouthed at me. "How did you know that?"

I smiled at her. "I just know my teas. Jasmine has a distinctive aroma, like peppermint tea has. Jasmine actually makes me think of India for some reason - even though it comes from China."

She wrinkled her nose. "Is there anything you don't know?"

I seem to be in deep thought for a few seconds. "Nope. I thought I was wrong once, but I wasn't."

"Okay, wise guy. In the book 'Promise me Diamonds' who jilted Maureen?"

"Rebecca - they were both gay but she didn't want to be Maureen's partner."

She snickered and then laughed out loud. "That's a bit wrong!" She said. "Actually, that would probably make a good book though."

"Well, why don't you write one then? I bet you could."

"I wouldn't have the first idea how to write one of them."

"Take something you already know, like this trip. Embellish it a bit, add some danger and sex, and then have the principals go through trauma and crises but reconcile in the last chapter. Piece of cake."

"Oh, be serious. Our being together isn't anything like a novel."

"You don't think so? Here we were, two people occasionally doing date stuff, but not calling it 'dating'. We kept circling the whole issue of our relationship for the whole time we'd known each other, but never really stating a goal or other unit of measure for our progress. We simply existed together; loving each other but afraid to say the words. It's a perfect novel."

"But we don't know how it will end."

"Wait and see how it ends. We could co-author it but I won't put my name on it unless I use a pseudonym."

"Why?"

"Real men don't write romance novels." I pronounced in a pretentious tone. "We may read them, but we don't write them."

She smirked at me. "You'd be surprised to know that about a fourth of authors who write those books are actually men." She picked up the empty mug and raised her eyebrows. "More tea?"

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"I think not. I have to make the run to the privy right now anyway." I saddled up and left the cabin. When I returned, she had cleaned the table and was sitting down reading her little book again. The one with the tiny pictures we couldn't make out. I sat opposite her and watched.

She had her back to the window and a beam of sunlight was shining on the table. As she turned a page, it lit up the back of the page. Suddenly all the photos brightened up. "Wait! Hold that page right there!" I told Nora.

"What? Why?"

"Just hold it. Look at the front of the page with the sun behind it. Those pictures are pretty dark, but with bright light behind them, they clear up and become fully visible."

She and I stood and pressed the book against the window. "Oh my," she said. "Look at that one." A flush crept up her neck to circle the ear I could see. The picture showed a guy leaning back on some sort of pallet or bed with the girl kneeling between his legs. His penis, certainly much larger than life for clarity, was sticking up in front of her. She seemed to be just holding it. She slammed the book shut almost catching my fingers.

She dropped the book and moved off behind the curtain. I picked up the book, held it to the light, and riffled through the rest of the back pages. It was definitely a sex manual. All sorts of positions were being illustrated. In each, the guy was quite magnified. The girl was very buxom also. There were four pages with six pictures per page. That made twenty-four training aids for lovers. I closed the book again. The cover, which I hadn't really noticed before, was written in a fake Hindi script, but it definitely said '*Kama Sutra through the Ages*'. It had been copied several times, but clear enough.

One picture, towards the last of them, seemed virtually impossible. The guy would have to be huge to do what was being indicated. I grunted derisively.

"What?" She said from in front of the fire where she had moved after recovering from her embarrassment.

"Not possible. It would break off from its own weight."

She snickered, rose to her feet and came across the room. When she bent over, I held the picture to the light.

"Wow! That does seem a little implausible. Maybe he really is that big." She'd caught how large he appeared. "I don't think something that big could actually be fun at all. It'd hurt me."

"Yeah. I'd hate to carry all that weight around myself. Stillâ!"

She reddened deeply. "Don't go all weird on me now."

I didn't wish to make her any more uncomfortable, so I gently closed the book and laid my palm flat on it. "Enough of that. Even I'm a bit surprised at it. You didn't know what the pictures were about at all, did you?"

"No." Nora said, shaking her head. "Singh never told us much about them. Now I know why."

"Maybe that was his way of making you go looking for answers. How about 'seek, and you shall find'. That comes to mind. Hey! That rhymes!"

"Oh, be serious, Chet. This is very serious stuff here. He really believes in these things and, I guess, the positions themselves. Maybe if we get invited to the special class we'll be told."

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"Well, we've already found them now, haven't we? We're ahead of the game."

She seemed deep in thought for a moment. "Yeah, maybe; but, what are the preliminary exercises that lead up to these positions? Everything he's taught us before has had initial exercises before jumping to the end position."

"You're right, Nora. Maybe we should just take these at their face value and keep doing our regular exercises." 'No! No!' My mind was screaming. *'I wanna do THAT one!'*

She slid the book aside and turned to me. "Please, Chet. I want to make sure we do this right. I know it will be so much better for us if we do." The look on her face was absolutely earnest. She truly believed that if we waited, we'd enjoy ourselves much more. In a way, I did also, but what were we going to do about the present? I decided she needed some sort of answer.

I turned and put my hands on her shoulders to turn her to face me. I looked down at her. "Then, we'll just keep doing it your way, Nora. I think you'll find that I am not 'just another guy' like the first guy. I do have needs, and I can deal with them; but I also recognize that my partner has needs also. We've decided to be partners, so what you want is what I want. That's what partners do."

She pulled herself tightly to me, pressing her length along mine. Her arms went around my waist. "Perfect," she said into my chest. We kissed on the deal; holding it for a long time. I reached over and picked up the book, handing it to her.

"Keep this handy, Nora. It has all the basics we need. We'll just get better and better at it." I said with a smile.

Time passed. I finished my lurid novel. The bad guy, wounded by the hero's gunshot, came back with a gang and laid siege to the cabin and mine. With ammo running low and time running out, the gal finally remembered a tale her dad had told her about a back entrance to the mine. I really hate it when new stuff is introduced very late in a book, but the way it was done seemed natural enough. Quietly, and before one of the gang slipped near to toss coal oil on the side of the cabin, all of them went out the back door (why wasn't one of the gang watching for that?) and got into the tunnel.

They penetrated the darkness until they reached a boarded up door and forced it open. There were conveniently placed kegs of blasting powder and fuses sitting on the ground. There, they rigged the whole thing to blow and waited until they heard the gang enter the mine. Once they did, they lit the fuse and ran down the shaft to the back exit. As they stood outside in the sunlight they heard a dull boom and watched dust billow out of the portal. Confident they'd done in all the bad guys they clinched, smooched, and walked off into the middle distance hand in hand. I had no idea where mama was during all this.

I blew a raspberry.

"What?" Nora asked, looking up from her book.

"Trite ending. I mean; a hidden exit from the mine? Really!"

"Yeah. It was kind of lame, wasn't it?" She giggled and I laughed.

"Yup. How about some grub gal?"

"You have to stop reading those things. They mess up your mind. And, yes, I'd like something to eat. What do we have?"

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I rummaged in the food box and came up with a big can of Dinty Moore. "How about beef stew?"

"Oooh! I love that stuff. I'll cook if I get to lick the spoon."

I pointed a spoon at her like a wand. "Poof, you're wish has been granted."

She hopped up and rattled around the drainboard for a pot and then used the can opener before dumping the stew into it. I lit the stove for her and she put the pot on to simmer. We also located a can of fruit salad and I dumped it into two wooden bowls. "Desert," I announced.

While we were waiting, I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her chest, hands just below her breasts. She hummed in her throat when I nuzzled her neck. "You sure are wonderful to be with, Nora. I am so happy you decided to come up here with me."

"And to think I had almost decided not to go." She shook her head wistfully. "Man, what I would have missed."

I kissed the back of her neck and in response she shuddered deliciously. "Keep that up and we'll never have supper."

With hands held high, I backed away. "Hey! I'm gone!" I sat down at the table and cut slices of bread.

A sudden thought entered my mind. I wondered just how frank a discussion Nora would tolerate about sex between us and all its ramifications. Would it still be possible for me to take that one aggressive step too much? She'd taken those murky pictures well and, if I was reading it right, maybe even considered what it would be like for her to participate in one or two of them.

It's been my experience that some girls really talk a good game, but when it gets right down to it, they fall apart and claim they didn't know what they were getting in to. I didn't think Nora was like that, but I ran a couple of ideas through my head for a way to test that theory.

She hadn't actually been bothered last night having me pressed against her. Instead, she had just casually mentioned it in conversation. So, I concluded, she might simply reply to a direct question: Would it be possible for us to have sex together? When I said that in my mind, I cringed. That was a pretty dumb way to bring up that subject. There had to be a better way.

Maybe later this evening, if she did her exercises, I could ask her if I could help. If she wore her leotard, there was no doubt I'd get excited in no time. If I wore the right shorts, there is absolutely no way she could miss it. I had a pair of silk sleeping shorts that would make anything under them stand out like a flagpole. Better yet, they were European style - no fly. I'd wear nothing but those. I mentally nodded; I had a plan.

"Dinner's ready." Nora said, putting the pot on the table and sitting down across from me. "Hold out your bowl." I did and she spooned some beef stew into it. She took some for herself and we began eating.

"Nora. I've been thinking. I think I would like to try some of those exercises now; the beginning ones. I can't think of a better time to start, seeing as we're up here for another week. We'd have lots of time to work on them. How about it?"

She looked up with a grin. "Sure! Want me to wear my leotard - or not?"

'Shit', I thought, 'she's on to me!' "Ahhhhhh. What's the alternative?" I asked stupidly.

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"Nothing, of course. That's the best way to get the full benefit of any exercise. Clothes get in the way and restrict movement."

I must have looked very startled - because I was very startled. "Butâ !" "

"Yeah, I know what happens. Just like what happened last night. You get an erection. I think we can work around that."

My brain froze for a moment. My greatest worry was that she'd get apprehensive (not a good word, but the best I had at the moment) when I got near her in that state, and here she was telling me it just didn't matter to her - at least not sexually I guess - because the exercise ends were worth the means. If I got an erection that was only secondary to the task at hand, so to speak. Oh, brother!

"Well, let me think about it. Okay?" I weaseled.

"Sure."

We finished our meal in relative silence; each with our own thoughts. When dinner was over, we washed the dishes, dried them, and stacked them along the table. Nora seemed to be taking a little extra time to do this, so I gave her all the time she needed. This was a big step in our relationship. One I knew I was going to approach with a little trepidation. I again vowed to myself not to screw up and make an ass of myself.

"I think I'd better head for the little house on the prairie for a for a bit. Great meal, but tough to exercise on a full stomach. You want to go first?"

She shook her head. "Maybe later. You go now and I'll set up our area near the fire.

That sounded good to me. "Be back in a bit," I said, dressing a little, turning on the flashlight, and shutting the door behind me.

I shuffled out to the truck and dug around under the back lid and grabbed more toilet paper. We'd need some soon.

Armed with everything I needed, I headed out back, got inside the shack, and closed the door. I was so fired up with thoughts of what was to come soon that it only took five minutes to take care of business. I sat there in the cold reflecting on just how big a step this was. Maybe it might be better to stay dressed for the first few times. I couldn't believe I was thinking that, but there it was. I checked the locks on the truck and headed for the front door of the cabin.

Nora had killed all the lights. The only illumination was from three candles sitting on upturned buckets arranged around the bear rug. Shadows danced on the walls from the flicker of the fire, now lowered somewhat by the shaking Nora had given it. At the moment, it was mostly coals, but still very warm.

"Nora, I've decided that maybe we'd better stay clothed for a while. I know that sounds wimpy, but somehow better to me."

"Okay. I'll get ready then; be out in a second. You want to change in here?"

Hmmm. I probably should. "Yeah. I'll wait until you come out."

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"Okay. I'm ready now. Come on ahead." She stepped out dressed in her tan leotard. "When you're ready, come on out." She said, kneeling down on the rug.

I quickly went behind the curtain and stripped off my clothes. For some obscure reason I was happy to note that my anticipation was exercise-oriented rather than sexual. I put on my pair of sleeping shorts; the ones with no fly. "Ready?" I called out.

"Ready." She answered.

I was really nervous. This was unusual for me. My normal attitude when anticipating a little sex was to put myself into an almost automatic mode. Instead, I was nervous. Deep down, I wanted to please Nora, not make her angry. Maybe that was it. Anyway, I stepped across the floor and knelt down on the rug also.

Chapter 14: Snowbound! - Chapter 14

Nora looked spectacular. She'd applied just a very light oil of some kind because her skin shone in the amber firelight. She motioned me to come around and face her; knees to knees. I found myself staring hard at the bridge of her nose. Not allowing my eyes to stray downward. She looked back at me, her pupils moving from one of my eyes to the other.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "You look very nice, Nora. Is it allowed for me to say that?"

She dimpled. "Sure it is. All compliments accepted. You look very well and fit yourself. This is the first time I've ever really seen you almost nude you know. I like what I see. You must do some exercising already."

"I do. Mostly stuff at home, but once in a while I hit a gym. I try to keep in shape." I cleared my throat. "Now, how do we begin?"

Nora answered. "We should begin at the beginning, as Singh says. You need to find your center. To do that, you need to relax, let all your muscles go slack. Once that's accomplished, we can begin to locate your center. Are you comfortable?"

"Kind of. My knees are hurting a bit in this position."

"Okay. Get off them and just extend your legs out past my knees. I put our sleeping bags rolled up against the wall so you can lean back without having to tense your stomach muscles. It's important that nothing is tense." She caught my startled look and smiled, "Yeah, that too."

I mentally checked, nope, I wasn't tense - yet. I fervently hoped I wouldn't get that way either; at least for a while. My legs stretched out on either side of her, but not touching. I felt strange, actually vulnerable, in this position but it didn't seem to matter. I listened to her voice guiding me in my relaxation. In a little bit, it seemed as if she was in my head.

"Relax. Relax. Let your mind wander and try to make it blank. Think of nothing." Her voice was mesmerizing me with its softness. I felt tension slipping away; to be replaced with an almost cool calmness. "Try to trace back any commands you receive from your fingers, toes, legs, arms, or even your head. Find out where they meet. This is your center."

"As you are doing that, slowly extend your hands out in front of you and clasp them together. Bring your elbows in until you are touching your chest with the heels of your hand. Do it slowly, very slowly. Keep listening to my voice. Do not try to talk, just listen to my voice. If it helps, close your eyes."

I did as she instructed. My mind has always been very active, but listening to her I felt it begin to slow down, shut down; almost like going to sleep, but without the fatigue. My arms got heavy, but I seemed to be able to hold them up just fine. Weird sensations came over me occasionally; almost like an electrical pulse shooting through my nervous system. It ended up right below my breastbone. It was either the beef stew, or a good candidate for my center.

When I opened my mouth to say something, I felt her finger on my lips. "Don't speak. Just bring your fingers in towards yourself and put them gently against your center. Move slowly."

I felt like I was moving glacially, but I finally felt my fingers touch my chest. She told me to extend my arms again and do the exercise over. I eventually touched my chest, but lower down this time. Four more times she

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had me repeat - each time I got closer to the little spot I'd identified earlier.

"You've found your center now. Open your eyes."

I blinked in the gloom. The fire had died down a little more; now just the candles were still giving off light. The cabin just seemed to be darker than before. I had trouble seeing Nora and she was just across from me. This was amazing stuff. I felt so relaxed - everywhere.

"May I speak," I asked softly.

"Of course."

"That was really something. I've never had that happen to me before. I really felt like I could trace all the little electrical pulses as they ran through my body. Very spooky."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. While you were exercising, I did mine also. I'm a bit tired now."

"Huh?" I said stupidly. "That didn't take long."

"You took almost half an hour to find your center."

"Wait. What!? That long? But â but, it seemed like only minutes to me. How can that be?" She'd done it to me again!

"I'm not sure. Singh tried to explain it, but I got lost somewhere in the middle. It has to do with self-hypnosis I think."

I thought back to what had happened and found I could agree with what she said. I had a friend back in high school who could hypnotize people. I watched him do it many times. His best subjects were, for some unknown reason, girls. It was true, however, that you couldn't be hypnotized into doing something you wouldn't normally do. I mean, making someone cluck like a chicken was something anyone could do, but taking off clothes or the like, if you were shy, just wouldn't happen. He was great at parties.

One party, I started scoffing at him a little. He wrote something on a piece of paper, folded, and handed it to me, then sat me down and just started talking to me; asking me to focus on the spot of light on the wall across from me. It got fuzzy, and then almost went out, when he brought me back from wherever I was I suddenly had a craving for pizza. When I mentioned this, he told me to open the paper. He had written: 'crave pizza'.

"Where were you just now?" Nora asked, concerned that I'd gone silent.

"I was just remembering a kid I knew who could get people to do strange things. Funny how your mind works at times. Sorry. You said you were tired. Shall I make up the bear?"

She stood. "That would be nice. I'm going to fix a bit of tea. Want some also?"

"Sure. Thanks." She looked great walking away also.

The water boiled and we made our tea. Nora had an herbal tea from a local company called Sleepytime and I had Earl Grey. Silently we sipped, watching each other in the dim light.

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"Nora? Would you mind talking about this other guy you took to your Yoga classes? I definitely don't want to repeat his errors. If I can avoid making an ass out of myself I'd sure like to know. Nothing really personal, but just in general."

She thought a moment and then started speaking; haltingly at first, then with greater strength. "He started out just fine; learning the basics and all that. We went to quite a few of the regular classes and he seemed to be working at it. After a couple of months, Singh asked if we'd like to come to an after-hours session. I told him I wasn't sure right then, but my partner insisted it would be fun."

I could imagine what fun he thought it would be. He was thinking with his little head. I already didn't like the guy. I hoped she wouldn't put a name to him because I really didn't want to know who it was.

She continued. "Our first session was pretty cool. The room was dark with what seemed like hundreds of candles all around. Just Singh and Saree were there, sitting side by side on a really large pillow. There was another large pillow in front of them and Singh told us to just sit down."

"He started talking about some of the history of the Kama Sutra; how it came to be and what it could do for anyone who followed its teachings. He opened a large book and turned a couple of pages. Then, in a soft voice, started the lesson. As he spoke, describing preliminary exercises - stretching and the like - Saree demonstrated them."

I was fascinated by this story and assumed that if and when we started studying we'd get the same treatment. I asked "So, up until now this guy was behaving himself?"

"Yeah. I could tell he was not paying much attention because he kept staring at Saree. It was almost as if I weren't in the room. I mean, I was watching her myself, but he was staring. That's when I noticed he had an erection. That's happened to him a couple of times before, but this time I felt kind of insulted that it wasn't me causing it." She chuckled ruefully. "I know that sounds strange, because I told you I'd always been a bit apprehensive around guys."

"Singh talked some more, telling us of the wonders of the Kama Sutra. While he talked, Saree untied her belt and let her coverlet fall around her waist. Singh began telling us of the various spots on a female that could be used to produce pleasure. When he covered all above the waist, he had Saree remove the rest of her clothes."

"Singh invited us to do the same. Despite my reluctance, my partner urged me to do just that. I refused at first, but he just yanked his clothes off; I just pulled my top down. I was really embarrassed for him. After all, Singh and Saree were attempting to teach us something and all this guy wanted to do was get naked." She stopped and looked down at the table. "I was ready to go home right then. This guy was giving off some sort of bad vibrations or something because even Saree got nervous. Singh halted the lesson and asked me if I was uncomfortable. I said I was. Singh said the lesson was over right then. The guy got a little pissed and practically jerked me to my feet. He said 'we're leaving' and told me to pull up my top. I was in tears when I thanked Singh and Saree. Singh just nodded. We left right away."

"Man, what an insensitive, impatient jerk. If he'd just played by the rules he could have learned something."

"He already thought he knew something. While he was driving me to my house all he uncovered himself and kept asking me to touch him. I never did. That's when he called me that awful name. That really hurt me. I refused to let him see me crying though. That didn't come until I got inside my apartment. I've seen him around a couple of times, but he won't say anything to me now."

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I took her hands in mine. "Nora. Not all guys are like that. In fact, pretty much all of us are a lot more sensitive to the feelings of others than this guy." I paused. "I am glad you told me this though."

"I wanted you to know about it, but couldn't just blurt it out; I had to do it right, Chet. Like now. Dim lights, warm fire, soft bear rug, and just the two of us with no distractions. I also want you to know, and this is really hard for me to say, that I have never touched a guy anywhere, um, sexually. I know. Here I am a college graduate admitting I've never gotten close to having sex with a guy but I'm just so damn fearful and shy. Dammit! I wish my mom had just kept her mouth shut!" She started to cry again.

At a complete loss to stem her tears, I just sat there in front of her and held her hands. She wasn't crying loudly, more of a weeping, but it really affected me down deep. Then it dawned on me that she was telling me she was a virgin. This changed the whole situation. Now, all her changes in direction made sense. She simply didn't know what to do.

This was going to be a little more difficult than I thought. Sure, I had experience with girls - well, only four girls actually - but all of them were savvy in the ways of love and sex; Nora was definitely not. Once again, I decided to let her make the first moves. But first, I had to dry those tears.

"Nora." I lifted her chin with my fingers. "Look at me."

"Y-Yes?" Slowly she opened her eyes and looked up at me.

"I promise with all my heart that I will not attempt to do anything to you, or ask you to do anything to me, that you don't want to do. You are very vulnerable right now and I suspect that the best thing we can do is just go to sleep. Tomorrow is another day."

"But â€¦ but, I thought â€¦ that you were ... erect."

I touched her cheek with my fingertips. "I was. Very much so. But, nothing is urgent here. I will put our separate sleeping bags on the bear, or I can even put them on separate beds if you want. You have the choice."

She gave me a wan smile. "Thank you, Chet. Could you â€¦ could we just sleep by the fire like we did the other day? I felt so warm and comfortable next to you."

I thought about that and decided I could take it. It would be tough, but I could handle it. I went around to her side of the table and gathered her in my arms. "Sure, Nora. We can do that." I lifted her chin again and kissed her.

She changed into her night clothes behind the curtain while I made up the bear and covers. I also poked at the fire and added a small log to the side as a bank. She came out and slipped under the covers, pulling them to her chin. I was already in my sleeping shorts so I just covered myself.

I was on my back so when she moved closer and put her head on my chest I just put my arm around her loosely. "Hold me, Chet. Just hold me."

"Sure, Baby. I got ya." I tightened my arm and kissed the top of her head.

So, there in front of a low fire, Nora and I, close friends and perhaps lovers at a later time, slept.

Chapter 15: Snowbound! - Chapter 15

The morning of our seventh day found the two of us cuddled together on the bear rug. I don't know about Nora, but my sleep was somewhat disturbed. Whenever I repositioned myself, I would wake fully because I didn't want to disturb Nora. To be fair, she woke me at least twice herself by shifting around; once she moaned quietly. What struck me though was that neither one of us really left the company of the other. Throughout the night I felt her warm body pressed up against me.

Now, through the window, dim light was beginning to show. The sun had yet to rise over the mountain, but the dim light it did produce was enough to make out vague shapes inside the cabin. I eased my one leg out from under Nora's, which she had placed over mine, and gently let it rest on the rug until the pins and needles eased a bit. She stirred, but didn't wake as I rose.

Quietly, I placed two logs on the fire and waited for them to catch and begin heating the room. We hadn't been cold all night, but we'd need the heat higher in order to get around this morning. It seemed a bit colder outside than yesterday perhaps. I decided that some hot coffee would perk me up so I put the pot on to boil and slipped into my sweatsuit and boots for the run to the privy.

When I pushed the door open on my return it creaked loud enough to raise Nora. "Hmmm. Whazzat?" She mumbled, running her fingers over her eyes. "You up already, Chet?"

"Yeah," I whispered back. "Go back to sleep if you want. It's early."

"Mmmmo-kay." Her head dropped back to the pillow. "Are you coming back?" She asked with a voice muffled by the blanket.

"Just as soon as I finish my coffee."

"Mmmmo-kay," she repeated.

I downed the last of the mug and splashed water into it. I took off my sweats and boots then slipped under the covers next to her. "Woo! You're cold!" She gasped when I curled up behind her.

"Sorry. I'll warm up fast though. Here, keep my hands out of trouble until they get warmer." I held one of them out and she put it between her palms and rubbed it. She pronounced my hand warm and released it. I eased it under the covers and made myself comfortable. I made sure I didn't make contact with anything unacceptable.

"Chet, you don't have to be so careful not to offend me. I know what's happening and it doesn't bother me at all. In fact, I kind of like it. After all, I caused it so why should you be the one embarrassed? I want you to be comfortable."

I sighed. "Okay, Nora. I guess it is kind of silly for me to feel this way, but I just didn't want you to think badly of me. I mean, within seconds of getting back under the covers I'm rubbing up against your back. What kind of message does that send to you? Not a good one."

"That's Silly! I know it's natural so why should I not want you to be natural. I'm not some delicate flower, Chet. It's true I don't have a lot of experience with men, but I do know what it's all about. Come on, relax." She pushed her hips back at me, pressing me hard against her behind. "There. That's much better isn't it?"

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What was I going to say? That it wasn't right? No way! "I have to admit, Nora, that it does feel a lot better."

"And so does this, to me." She took my hand and brought my arm against her waist, pressing it tightly against her warm skin. My palm was filled with the firmness of a breast. Almost unconsciously I moved my fingers a little in a circular motion. She gave a tiny little moan. "Oh, that feels so good. I've wanted you to do that for so long." I stopped moving and just held her.

Soon, Nora's breathing slowed; I could hear soft exhalations coming from her. She'd fallen asleep again. Probably the best thing for the two of us right now. I mentally kicked myself for being so practical. I knew it was a lame excuse, but all that I had for now. I simply didn't want to scare the crap out of Nora, a self-proclaimed virgin, by coming on so strong the first day after we really declared how we felt for each other. Time *should* pass before we had any serious sex; if for no other reason than to make the first time spectacular for both of us.

We woke again later. How much later I had no idea, but I was hungry. I eased myself out from under the covers. Nora still slept as I quietly put out the fixings for cold cereal but, as I looked at them, I decided that oatmeal would be much better - and warmer. I heated water and added the requisite amount of oats and watched it come to a boil. It almost ran over, but I kept that from happening. Soon, it was ready.

"Nora." I called gently. "Breakfast is ready. Want some oatmeal?"

Her reply was muffled but definitely in the affirmative. "Oh, yeah! I'm hungry enough to eat a goat." A funny choice of words, I thought.

Then I caught on. "A goat, Gracie?" She and I shared a love of old movies. George burns and Gracie Allen were near the top of both our lists.

"Sure; because I'm a little horny." She snickered, waiting for my 'George' reply.

I just laughed and shook my head. "Not me, folks. I plead the fifth."

She laughed also and threw the covers off. Her nightgown was twisted quite a ways and before she stood I got an extremely subliminal view of two shapely legs.

Still laughing, she went behind the curtain and did her morning things. I would wait until after breakfast to do mine. "I'll be right back!" I called and clumped out the door. When I did get back, about three minutes later, she was sitting down at the table and slurping down oatmeal.

"Really tasty. I love oatmeal. It sticks to you almost all day."

"That it does. So, what shall we do today? Some more snowshoeing? We have a week left and even if we don't get more snow it'll be a bear getting out of here. Sorry, bear." I added, nodding to the rug. We can go back along the trail and see just how bad it will be."

"Sounds good to me. Dress really warm?"

"Well, dress with layers so you can take off outer clothes to regulate your heat. We'll pack a lunch also. If we can, I'd like to go all the way back to the gate; that's about four miles. Think you can do that? Remember, that's four there and four back. In deep snow it will probably take us all day but we're in no hurry at all."

"Okey dokey," she chirped. "I'll wash dishes and you can do your morning stuff."

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I slipped behind the curtain with a pan of hot water and brushed my teeth and washed up. I'd decided when I left Boulder to stop shaving. So far, Nora hadn't said anything. Maybe I'd better ask. "Nora? Do you mind if I don't shave?"

"Not at all. I think you look fine with a light beard. More like the heroes in my books that way. All the hunks on television have five-o'clock shadow too."

Well, this was news to me that she liked the look. So, no shaving. That made my morning routine a lot shorter. I emerged dressed for the trip. "Taaaa dahhhh! Ready!"

She snickered. I was wearing a pair of old blue ski pants, the stretchy kind, with a checkered flannel shirt and a denim vest over that. All I needed was a long-tassled knit cap with a big yellow pom-pom on it. I must have looked like some demented ski nut. "What?" I asked.

"You look like some sort of weird guy that hangs around ski lodges." Well, close but no cigar. My face fell. "Still, I bet it's warm."

"It is. Better get ready. I'll be out in the truck gathering up stuff. Are you making sandwiches?" I pointed to the bread slices, bologna, and cheese slices on the plate.

"Yup. Go get your stuff. I'll pack the lunches."

Sounded like a good deal to me. I went out and opened the back of the truck. Our snowshoes were right on top so I tossed them out, followed by two strong hiking staffs. We'd need those to gauge how deep some spots were and to probe for rocks. I debated a moment and then went around to the cab and took out my pistol and belt. Might never need it, but one never could tell; and then you really needed it. Anyway, another rabbit or two would taste good tonight.

While I waited, I reflected on our current situation. Clearly, Nora hadn't completely resolved her conflicts about how far she was going to go vis-À-vis our nascent dip into a sexual relationship. She was comfortable with the two of us doing dates - movies and the like - but still didn't know what to do when confronted with things of a sexual nature; like my erections. Something had to be done to get us off dead-center. I didn't have a clue as to what.

Nora came out, lugging her backpack on and holding out mine. I took it and slung it over my shoulders. I handed her the hiking staff and told her how we'd use it. I added that it also helped to keep her balance in deep snow. We strapped on our shoes and headed back down the road we'd come in last week. It was completely covered by the snow and not a single rut showed. You couldn't tell we were on a road and if you didn't know where it went, you'd wander all over the place.

We slogged along for about fifteen minutes and then took a break on a big rock. Nora was winded so I waited until she was ready again. I knew she'd get her second wind soon. We talked while we made our way down the road.

"Chet. A few days ago I told you how my mother filled me with total crap about what guys think and do. Do you feel comfortable telling me what really goes on? Not the really deep stuff, but just feelings and the like. I really want to know."

I took some time to gather my thoughts. She was giving me an opportunity to really set her straight or at least to my view of the world as a guy. She was a smart girl but she didn't have the real facts concerning men and their desires. Somewhere in the middle was the truth. I started in.

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"Well, Nora. A lot of guys, like your recent washout, think that every girl they meet is some sort of property once they establish even a tiny relationship. They think they can just go ahead and do whatever they want and the girl won't object. That may have been true a hundred years ago, but that just won't cut it today. Did your mother tell you that most guys just wanted to get you into bed?"

She nodded. "She didn't exactly put it that way, but it was implied. She used the phrase 'into your pants'."

"In some limited cases that's probably very true but, and this is important, if the girl that lets him do it she won't be happy at all because the guy will just think that it is appropriate behavior and do it again and again. A lot of guys when faced with someone like you who resist that advance get mad and start tossing off names that I wouldn't call anyone. He called you a 'tease' didn't he?"

She nodded again. "It was a little worse name than that. He put another word in front of it that I won't repeat. But you're close. It really hurt me. I never thought I was doing anything like that."

"Inappropriate behavior, since he was the one who started the whole thing and you didn't want to. Your mother probably also told you that once a guy gets what he wants, he'll just up and leave - disappear. Or worse, tell all his buddies how easy it was to compromise you."

"Yes."

"Once again, she was right, but only with a small part of the male population. Any man who considers telling anyone about his conquests isn't a real man at all and is probably lying anyway. Locker room talk is usually just that; talk - without an ounce of truth to it. But, even then, the word gets out and ruins the reputation of the nice girl who gave in to him in the first place."

We paused at the top of a rise and sat on a log. She smiled ruefully at me while she caught her breath. "Yeah. You must have been talking to my mom. How do you know all that?"

"I was very close to my parents. When I went through puberty they told me I could ask any questions I wanted. Almost as fast as I could think of them they answered them. Everything from why I got erections to the correct way to put on a condom. The whole range of things sexual was explained to me. They were the ones who started me out on the right path. I remember those lessons and never once did I knowingly do anything wrong to a girl or be a cause to her embarrassment."

She took my hand and squeezed it while I continued.

"Over the years, I've had three really steady girlfriends. The first was while I was in Germany at the age of sixteen. We exchanged our virginity in a barn way out in the middle of a field. We were on a photo club trip at the time and it just happened. I don't think that either one of us set out to do that particular thing, but events just came together at the right place and the right time.

"I said we exchanged virginity because that's exactly what happened. One moment we were sitting side by side on bales of hay watching the cows wander by and the next we were nervously removing each other's clothes. To this very day I have no recollection of who actually said anything. We were just suddenly making love." I shook my head. "For the rest of the trip we didn't mention it to anyone. When we got back it was just our secret. We told nobody at all. Her best friend was the girlfriend of my best friend and neither one of them knew." I paused, and then chuckled. "How did I get started on this subject?"

"You were telling me about what some guys do and why you didn't think you would. After that story, and I'm absolutely sure it's true, I know for a fact you wouldn't do anything to harm or embarrass me." She reached

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out and patted my cheek with her gloved hand. "I love you."

'Now', I thought, *'that was a very positive step'*. I took her hand in mine and pulled her towards me. We met in the middle and shared a tender kiss. "I love you too, Nora." I pulled her to her feet. "We'd better get moving again before we stiffen up." She snickered and I suddenly replayed what I'd just said. We both laughed at that.

"Damn! You're fun to be with." I said pushing off up the trail.

We reached the first spot where I thought we might have trouble. It was a small depression that, in the summer, wouldn't bother us at all, but in the winter, when it was filled with around three feet of snow we'd have a hell of a time getting through. "We need to walk beside each other about the width of the tires on my truck. Probe ahead with your staff and check for rocks. If you find one just let me know. I don't think there are many, if any at all, but we have to make sure."

The two of us, holding hands to get the right width, began pushing our way through the bowl. Neither one of us had hit any rocks when we reached the other side. I looked back across the bowl, now nicely marked by our twin trails. "Great. I'm sure we can make it but if we have to winch, there's that tree over there to hook to. I have seventy-five feet of cable on the winch; more than enough."

"It's quite a climb back out of the bowl though, Chet. Will that be hard?"

"No, not really if I can get up a little speed. We might have to back down to the bottom and hit it again but I'm sure we can make it. Let's rest up near that tree. Okay?" I jammed the sharp end of a broken branch vertically in the snow to mark the side of the road.

"Sure." We pushed onwards and arrived at the tree, set our packs down and stretched. "Chet. What about the second girl. What was she like?"

"She was a really quiet type. She liked to hang around libraries and museums and places like that. We were both seniors in high school. Kind of aimless and looking for things to do. We went out a few times; got serious enough to call it dating, but one day shortly after we graduated she told me she was leaving. Just like that she moved out of town. I didn't see anyone else in what you'd call steady for almost a year."

"And the third?"

"Angie was special. She was always popular with the rest of the guys. Always flirting and touching. I knew she would probably break my heart but I couldn't leave her alone. I was in my sophomore year at college and my grades fell a little while I pursued her. She would be full of fun one day and moody the next. With no warning at all she up and got engaged to some jock. She was only my second involvement with sex. It hurt very much when she told tales about me; mostly untrue."

Nora moved closer to me and put her arm around my waist. She didn't do anything else while we just sat there.

"You know," she said. "You and I are very much alike I think. We've both been treated unfairly haven't we?"

"Perhaps. I do know that I'll keep trying though. Of all my many friends," I chuckled. "You are the only one I've ever told those stories to. My male friends would laugh at my inexperience and most girls I know wouldn't understand what I went through. Somehow, I think you're different, Nora."

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She kissed me deeply and with passion. "I hope so. You are still the most confident man I've known, but behind it all is just a guy who needs some loving. You're too nice a guy to force yourself on anyone and maybe that's what attracted me to you."

We looked at each other for a long moment and then, almost simultaneously, stood and reached for our packs. I glanced up at the sun. "We'd better get going again or we won't make the gate by lunch."

We were just a little bit late getting to the gate. Another area that we might have trouble getting through was a traverse across a small valley covered with several deep drifts of snow. I figured that we might be able to skirt the upper edge and stay right up tight against the trees and miss the worst of them. If we dropped down too far we'd end up with no place to winch from. We'd check further on the way back.

Nora found a nice warm flat-topped rock about the size of a car we could use as a lunch table. We simply hopped up on it and spread out all the fixings. As we munched our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches we talked some more. Her mother hadn't done Nora much good with the frank talks about sex that she gave. She'd only provided her daughter with horror stories about all the damage guys could do to a girl's reputation or her body; not the good things that could come of a relationship.

She also confided that except for one brief glimpse of her erstwhile partner's penis, she'd never seen one before; or since. My initial response was to joke about it and say something about being ready to remedy that, but I'd held back. Nora said she had lots of questions that needed answering and her female friends were either unwilling, or unable, to answer them. When I asked why, she told me that they just laughed and didn't take her seriously.

She also admitted that one of her friends even tried to explain how to masturbate a guy, but she'd gotten so embarrassed that she had to leave the room. "I'm a real mess, Chet. I don't know the first thing about men and what it takes to please them."

"Unfortunately, mostly every guy is different. What one guy wants may be totally different from another. You already know one example. This partner of yours was interested in these classes just to get to you, right?"

"Well, mostly, I guess."

"Then, there's this Singh guy. He wants to just teach and let you and your partner make the decisions as to what pleases. Then there is me. What pleases you pleases me. I'm here for you to help in any way I can. I have no real agenda at all. None of the 'I must do this, then do this, then do that'. To my way of thinking, that's the only way to go because it puts the woman, you, at ease; or, at least it should. More importantly, you call the shots."

"That would be wonderful, Chet. I have a lot to learn, but I wouldn't like to have something forced on me. I want it to be an almost mutual thing between me and my partner; in every sense of that word."

I took her hand and held it, getting my fingers sticky with jam in the process. "When you're ready, I'm here, Nora."

We both giggled when I finally noticed my fingers were stuck together. "I guess I'm really stuck with you," I quipped. She groaned.

Our half-hour for lunch was up so we cleaned up our rock and repacked our knapsacks for the trip back to the cabin. We retraced our path and spent a little time remapping a slightly different route up near the trees. I even managed to kick down a couple of deeper drifts into the valleys between them. Nora found a rock which

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required moving and it took the two of us ten minutes to shift it out of our projected route.

The two of us pushed onwards, traversing the first snow-filled bowl with ease, repacking the twin trails we'd made for the tires on the truck. By the time we got back, the sun was almost behind the mountain and it was getting cold again. "Will it be really cold tonight, Chet?"

"Not sure. Might be as low as fifteen or so. I'd better shift some more logs over next to the trap door. You go on inside and perk up the fire. Okay?"

"Okay. Want me to set out something for dinner also?"

"Sure, whatever you want. There even might be a nice canned ham somewhere in that box."

"Great! I love grilled ham slices and eggs. I'd better go easy on the eggs though because we only have two eighteen-packs left. At the rate we've been snarfing them down, they'll go fast."

"Yeah. Hang on. Sit down on the porch and let me get that snow packed around your boot top out."

She sat and held out her foot. I knelt and began untying the boot and snapping bits of frozen slush off the bottom cuff of her pants. When both boots were done, she stood and disappeared inside. I went around to the back of the cabin and refilled our wood grab area near the door. Once that was done, I used the privy and then went inside to wash up.

Nora was flitting about gathering up clothing and stuffing it into a string bag. "Did you put more wood where we could reach it?" She asked.

My quick mouth almost got me into trouble again, but I kept quiet with an effort. "Yup. It looks as if we might not have to chop up more. What's left might just last us. No, cancel that. We'll have to chop up some more before we leave. I'd never leave Dave with an empty wood bin. That's just not neighborly." I popped my back. "Ooh! That felt good. For some reason my back is really hurting."

Nora smiled at me. "Want me to rub it after dinner? I give a mean massage. I even have some oil to soothe the savage beast." She snickered.

I laughed back. "Sure. That would be great. Doesn't your back hurt too? Sometimes snowshoes can do that. Especially the hips and upper thighs."

"My upper thighs are just fine. I didn't walk around as much as you did. Mostly, I just followed your trail except where we made that road. Won't that get filled in by the snow when the wind blows?"

"Maybe. I don't think we'll have much wind for a while. What'll we have for dinner?"

She poked around in the food box for a while and came up with the can of ham. "This?" She held it up.

I was always up for ham and eggs. It was a great combination. Lots of thickly sliced ham and three scrambled eggs. "Sure. Let me get washed up." I stripped off my shirt and poured a bit of hot water into a basin.

While I was washing, I felt Nora's hands lay flat against my back and begin to knead. The tension of the afternoon began to ease a lot. "Mmmm. That feels good. Thank you." She stopped, giving me a last pat on my spine.

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"Later. I'll do a better job. The legs of your jeans are wet. Get out of them and I'll put them by the fire."

"Yes, ma'am." I ducked behind the curtain and pulled them off. I figured I might as well just get into my night stuff and put on a robe. I tossed my jeans out to her and towed down my legs, then put on my sleeping shorts; the soft flannel ones I liked so much. Wrapped in my robe, I came out and helped Nora fix dinner.

The skillet was heating up so I told her to go change also. She nodded and slipped behind the curtain. There were interesting sounds of zipping, snapping, and sliding cloth coming from behind the divider. In my mind's eye I pictured her standing there in the altogether. A dangerous series of thoughts to be sure. Soon, she re-entered the room dressed in what I would have called a Mother Hubbard.

It was a sort of high-collared nightgown, but made of something like layers of cheesecloth. You couldn't see through it, but it made you think you could. She looked very desirable and I said so.

"Yum. You look good. I like you with your hair down." I did, too. When she wore it up she looked somehow tougher than normal. When she let it fall, she looked more feminine.

She dimpled when she smiled. "Thank you. Is the meal ready?"

I peered into the pan. "I think so. At least it's sizzling mightily. Grab a couple of plates and I'll get the loaf of bread and the butter.

"Okay." She did.

We sat down facing one another, like usual, but instead of diving into our food, we just looked at each other. She was the first to speak. "What?"

I looked away, and then looked back. "Nothing, Nora. I just suddenly saw you in a different light. You seemed a bit softer, somehow. Like you were slightly out of focus."

She smiled. "You need to have your eyes checked then."

"No. Not physically, but sort of a glow about you. Like I'd never really seen you before. Very becoming."

Nora dimpled again. "Thank you, Chet. Now eat; you need your strength." She didn't elaborate on that and I didn't ask.

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We finished eating, stacked the dishes, made a couple mugs of tea and stretched out on bear, as we'd come to call the rug. The fire was warm and made us a bit drowsy. We took turns telling each other what we saw in the fire. She pointed out a little alcove under a log that didn't appear to have any fire in it at all. She seemed saddened when it suddenly burst into flame. "Oh, that was so pretty."

"There's another one forming over there," I pointed out. "See, just across that big log."

She looked. "Yeah, I see that one. Those coals are really hot aren't they?"

"Definitely. If we had some bigger marshmallows we could roast them. But we don't. All we have are those tiny ones for the cocoa."

"Phooy! I like marshmallows over a fire. I should have remembered to buy some." Nora reminisced.

"Yeah. They're really strange aren't they? I mean, all they are is just puffed up bits of sugar but they taste so good. I really like them on cocoa."

"Me too! My mom used to float one big one on top of my cocoa and I'd let it melt until it was ready to drink. You always bent over and slurped up the marshmallow first; that was the rule in our house."

We talked back and forth for a few minutes. Neither one of us wanting to really think about what direction we'd been going in before. I sensed that Nora still wasn't ready for me to make any overt moves. That was fine; I had a while to go yet. I admitted to myself that things could get a bit frustrating for me, but nothing I couldn't deal with.

Nora stood, gathered up our mugs, and put them into the tin washbasin. I added some hot water and a few squirts of liquid soap. I washed and she rinsed and dried. It was quite a domestic scene. I laughed. "Now, all we have to do is put the kids to bed and we'll have some time to ourselves."

Nora looked up at me sharply and a grin creased her lips. "Yeah. I'll get my knitting and you watch some television." She laughed with me. "Seriously, Chet. Do you want me to do some work on your back? I have some oil with just a bit of wintergreen in it. Not much, but it does help sore muscles. How about it?"

I mulled that one over a bit. "Sure. If you don't mind. That would feel great. Where do you want to do it?"

She pointed to bear. "Over there. Lie flat on your stomach and let me get the stuff." I went to the designated spot, took off my robe, and lay down flat. I heard her digging around in her bag muttering to herself. She finally came out holding a small bottle with a light green liquid in it.

When she pulled a rubber glove on, I had to ask. "Um, is that stuff toxic or anything?"

"No, silly. It's to keep the wintergreen from getting on my hands. Normally that doesn't hurt at all, but if I touch anything else it can sting."

What she didn't say was that if she didn't use the glove and touched me elsewhere I could end up dragging myself around in the snow naked to stop the burn. Or, at least that's what I *hoped* she meant.

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She knelt astride my hips, dropped just a little lotion onto my back, and began rubbing it in. Her fingers moved in unison on each side of my spine. When she reached about halfway up, she replenished the lotion and continued. She reached my shoulders and rubbed outwards and down as much of my arms as she could reach. It felt wonderful. I could already feel the tension leaving the muscles in the small of my back.

"How about your legs? Want some down there too?"

"Mmmm huh." I replied.

She took that as a yes; then turned around and rubbed just a tiny amount on the backs of my thighs and downwards past my knees. She lifted one leg at a time from the knee and massaged all along my calves. She certainly was thorough. By the time she reached the second thigh I knew I was in trouble. I was reacting and it appeared to be unstoppable this time. I lifted my hips high enough to let it move upwards before it got really unruly.

"Whoa! Did I hurt you?"

"Nope. Just got a little cramp. You're doing fine."

She said nothing right away but that silence lasted for about thirty seconds. "Chet. Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"Absolutely not, Nora." I had to be honest though so I added "I'm just reacting a little to the massage."

"Oh." That's all she said, but the single word conveyed volumes. Her fingers slowed and finally stopped. Her warm fanny, which was the reason for my tumescence, rose up and she knelt beside me. "I can do your arms better if you're on your back. Do you want to turn over?"

I debated that question for ten seconds. "Hop off for a sec and let me turn over." She did and I gathered my robe around me as I turned. Meanwhile, she had moved around to kneel by my shoulder. She reached out and took hold of my arm.

She began kneading the upper muscles and across my shoulders. This time she didn't use any wintergreen oil, but only her fingers. She'd taken off her rubber gloves. She began quietly humming to herself as she continued stretching her fingers down my arm and around my wrist.

Nora sidled around my head and continued her massage on my other side. Across my chest, down my shoulders and upper arms, and then back to the wrists. She was an expert at it I realized. "You're very good, Nora. Is this something that Singh taught you?"

"Actually, it was Saree. She took the class one evening and showed all the girls how to do massage on their partners. The next session, Singh taught the boys how to return the favor."

"Is wintergreen part of it?"

"No. I just thought that that it would penetrate a little better to those sore muscles. Was I right?"

"Oh, definitely! I'm limp as a noodle right now; except for â | uh â | you know."

She tittered. "Yeah. I can see that. Saree didn't say anything about that, but happened to every one of the guys when their partners did the massage. That was the last night I went with that guy. We broke up after that."

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"Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean to bring that up. Say! Could you guide me on how to give a return massage to you?" Oh, that was about as subtle as a whack on her forehead with a two-by-four.

"Absolutely! I even have a little fragrant oil to use. It smells kind of like fresh flowers. Saree gave it to me." She patted the center of my chest. "There. All done." Then, almost as an afterthought, she pulled my robe closed and slid her hand down to smooth it out, until she hit the bump - and stopped dead. Red-faced, she gasped out to me. "Oh no! I'm sorry Chet. I have no idea why I did that. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to â um â do thatâ!" She jumped up and ran behind the curtain.

"Don't give it a thought, Nora." I said to her departing back.

I stretched upwards, limbering up the joints she'd freed. When I arched my back, one last vertebra popped. It sounded like a stick breaking. I sat up and reached for my robe belt as I came to my feet. A good cup of tea might be just the thing right now. I took some hot water from the kettle by the fire, dropped in a tea bag, and swirled it around with a spoon. She must have heard me.

"Can I have a cup of tea too, please?" She asked in a small voice.

"Sure, Nora. Apple Spice or Green?"

"I don't care. Whatever you reach first."

"Green tea it is then. Come on out and fix it the way you like it."

She snuffled, and then blew her nose. "Okay." She came back to the table, eyes downcast, and sat, looking down at her hands on the table. I put a mug in front of her, added the tea bag, and poured hot water over it. When I pushed the sugar towards her she looked up. Her eyes were a bit red. "I'm sorry, Chet. I don't know what came over me. I feel so embarrassed. Maybe it's true what â what that awful guy called me. Maybe I am a ... a ... that horrible name..."

"No!" I slapped the table in front of her, making her jump. "I don't want to hear that word again. It's demeaning and certainly not true. My reaction was to the wonderful massage you gave me. There was nothing sexual about it really. I was showing great pleasure, that's all. Every part of my body feels good and it was just a reaction to that feeling. If you'll tell me what to do I would very much like to give you the treatment Singh taught the guys. If you allow me to give you that massage, the very same thing is likely to happen. It's an involuntary reaction, Nora; a very, no, *highly* pleasurable physical reaction for me - for any guy. Please don't feel badly about it."

She looked up and I put my fingers under her chin. A wan smile appeared and her eyes searched back and forth between mine. She sniffed again but smiled even more. With a finger, I wiped away a tear that had formed on her cheek. She took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay. I guess that's just another one of my mother's distorted facts she fed me. She told me that guys only get that way so they can do bad things to girls. And, if I ever saw one that way to run away. Pretty silly, huh?"

That woman really had poisoned Nora's mind. No wonder she was so messed up. "No. Not silly. It's a very real fear. Given the right, or, rather the wrong, circumstances it could happen just like that. I can guarantee that it won't here tonight - or any other night. Sure, I'll get erections; I get them quite often. You knew I had one the other morning. They even happen while I'm asleep. It's part of life, Nora. I'd be worried if I didn't get any. Think about that. How would that make you feel if I didn't react that way around you? Nora, I love you. If you and I hang around each other you're going to see more of them. Now, what about that massage?"

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Nora smiled over the table at me and took my hands in hers. She pulled them up and touched her lips to the knuckles of each hand. "Thank you, Chet. That helps me understand much better now. And, yes, I think I would be unhappy if I couldn't make that happen; but only from you. Maybe that's the distinction my mother never made. That on the right guy, an erection is a good thing." She puffed her cheeks and blew. "I do feel better now. I'd like that massage very much if you're still offering."

"I am."

"I'll get you the oil." She said as she got up, went behind the curtain, and returned with an unmarked bottle of amber liquid. She took the top off and passed it under my nose. It did indeed smell like flowers in summer. She asked me to put it in warm water for a minute or two while she got ready. She rustled around a bit and then came out dressed in nothing but a rather thin shimmering robe. I idly wondered where she had put all those clothes she kept changing into.

"Okay. I need to sit down and assume my resting position before we start. It helps to prepare me for what's to follow. You just kneel behind me for the time being."

I nodded and knelt at right angles to the fire. She pulled off her robe and sat down facing away from me. All she was wearing was a translucent pair of nylon panties. She curled her legs up and hooked her ankles on top of her thighs. With her arms down at her side, she took in a deep breath and let it out several times before slowly pulling her arms inwards and down to rest on her thighs.

"There. Let me compose myself a little and we can begin. While I'm doing that, you can rub your hands with oil and put them at the top of my shoulders."

I did as she asked, putting a couple of drops of oil in my palm and rubbing them briskly together. Carefully, I reached out and lowered my hands to the curve of her shoulders and stopped.

Nora's back straightened and I heard the light popping of vertebra as she stretched upwards. She began.

"Now, just gently run your palms up towards my neck, lift when you reach it, and start again at my shoulders. You can cover the front as well as the back of my shoulders while you do this."

Pleasing her was my one goal at the moment so I started rubbing her as she asked. It was so sensuous that my mind drifted a little as I stroked. She held her posture rigid, but not stiffly so - enough to maintain her even breathing as I stroked her skin.

The instant I touched her, I began to react. There was no point in even trying to stop it at all. I glanced down and saw the front of my shorts rising in time with the pulsing of blood that was causing it. I maintained a steady stroke on Nora's shoulders while this was happening.

"You can begin to move towards the top of my spine now if you wish. Put your thumbs on either side of it and press downwards towards the base. Your fingers can be spread if that's easier for you. You can also add more oil."

I stopped momentarily and put some more into my palms and then began stroking my fingers down her spine. A small groan escaped her as I started downwards, pressing with my thumbs and feeling each individual bump of vertebrae.

"Oh, I never knew how nice this would feel. I've never had this done to me - only described. It's a bit hard to describe, other than very sensual"

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"I can agree with that, Nora. It is highly sensual. May I move a little closer? Is it allowed?"

"Definitely. Not only is it allowed, it is required later on because I lay back into your lap so you can massage my center."

I knew of previous experience that her center was just south of her breasts; pretty much the same area as my center. I also knew that when she leaned back the very first thing she would encounter was my hardness. I hope she understood what I'd told her earlier because if she hadn't, then she'd break off the massage immediately.

"Move a bit closer now so you can reach my sides." I did so and started pressing my palms outward from her spine and around the curve of her ribs. She giggled. "Careful! I'm a bit ticklish and as long as you just press and slide you're fine. No fingertips though."

We continued wordlessly for about five minutes as I worked my way down her spine and back up. I felt her muscles relax a little and she began to lean back towards me. "Are you coming back now?" I asked.

"Yes. Run your hands over the tops of my shoulders and then down each arm to my elbows. Use more oil if you need it." I did, as my hands were drying out a little.

Now we got to the sticky part. She was almost lying flat against my lower thighs and in just a few more seconds would feel it. It was a turning point for sure.

She moved imperceptibly backwards until her lower back began pressing against me. She stopped moving. "Chet, is that you I'm against?"

"Yes." I said simply.

"Good. I was hoping this would happen. Saree said she'd never had this massage fail to cause that reaction in a partner. She told the truth, it seems you're normal." She smiled upside down at me.

"God! I hope so. Where do we go from here?"

"All you have to do now is keep up with the massage but now you run your hands down my sides and always keep pulling your fingers towards my center which is right here." She poked a spot about equidistant between her breasts and navel. "Since the breasts in a female are part of the exercise, you should pass over them too. Is that going to bother you? I mean, more than it already has?"

"Nora, I have to say this: I've wanted to touch your breasts for a very long time. I told myself I wouldn't do it until you gave your permission; and now you have. I thank you from the bottom of my heart." I commenced the second part of the massage.

She closed her eyes and composed herself by wiggling backwards a little; settling down against me; pressing me into a comfortable place beside her spine. She showed a small smile as she did it which faded into tranquility as I started moving my palms and fingers.

It was time for a new application of oil so I added some more to my palms and began where I should. I started at her shoulders, but this time I moved the heel of my hands inward until I was riding up the outside swell of each breast. I paused, then moved over them; engulfing them with my hands but not stopping. I continued inwards and rested my fingers against her breastbone.

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I lifted both my hands and performed the same action several times, never pausing as I slid over her breasts. I noticed her aureoles wrinkling and her nipples hardening as I stroked. My extended fingers pressed gently against her ribs as I passed downwards over them until I reached the top elastic of her underwear. My movement along her body caused more moans and a definite increase in her rate of breathing.

The next time I cycled downwards and touched her stomach, it jumped under my fingers. She giggled and it jumped again. "Your center must really be accepting my strokes, Nora." I said with a smile.

Her eyes popped open and she looked up at me again. "Yeah. That's for sure. You've stirred up a lot of emotions. I can't believe how, um, strange I feel."

"Aroused? Is that how you feel?"

"If this is being aroused, then I'm all for it. I know what I read on those trashy novels but this is real; happening right now. I feel all mushy inside and my skin is tingling like it's stretched tight. I feel like it's going to split wide open."

While she said that, I ran another complete cycle of stroking across her chest, down her ribs, and across her stomach to end at her center. Her stomach muscles quivered again.

I made a decision. I was going to see just how far her arousal extended. With deliberate slowness, I started again at her shoulders and ran down her rib cage but this time I didn't stop at the elastic. Instead, I slid under it about two inches and pressed downwards with my fingertips. Without pausing, I moved across until both hands came together; then I pulled them upwards towards her navel.

"Oh!" She said, following it with a deep groan; lifting her hips slightly causing my fingers to press much harder than I intended. "Oh." She repeated and took a deep breath. "Press there again, Chet. Please!"

Without hesitation, I started again at her shoulders and ran the whole cycle through, including my fingers under the elastic. I was on my fourth repetition when her hands, which had been resting on her ankles the whole time now, flew outward, and grasped my wrists, preventing movement. She took a deep breath, held it, and then pushed my fingers further downwards.

"Press here, please. Press here!" She pushed down with her hands again.

"Nora," I said softly. "Is this part of the exercise?"

She answered just as softly. "I don't know, Chet." She added dreamily, "But, if it isn't then it should be. Oh, don't stop doing that."

I was making small, light circles with my forefingers. I could feel her stomach muscles twitch and quiver. Suddenly, Nora shouted "AH!" and her whole body went rigid. She was having an orgasm. I eased my fingers around the same path very carefully and each time I did she gasped again. Sensing that this was providing great pleasure to her, I was determined to continue as long as she wanted me to.

"Oh, Chet! Ohhhh â AH!" Another spasm; by my count this was her third in as many minutes. She began gasping for air; opening her mouth soundlessly then taking in a huge breath only to let it out between tightly compressed lips. Her eyes were closed securely as she gave way to her inner feelings. After two more spasms, she began to go slack in my arms.

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Her arms fell away from mine, lying along her thighs limply. She finally opened her eyes but I couldn't make out how she felt because they seemed out of focus. This was a completely different Nora. I'd never seen her look like this before. She appeared, for lack of a better word, soft; radiant, maybe.

"Oh, Chet! What happened? I remember you rubbing me and then â€¦ nothing until I looked up and there you were. Did I black out?"

"No, Nora. I suspect you've just had your very first orgasm."

"An â€¦ orgasm?"

"Yes. It isn't shameful by any stretch of the word. You simply succumbed to something that should have happened many years ago instead of being repressed until this moment. I simply helped you out of your shell. Forgive me for being so direct, but I think you were actually asking me to do this weren't you?"

She looked at me steadily for perhaps a whole minute; eyes tracking from one of my eyes to the other. I could see thoughts running through her head, banging into one another, at the speed of thought.

She answered by reaching up, clasping her hands around my neck and pulling me down to her lips. We kissed, deeply, for quite a while. We hung there, upside down to each other, kissing all over each other's faces.

"Mmmm. Mmmm. Mmmm" Nora repeated, kissing me deeply with each sound. "You are the greatest person in my life, Chet. I hope you know that."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

"I need to clean up, I think." She giggled giddily. "I feel so happy right now. I wonder why that is?"

"Euphoria, perhaps?"

"Maybe." She got to her knees and then rose to her feet. She smiled back at me, and then her face fell as she looked down. This alarmed me until I looked down also. I had a large wet spot on the front of my shorts. I had done the same as she and I was so intent on pleasing her that I didn't even notice it.

"Is that from the oil?" She asked tentatively.

"No, Nora. It came from me. It's that nasty old stuff that makes a girl pregnant that your mother probably warned you about." I said gently. "When you had your climax, so did I it seems." I pushed at my shorts. "See; all gone now. It goes away after I have an orgasm. You're safe now." I laughed lightly. "Go clean up."

"Um, for how long? Am I safe, that is? I mean, how long before you â€¦ um â€¦ that happens again? Will it happen again?"

"I certainly hope so. In twenty minutes maybe. But that's something we won't worry about now. You, and I, for that matter, have had quite enough for one night I think. We have all the time in the world. Hey! Isn't that a song from a movie?"

She smiled back at me. "Yes, it is." She went behind the curtain humming that song we both remembered from one of our movie dates.

Nora came out, dressed in her night clothes, and lay down on bear. She reached up, pulled me down over her and we kissed again. "Thank you again, Chet. I'm still tingly all over." She murmured in my ear. "Things are

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definitely better for me now I think. I'm still on a high but I'm so sleepy I could fall asleep right now. Do you mind?"

"Mind? No way, Nora. You just go ahead and get comfortable. I'm going to clean up a bit myself. I'll be back in a jiffy - well, actually in my robe." She snickered as I stood and went behind the curtain myself. Definitely new shorts were in order. The old ones went into my washing bag. I donned another pair of shorts and went to join Nora.

She had indeed fallen asleep and, even though I rattled the fire grate a bit and added two new logs, she never woke up. She did have a very satisfied smile on her face though; and rightfully so. I lay down beside her, hip to hip, drew the quilt over us, and fell asleep in seconds.

Chapter 17: Snowbound! - Chapter 17

Nora was up and hopping around the kitchen like some little chickadee searching for grain. She was trying to be quiet, but every once in a while she would make a noise and pause, waiting to see if I woke up. I am very good at faking being asleep so she never knew she was under observation.

I heard the burbling of water boiling and the clink of a spoon in the mug as she added sugar to her tea. I'd never really drunk much tea, but on this trip I'd hardly touched coffee at all. My favorite was the blackberry tea with its deep berry flavor and aroma.

She slipped behind the curtain and rustled about until she emerged again with her small Yoga booklet; the one with the instructive pictures. I heard the pages turn until she reached the back of the book. She was holding the book to the window, looking at the pictures. This was a good sign, I thought.

I sneezed. Nora jumped about a foot. "Oh! Give me some warning next time, Chet!"

"Sorry. I don't know when it will happen. Sometimes it surprises even me. I just explode."

"That you do - well. How did you sleep?"

"I slept better last night than I've slept in a long time. I must have really been relaxed."

Nora reddened a little at that. "Well, I slept just fine also. Are we doing anything today, or just hanging around here?"

I gave it some thought. "Dunno. Did you want to go anywhere?"

"Could we just go out in the snow and poke around? No specific destination, just ambling? I'd like to see the rest of this little canyon."

That sounded good to me. "Okay. There is a one place you might like. I was up there a couple of days ago. It's a kind of cave or undercut cliff where deer like to sleep. It faces south so the sun will get in there nice and early. It should be warm all day. Then, we can go further up the hillside to an old mine. We can't go in though - it's very unsafe and liable to collapse on us."

"Oh, goodie!" She clapped her hands. "I'll make us another lunch. How about sliced ham and mustard?"

"Excellent. Make the bread slices nice and thick too. How is the bread holding up by the way?"

She went over and poked several of the loaves. "They seem still soft. Only one had been open at a time so they won't get dried out. This lunch should finish the open loaf."

"Good. You get started and I'll get washed up and help." I got out of the blankets, quickly facing away from her, and went behind the curtain to wash up. I warmed up while I shaved. Dressed in my jeans and a checkered flannel shirt I was ready for a new day. I came up behind Nora and put my arms around her middle.

I started to nuzzle her neck, but she giggled and tucked her chin down. I kissed the back of her head instead. She turned around and kissed me back, right on the lips. I tasted ham. "You've been nibbling, haven't you?"

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She grinned guiltily. "Yeah. Want some?" She held out a nice chunk of ham on the tip of the knife. I took it in my teeth and chomped it down.

"Tasty. I'm already looking forward to lunch."

"You haven't even had breakfast yet and you're thinking about lunch?"

"Yeah. I'm a growing guy." I ambled over to the small cabinet and pulled down a bowl, dumped cereal into it, and added some milk. I spooned in a little more sugar than normal for that quick burst of energy. In five minutes, it was gone and I'd washed the dish.

We dressed warmly, put on our boots, and made a last check of the fire. It was banked well so we shut the door and made our way across the clearing to the little logging trail up the side of the canyon. We didn't bring our snowshoes this time because we weren't in a real hurry. Plus, the snow level had dropped a little since the storm. Most snow up here will either evaporate in the dry air, or crust over with a little moisture if left alone.

Nora called a halt first, sitting down on a log. "Whew! That's hard work going uphill that steeply. Will it level off?"

"In just about another quarter mile it will. We're almost there. If we go slowly, we might see some more deer."

"Really? I wish I'd brought my camera."

"We can go out tomorrow and stalk deer if you want. It's fun to see how close you can get to them. I once got close enough to a cow elk that I could touch it with a stick. She didn't even know I was there."

"Very cool!"

As soon as we went over a little rise, it was evident that we would see some deer. I pointed out some tracks in the snow heading towards the meadow. Nora whispered to me about the wind and I was surprised she even knew enough to ask about it. "It's coming right into our faces, so they can't smell us." I whispered back.

We crept over the hill and spotted several deer lying in the grass under the cliff face. Nora reached over and grabbed my hand and squeezed, signifying she'd seen them also. We froze in place, just watching them. There appeared to be five does and two bucks; one of which had a terrific rack. I counted seven points. The other buck was little - he had only two points so me must have been pretty juvenile, perhaps even the old buck's offspring.

The tableau ended when a nearby squirrel started chattering and throwing pine cones at us. The deer jumped up, milled around for a few seconds, and then went bounding away down the hillside. Stupid squirrel!

Nora picked up a rock and chucked it at the tree the animal was in. He quieted down for a moment and then started scolding us again. He quit when we went further up into the meadow and sat down under the overhanging lip of the rock formation.

"The grass is still warm where they were lying. Feel that?" She put her palm flat on the ground where the grass was flattened.

I did the same and nodded. "Yup. They were just resting though, not spending the night. It's too exposed for them here at night. Mostly, they look for fallen trees to hide behind.

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"Well, I think it's amazing all the outdoors stuff you know." She looked around. "I'd love to come up here in the summer and just go hiking. I bet it's really beautiful."

I nodded. "Sure is. There's a nice deep hole in the stream where we go swimming too. It's just a little further upstream from where you panned for gold."

"I'd like that. Do you suppose your friend would let us come up here?"

"Dave? Sure, his whole family is pretty decent. I come up with Dave and we stock the wood for winter; but we don't do that until around September though. The best time to come up here is in May or Early June. Until then, you can't get in here because of the snow."

"Really? Even deeper than this now?"

"Oh, yeah. We hiked in here one year on snowshoes and found the depth to be around four feet. Good thing we did too because the roof of the cabin was really loaded with snow. We pushed it off."

"Wow! That's pretty deep." She unzipped her coat and opened the top button of her shirt. "Boy! The sun really heats you up right next to all this rock."

"That's because the rock is very light granite. It reflects the sun's rays back down to you. If you aren't careful, it can burn you."

"Well, I don't care. It feels great." She opened another button. This one revealed she was not wearing a bra because I could see the swell of her breasts. She caught me looking and flushed; but she didn't cover up. That was another good sign.

"Chet? Are you checking me out?" She asked - again.

I laughed at the way she said it. Prior to this trip I bet she never thought of anyone 'checking her out'. "Guilty as charged, your honor. I was indeed."

"If you're going to do that, you might as well do a good job of it." She unbuttoned the rest of the shirt and pulled it open to the warmth of the sun. "There! Now I can get a good tan and you can get a good look." She giggled and looked around the clearing. "Ooh, I feel so naughty!"

"I can't let that go unchallenged, Nora." I unzipped my coat and unbuttoned my shirt also. Actually, the sun did feel pretty good. It was quite warm, especially with no wind to cool things off.

"Yeah, but you don't have these bumpy bits do you?" She put her hands under her breasts and pushed them up from below.

"No, I don't. Your bumpy bits look just fine to me, Nora. Very pert."

"Pert? You have got to stop reading those trashy novels, Chet." She laughed. "Pert!" She laughed again and I joined in.

We set out our lunch and had it right there in front of the cliff. I was fascinated by the movement of her breasts as she twisted about getting things out of her pack. They were hypnotizing me almost. They definitely weren't pendulous at all. For lack of a better word, they were 'active'. Our lunch finished, Nora wrapped up the paper we had around the sandwiches and stuffed it into her bag. She shivered. "It's a bit colder now. See?" She

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pointed to her chest.

Her breasts had come to a fine point. She was indeed cold. Lest I make some stupid remark, I just smiled at her and pulled the front of her shirt together. She buttoned it; smiling back at me. "If you had told me I'd be doing this even two weeks ago, I would have called you a liar. For some reason, it just felt right to me this time. Normally, I would have been embarrassed to tears but having you looking at me didn't bother me at all." She chuckled. "I bet you didn't mind either, Chet."

"*Moi?*" I protested, pointing a finger at my chest.

She smiled and nodded at my protest; now forgotten as she rose to stand before me. I held out my hand and she pulled me upright also. Both of us buttoned up and closed our coats in anticipation of the cooling wind. "Come on; let's go back to the cabin. I'm getting a bit cold for some reason."

"Okay. Do you want to lead the way back?"

"Sure. I know the way." She started off down the trail. I followed.

The trip back was uneventful except for when we were sitting on a log resting for a moment. We were surrounded by total silence but for our own breathing and I was sure I'd heard a shot. It had no echoes, so it was probably an echo in itself. It sounded a long way off. When I remarked to Nora about it, she said she hadn't heard anything. Sometimes the surrounding mountains channeled sounds from a great distance down the canyons. The shot, if that was what it was, could have been miles away.

We trudged up to the cabin and Nora went in. I stayed outside, used the privy, and started the truck for a bit. While I waited for it to warm up, I flicked on the CB radio. Except for the trucking channel, I heard nothing but static breaking the squelch. Even the trucks were fading in and out as they ran up and over the pass into Denver.

Just as I was about to turn it off, I heard a faint station calling. The voice was still somewhat garbled from distance, but I did make out that he was in conversation with a ranger station. I listened for several minutes and then heard the voice again. It was ranger Dan talking to a couple of others.

I knew that weather conditions could affect short-range communications in strange ways. Ranger Dan could be miles away, or in the next valley. No way to tell. He did state fairly clearly that he had sighted the target and was pursuing. Could he be chasing that game thief he mentioned?

The radio went silent again so I turned it off and shut down the motor. Nora had heated up water and was in the act of putting tea bags in the mugs as I entered. "Nora? Remember the phrase I gave you to tell me if you were being held here in the cabin by anyone?"

"Yeah." She looked wary. "Why?"

"I just heard Ranger Dan on my CB talking to someone else around here. He said he had spotted the 'target' and was chasing him - or her. Remember that poacher he told us about? Well, maybe that's who he was referring to."

"How does that affect us?"

"If this guy comes over this way and somehow catches us here in the cabin or, more importantly, catches you here by yourself, then I need to know that. The best way I can see is the phrase I told you about. Do you have

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any better one?"

Nora thought about it for a moment. "I like it better if I just say 'well, come on in' or something like that, but I don't add your name. So, if I say 'well, come on in, Chet' then all is fine. If I don't give your name, then be really careful."

"That sounds even better to me. When you hear me shout, get whomever it is to turn and look out the window. I want him to see me as I pass the cabin for the privy. No matter what I say, be ready to take some sort of action because I'm going to sneak around back and peek through the wood door by the fireplace. The best thing you can do is drop straight down or jump over to that side of the cabin." I indicated the side that the door swung open against. "You'll be protected somewhat by the heavy door."

She looked a bit scared, but nodded. "O-okay. I can do that. What are you going to do?"

"Best you don't know that or you'll give it away. I really don't think anything will come of it, but it is always best to be prepared."

She came over and hugged me. I kissed her forehead and smiled at her. "Hey. I didn't mean to frighten you. We'll be just fine. Sit down and have your tea."

We settled down into our evening routine. Nora pulled out a book and read it while sipping her tea. I just sat there and watched her. Her whole demeanor seemed to have changed. She was somehow different, yet the same. Very hard to explain even to myself. We had broken ground between the two of us that I hoped would lead to something much more intimate.

She stretched, exhaled, and closed her book. "Chet?"

"Hmmm?"

"Could I do to you what you did for me last night?"

My head came up and I stared at her. "Like what?" I asked, not daring to add anything more to that simple statement.

She flushed. "I mean the massage you gave me. You followed Singh's instructions, through me, as best as I could remember. Would you let me do it to you tonight?"

I Pondered that for a microsecond or two and then answered. "Sure. I'd like that very much, Nora. Do you have any more of that hot oil?"

"Yeah. I have lots of it I guess. Almost a full bottle. I can even heat it up if you like."

"I would like that; very much. Thank you."

"Definitely my pleasure. Before dinner or after?"

I thought a moment. I was a bit hungry right now, but I could wait a while. On the other hand, a full stomach might be better if the two of us got a bit carried away with the massage and missed dinner. Either way, it would be good for me. It was about time I pushed the envelope a little.

"How about we fix dinner now and do it right afterwards? Would that my okay with you?"

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"Sure." She hopped up and began rummaging through the food boxes. "Here! How about some pan-fried tuna patties? I know how to make them."

"You mean the ones with cracker crumbs and fry them in the skillet?" I asked.

"Yup."

"I loved those as a kid. I'll go wash up." I left her opening cans and went behind the curtain and pulled my shirt off. Cold water washes were never my favorite, but it was quick and took only minutes to perform. I felt my jaw and decided that a trim was not really necessary; unless, things really went smoothly tonight. I opted for a cold-water trim. A little soap, a quick pass with a safety razor around the edges of my beard, dab of foo-foo juice and I was ready.

"Mmmm. That smells nice. What is it?" Came the query from Nora at the table. "I bet its Old Spice."

"You'd be right then, Nora. I've used Old Spice for years. Do you like it?"

"I love the smell of it, Chet. I thought you used it, but I haven't smelled it lately. Special occasion?"

"I hope so."

"Ah." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Dinner's ready. You want to make the tea?"

"Sure. I can do that." I put a couple of tea bags in our mugs and added hot water. We both liked sugar so I added a spoonful to each of them and a touch of milk to hers. "There ya go."

"Thank you." She went behind the curtain and returned almost immediately with her little Yoga book in hand. She sat down, picked up her fork, and dug into a tuna patty while studying her book.

"Studying for the exam?" I smiled at her.

"Sort of. I don't want to do anything wrong and mess up the session. I want it to be just right - like it was for me last night. That was perfect. Especially when I â er, you â umâ!"

"I know what you mean, Nora. It was good for me as well as you. I hope you enjoyed it because I sure did. It pleased me to please you."

She smiled at me, showing her white teeth. "Yeah. I did enjoy it very much. I hope I can return the favor."

I smiled, then finished my tuna patty and picked up our plates for cleaning. The tin washbasin was filled with hot water and I just dumped them into it. Nora got up and went behind the curtain again while I rinsed the dishes and dried them.

Her voice came from behind the curtain. "Go ahead and get ready, Chet. Just pull off your shirt and jeans - or more - if you want. I'll be out in a second in my outfit. Just lie down on the bear when you're ready."

I did as she asked, stripping down to my underwear. I hesitated briefly, wondering if I should strip all the way; yeah, why not. I was in the act of wrapping a towel around me when she came out into the room.

Chapter 18: Snowbound! - Chapter 18

In the firelight, she was radiant. The flickering light danced across her skin; dappling it with lights and darks of red-tinged luminosity. She was wearing exactly â nothing. She was completely naked. She took a couple of halting steps, with eyes downcast, and then paused and looked up at me. "Is this â okay with you? To do it right, Singh says we must be nude. I wasn't completely true to the manual last night because both of us had clothes on. Tonight will be better."

I didn't know what to say. How could it possibly get better? I was conscious of my body reacting to the sight of this beautiful woman in front of me. I willed the towel to hide me at least until I was face down on the rug. I didn't want her to think badly of me; or that I had a lower agenda in mind than a simple massage.

"That's just fine, Nora." I managed to stammer out. "Do you want me face down?" I hope, I hope, I hope.

"That will do for a start. Later, you turn over though."

I thought to myself that it would be the moment I turned over that defined whether or not we would go further. There was no doubt that I would be sporting the mother of all woodys when I did.

Face down, I felt her pull my arms straight out from my shoulders. I also felt her settle down gently on my hips and lean forward. The drip of warm oil rippled down my spine and the massage began.

Her slippery fingers worked their way into the muscles of my shoulders, out to my elbows and back. This was repeated many times and then she added a movement towards my spine and down. Her thumbs pressed against the bumps along my spine downwards until she reached my very lower back. Her fingers splayed out and down my hips. She paused to add some more oil.

"Is that too warm?"

"No." I said drowsily. "Not at all. You have wonderful fingers."

She began humming a tune that reminded me of a song I'd heard once played on a Sitar. I don't even remember where I initially heard it, but it stuck in my mind; the Beatles, maybe? Now, she was repeating it back to me. Undoubtedly, Singh had a hand in it.

"I've heard that tune before somewhere."

"Really?" She said. "It gets played sometimes at our Yoga sessions. Saree says its part of the overall effect."

"I can agree with that then. Very pretty song."

"Mmm, umm. Just be quiet now and let the oil flow into you."

I shut up and let her fingers knead my tired muscles. My mind went into free association and all sorts of erotic thoughts flew through it. I felt myself stiffen even more at the thought.

Nora shifted around and faced towards my legs now. Her fingers began digging into my thighs and calves, passing the warmth of the oil into the skin. I felt myself drifting easily in a haze.

Snowbound!

I had no idea how much time had passed, but Nora's voice broke through and asked me to turn over. She was kneeling beside me and I hadn't even felt her move off my hips. The time had come for me to display myself to her.

Carefully, I eased my legs and hips over against her knees so I at least faced away from her for a bit. As I rolled over onto my back, I opened my eyes and watched her face as my midsection came into view. To her credit, her only reaction was the widening of her eyes and a quick lick of her lips.

She only said two words: "Oh. My."

"I'm sorry, Nora. Something that felt that good was just impossible to repress. This is my reaction. Ignore it." If you can, I added silently.

In the firelight, I could see the slightly curved column of my erection standing up stiffly from my hips. I tracked her eyes as she moved them slowly upwards from my legs to my face and then to my eyes.

"I don't mind, Chet. You have a beautiful body, don't you? This is what I felt pressed against me last night?"

I nodded; unable to find my voice for once.

"It's much, um, bigger than I thought it was. I, ah, need to get up here by your head so I can do your chest."

She shifted around, putting her knees on either side of my head, pressing them into my shoulders. I detected the aroma of warm girl coming from her; my erection flexed in response to the stimulus. She must have not noticed it though.

She dripped warm oil on my chest and began. Slowly kneading her fingers into the shoulder muscles and outwards to my elbows again. She repeated this several times and then began pushing her palms flat on my chest and running them straight down towards my belly. As she did, her breasts came into view and then disappeared as she bent over me and then leaned back.

I watched her carefully as she moved downwards and then outwards along my rib cage. The further down she went, the closer her nipples came to grazing my chin and lips. It was all I could do not to simply stick out my tongue and capture one as it went by.

Strangely, given the effect she had on me, I felt at ease being nude under her. I almost forgot about the large indicator of my feelings sticking up before her. In a bit, I began to drift off, closing my eyes slowly and doing deep breathing.

"There. That's what to do. You just take deep breaths and let me take all the tension out of you, Chet."

I had a fleeting thought that there was only one method she could take all the tension out of me. She was making progress however. She continued rubbing the skin of my chest, ribs, and stomach until I drifted off.

Time had passed. I was aware of that fact. I was also aware of her fingers slowly surrounding the base of my penis, pressing gently downwards into the area under it; rubbing my testicles carefully. They pressed down and then trailed back up my stomach until they reached my nipples. I groaned quietly.

"Shhh. My love. Just relax and accept my offering of peace and tranquility." She began another journey down my body, fanning her fingers out over my rib cage, until she again reached my erection. The instant she touched it, I groaned again. I felt myself tense involuntarily which she apparently didn't notice.

Snowbound!

She made several more trips up and down until she halted for a moment. I didn't open my eyes but I did feel the application of a bit more oil on my stomach. Her fingers resumed downwards but this time they didn't stop just at the base of my penis - they passed on either side and clasped together. Her palms pressed me between them and she lifted them upwards along the length of my erection. The oil made them slide delicately upwards.

"Ahhhhhh. Nora! That feels heavenly."

"Quiet." She said softly. "Just let me please you as you as you pleased me."

She wrapped her entire hand around my stiff shaft and then added the second above that; then squeezed and lifted them upwards towards the tip. When she reached the ridge, she pulled her fingers over it and off with a slight noise from the oil.

The next thing I felt was her starting the process all over again from my nipples downwards. As she bent forward, this time I did stick out my tongue and managed to touch one nipple as it passed my face. This time, it was her that groaned. "I need to change position again so I can do your legs." She said, dashing my hopes of touching her soft nipple again.

She moved her knees from beside my head and repositioned herself at my feet. "Open your legs just a little so I can get between them."

I did as she asked and watched as she nestled her knees upwards, touching my inner thighs. With no hesitation, she again grasped my stiff penis with both hands as before and concentrated in sliding them up and down very slowly. Occasionally, one hand or the other would leave and caress below it carefully.

Her warm breath blew against the exposed skin of my stomach and thighs as she ran her hands up and down. "Mmmm, Chet. You have a beautiful body, you know. I could do this all night and never get tired of it."

"That may be true, Nora, but I am rapidly getting close to doing something you may not be ready for."

"You mean ejaculating? Singh says that's normal during this type of massage. In fact, he says it's almost required if I did a good enough job. Are you close? I've never done this so I don't know what will happen."

"Well, don't get your face too close then, Nora. It happens sort of fast. Sometimes I don't get much warning either. I am so relaxed right now, that it could happen any minute."

"What's it called when you - a guy - does that? Other than ejaculation."

No point in lying at all. "It's called coming."

"Coming?"

"Yeah. It's just a simpler word than ejaculation I guess."

"I've heard it before, but I didn't know what was meant by it."

She was continually stroking her hands up and down the length of my penis slowly as we talked. A tingle built up down deep inside me that I knew would build up in no time. "Nora. No matter what, keep moving your hands on me. I'm starting."

Snowbound!

The words no sooner left my lips before I began ejaculating into the air. Nora moved her head back, giggled, but never stopped rhythmically sliding her hand up and down. More poured forth, dribbling down her fingers to land on my stomach. Eventually, the flood stopped. She kept her hands moving though, squeezing gently to see if any more was forthcoming.

"Is that all?" She asked quietly.

"Yeah. That's all. God! I feel so relaxed right now."

"I know. I can tell." She ran her fist up and down my now-partial erection, pressing it into my thigh. She gave a short laugh. "I guess I was affected a little too. I'm all wet."

I lifted my head a little and looked down at her. She was indeed very moist in the vee between her legs. It was the first time I'd actually seen her pubis even though I'd stimulated her to orgasm just the night before. It looked just fine to me. My head fell back and I closed my eyes.

"Nora, you're the greatest thing that ever happened to me." I held out my hands and she took them.

"I've wanted to do that for so long, Chet." She said softly. "You have no idea how many times I've dreamed of reaching out and touching you. Now I've done it; and I want to do it again and again."

"Nora, we can rush into this headlong, or we can take it easy. We have each shared a simple loving act with one another and, perhaps, it might be best to just sleep on it now and see how we feel about it in the morning."

"You're right, of course, Chet. This is all so new and frightening in a way for me. I've always been scared of opening myself up to anyone. You're the first one that I've responded to like this."

Nora was still lying fell-length beside me with her one leg over mine at the knee. The weight barely noticeable in my heightened state of awareness. I stroked her back and shoulders with my free hand.

"You have a wonderful touch, Chet. I love the way you don't try to maul me. But, if we're going to do some thinking, then we'd better get our night clothes on hadn't we?"

Reluctantly, I let her roll away from me. "You're right, Nora. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry at all. I'll still be here in the morning, Silly."

She extended her legs outward and sat up gently, making sure she didn't put any pressure on my upper thighs. Once sitting, she lifted her body directly upwards - affording me a brief view of her womanly delights. I swiftly reached up and patted her on the butt as she stepped away from me.

Nora giggled all the way across the room and continued even beyond the curtain. "I think that tonight I'll just wear my old flannel nightgown. You want anything from here?"

"You could toss me my night shorts if you would, please. The grey ones should be on the little stool in the corner."

"Found them. Here you go." They arched through the air and landed right on my stomach. Two feet more and they would have hit the fire.

Snowbound!

Speaking of which, it had faded somewhat during our episode so I quickly donned my shorts and built up the fire a bit. "How hot do you want it tonight?" I called out.

"Not too hot. This nightgown is pretty warm and with bear under us and the quilt over us, we'll be very snug I think."

"Okay. Easy on the wood then." I snickered to myself at the double-entendre I'd just uttered. I was sure she didn't get it though because she made no sound at all.

"Chet, is it very cold outside? I need to make a run to the privy."

"I don't know; let me check." I went to the door and cracked it open. It was absolutely quiet outside. No wind at all. This could mean either it was blistering cold, or a rather mild night. My nose told me it was perhaps just under freezing. "Kind of cold, but no wind at all. Throw your coat on and boots; you're good to go."

"Thank you." She replied. She swept into the room wearing the nightgown straight from the old time Granny days. It buttoned at the neck and almost reached the floor in length. It was slightly transparent because when she passed between the fire and me, it showed the silhouette of her body under the cloth.

She picked up her coat and wrapped it around her shoulders and then slipped into boots that clunked as she walked because she didn't tie them. Peeking out the door, she took a breath and began walking swiftly around the cabin.

I stretched, stood up, and, giving some thought as to how chilled she would be, started water boiling for a final cup of tea. No doubt, this would also require me to pay a visit to the privy also.

She came back, stamping her feet on the porch, and pushed into the room. Her nose was slightly red but she had a cheery look on her face. "There were two deer standing in the moonlight over by those little trees on the trail. They didn't run or anything when I walked by them."

"No reason to. They don't fear us very much - probably just as curious as they are to us. Unless it's hunting season. Then, they'll never get near us."

"Beautiful animals, aren't they?"

"Certainly are." I smiled at her. "Especially as a roast in the oven."

She laughed. "Really! I guess you're not a member of PETA are you?"

"Yes, I am: People for the Eating of Tasty Animals."

She stared at me for five seconds and then threw her head back and laughed loudly. "That's a good one! I'll have to remember that when my tree-hugging friends start hassling me for liking venison. Is this for me?" She asked, picking up the mug.

"Yup. You sip away and I'll go outside myself."

She sat down and sipped carefully, mindful of a burn. "Mmmm. Good. Mint?"

"Yes. Mint. Bye."

Snowbound!

I shuffled into my coat and boots, and then made my way to the privy also. It was definitely chilly, but with no wind it was tolerable. My business completed, I crunched my way back to the warm cabin.

Nora was snuggled down deeply into the quilt, facing towards where I was to lie. I finished my tea while sitting on the seat at the table and watched her settle down. Her hair fell down her shoulders and partially covered her face. I couldn't tell, but she seemed very close to sleep. I rose, washed out our two mugs, and slipped into bed beside her. She was definitely asleep as she only murmured as I gently eased up next to her. We lay side-by-side in the warmth of the fire and slept.

Chapter 19: Snowbound! - Chapter 19

When I woke the next morning it was just getting light outside. We'd turned in fairly early, so I'd gotten all the rest I needed for the day. Quietly, I rose from our warm nest we'd formed and fixed a cup of coffee. Sitting on the chair at the table, I sipped the hot brew and wondered what we could do today.

Well, I smiled to myself, one of the things I needed to do was give myself a thorough washing. The oil we'd used last night was nice, but it made me a bit slippery if nothing else. I put on a larger pot of water to heat and went behind the curtain to gather up my toilet articles. Once the water was hot, I dipped out a basin of it and started.

The best way to do this at camp was to begin at the top and work down. That way, any water that dripped would simply flow downwards and be used later when you got there. I put a towel down on the floor and started. I skipped my hair because we'd brought something new on this trip - waterless shampoo. It was a new thing, and appeared to do a fine job without any water.

Working my way down, I reached my shorts soon. Mindful of a still sleeping Nora, I turned my back and slipped them off. The hot water felt great and after the application of some soap the oil was gone. Quickly I finished and rinsed off with more hot water.

While I was behind the curtain putting on clothes, Nora woke and stretched. "Good morning," she said fuzzily. "You up already?"

"Up and finished washing up. You want to go next?" I asked.

"Ummm. Not just yet. I feel so lazy just now. I was sort of stressed out I guess. That got fixed last night. It was so â fulfilling, I guess is the word. Very fulfilling - and relaxing. You make a great partner you know."

I smiled down at her. "Thank you, Nora. You're a great one to partner with."

She closed her eyes and stretched again. The covers fell from her breasts and, as she arched her back, they pointed towards the ceiling. They looked delightful. "I've boiled some water for us to use. I'll toss my used water out the door and you can refill it when you're ready. I'm going to check the truck and make a potty stop."

"O - Kay." She hummed, flipping the covers completely off her beautiful body. She seemed to have lost her reticence towards nudity in the last few days. This, I acknowledged to myself, was a good thing - for the both of us. It suggested that she trusted me very much. I was not going to do anything to make her lose that trust.

I took up my coat, put on my boots, and went out the door. First, I headed to the privy and then went to sit in the truck and fire it up. It started easily and warmed. Waiting there, I flipped on the CB radio and dropped to the trucker's channel. Several of them were chatting as they ground up the grade to the pass. You could hear their engines roaring and transmissions whining in the background as they talked.

Warm air began flowing around my feet and onto the window, clearing the slight frost that had formed. The driver's chatter faded as they topped the mountain and started down the other side. I made a general transmission and another trucker returned my call. We exchanged information as to where I was and where he was headed: to Denver with a load of watermelons, of all things. He thought it was pretty funny they were in a refrigerated trailer when the temperature was below freezing already.

Snowbound!

We continued for a bit but before he faded out also, he said that he'd gone through a little snow flurry further west. I told him that lower elevation snow under low clouds rarely got up to my altitude of just over ten thousand feet.

"Ten thousand! Where are you, buddy? On top of a mountain somewhere?"

"Sort of. I'm about ten miles north of you on the side of a hill in a cabin. We're nice and warm and alone."

"Got one of them snow bunnies up there?"

I laughed. "Sort of. She's a very close friend."

"Yeah, man, I gotcha. Good work, if you can get it. See ya. Traveler is out and climbing this here hill in granny."

I chuckled again. "Good to talk to you Traveler, The Engineer is going 10-10. Bye!"

I shut down the radio and the truck. The gauges had indicated the engine was just fine. I got out, locked the door, and pushed back into the cabin. Nora was on the floor groaning and holding her right foot. Obviously she was in pain.

"Nora! What happened?" I asked, kneeling at her side. "Did you fall?"

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes and a grimace of pain. "Yeah, sort of. My foot slipped off the chair and I lost my balance. My leg shot out from under me and I cracked my ankle against the table leg. Look at the big bruise I'm going to get!"

I reached down and lifted her leg gently, not noticing that she wasn't clothed. It certainly did look very painful, but nothing appeared to be broken. I gently worked her ankle in a circle, noting that when I pressed it one way she gave a sharp intake of breath. Tendon, I thought. Not serious, but it would keep her off her feet for a while.

"Looks like you banged the tendon a bit. Can you stand? If you can, then I'll help you finish rinsing off and then we can wrap it up with a bandage. I have a medical kit out in the truck."

She looked up at me. "Okay. Help me get back on the chair and I can finish while you're getting the kit."

I lifted her carefully and put her on the chair, then went out to get the first aid kit. When I got back, she'd dried off and was hopping over behind the curtain. She came back out wearing a pair of cotton panties. "I feel more comfortable in daylight with *some* clothes on," she chuckled. "Let's get to wrapping."

I sat opposite her, holding her ankle in my lap, and began winding the elastic bandage around it. She grimaced a little at its tightness, but allowed me to leave it that way when I told her that tight was good. "I'll loosen it in about an hour after the swelling hits maximum. That way your foot won't turn purple and drop off." I smiled.

"Ooh, not funny." She said, but her eyes smiled anyway. "I think I'll just put my granny gown on and sit here at the table. Is that all right, or should I lie down and put my foot up?"

"You can do either; or both. Not at the same time, of course, but one after the other. If your ankle begins to throb, then lie down and elevate it. Okay?"

Snowbound!

"Okay, Doc." Her humor was returning.

"I heard on the radio that there might be some more snow headed our way. Would you be comfortable staying here while I make a quick trip up to our phone spot and called the Weather Bureau? I wouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours?"

She thought a moment. "Sure, I should be okay. Breakfast first?"

"Definitely. What would you like? My treat."

"Pancakes!" She shouted. "With lots of syrup and butter!"

"On their way." I stood and began gathering up the materials for our meal.

After I whipped up a batch of pancakes, we quickly ate our way through them. Both of us turned out to be quite hungry; perhaps from the great sleep we got following our rather physically exciting evening. In any case, we lingered a little over tea after I washed the dishes.

"I think I'll head out now, Nora. The sun may or may not come out, but even if it doesn't the trail should be fairly easy. The path we left going up there the other day shouldn't have filled in so I won't have to take snowshoes."

"You be careful, Chet. If you get hurt, then we'll both be in trouble." She flexed her ankle and grimaced. "Darn! Still hurts like fire."

"Well, don't do that then. Want me to warm up a couple of rocks to wrap in a towel for your feet?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I put a couple of rocks near the fire and they warm up. Then I wrap them in a towel and you set them on either side of your ankle. Helps to keep it warm you see"

"Umm, yeah, I do see. That's clever!"

I went outside and picked up several softball-sized rocks and brought them in. When I set them at the edge of the fireplace, she hobbled over and sat down on bear. "Hand me that sleeping bag roll would you, please?"

"Sure." I got it and handed it to her. She tucked it under her knee and elevate her ankle. The angle was a bit wrong, so I unrolled the bag and refolded it for more length. That supported her whole leg.

"Ah, that's much better."

When the rocks were sufficiently heated, I carefully wrapped them in a thick towel and placed them around her ankle. She practically purred with pleasure. "That reels really, really great, Chet. Oh, darn. I forgot my book."

I got her book and handed it to her. I also gave her a tall glass of water so she could keep it handy along with a small bag of gorp. We'd brought along a large plastic bag of gorp which consisted of raisins, M&Ms, peanuts, sesame seeds, and several kinds of other nuts and berries. It was quite tasty and could also be a bit filling.

I knelt and kissed her then rose and put on my coat. "Bye, Babe. You just rest easy."

Snowbound!

"No problem there. These rocks are making me sleepy."

"Well, just snooze then. Best thing for you actually."

"Bye."

"Bye"

Starting out slowly so as not to heat up too fast, I shuffled up the trail to what we'd begun to call 'phone meadow'. It wasn't an especially hard climb; more tedious than anything else. I occupied my mind with idle thoughts but kept my eyes open for any wildlife I might encounter.

I reached the meadow, pulled the phone out, and turned it on. The cool, crisp air was working its magic because I had three solid bars and a wavering fourth one. Before I left I programmed in several useful to have phone numbers so I scrolled through them and found the one for the US Weather Service. I identified myself and was immediately recognized. Several years before, my dad had retired from this very office in Denver. One of the forecasters came on and we chatted a few minutes before I asked him about higher-level snow flurries.

"Nah. Don't worry about them, Chet. What that guy was seeing was some ground fog and crystallized condensation. I don't see anything coming your way for at least a week or more. In fact, the thousand millibar line is way north of you now."

"Thanks, Art. I appreciate that. I'm here at Dave's cabin for the next few days."

"Alone, or with anyone." He chuckled good-naturedly.

"With someone; and it looks somewhat serious this time. I won't hold you up any longer, Art. Take care."

"Yeah, you too. See you." He hung up and so did I.

From this particular spot there were several ways to get back to the cabin. Since I was in a bit of a hurry to get back, I chose the most direct route - down the little stream.

I was shuffling along, watching the antics of a ground squirrel, when something on the opposite bank caught my eye. There were several darker indentations that looked like foot prints. They seemed to just appear, then disappear as if whoever made them had hopped up on the bank and then jumped back down.

My curiosity aroused, I found an iced-over ford and crossed the stream. Sure enough, they were human boots. The tracks led out from a copse of pines directly to the water, and then three steps right on the bank, and then back into the trees again. I thought that was curious, but, then remembered Ranger Dan's visit. Perhaps this was him checking to see if he was in the right valley. If so, then his horse would have been tied in the trees. I shaded my eyes and scanned the tree line. Several dark patches looked to be disturbed so I made an assumption. Incorrectly, it turned out.

Approaching the cabin, and with absolutely no forethought, I simply climbed the steps and pushed the door open. I froze. Sitting in a chair at our table was a somewhat large man and he was holding a hunting knife generally aimed at Nora's side. Not enough to actually call it threatening (maybe in his mind) but just 'there'. My first thought was *'Why the hell did I suggest a sign/countersign and then not use it?'* Not smart, knothed.

Chapter 20: Snowbound! - Chapter 20

"Come on in, Guy. Don't try anything heroic, understand?" He threatened in a growl. It was so campy that I almost laughed out loud. "Siddown!" He ordered.

I pulled out another chair under his watchful eye and sat. "Where you been?" He asked.

"Up checking on how well my mine shaft is holding up under all this snow." Thanking the impulse that had made me turn off my cell phone since I didn't need it down here. I didn't need it making any noise right now. "What's going on, Nora?"

"He - He just shoved his way through the door and stuck that big knife in my face. I don't know what he wants, Chet.

"Right now, I want something to eat. I've been out all night and I'm hungry. Youâ!" he pointed to me. "Get something going. You got meat?"

"Yeah, I have some bacon."

"Okay. That. And some eggs. Lots of eggs."

I must have stood up a little fast because he jumped and pointed with the knife at Nora. "You just take things slow, Guy. Real slow." Where did this guy learn his dialog? Thugs-r-Us?

I concentrated on making the three of us some breakfast. Nora was still white-faced, but her color was returning slowly. She winked at me with a half-smile on the side of her face he couldn't see. She was not quite as scared as she made out. This could be a good thing, I surmised.

I set the plate down and with difficulty he ate and watched the two of us closely. I was not going to move without his say-so, but that didn't keep me from thinking at light speed.

"We have some more bread out in the truck if you'll let me get itâ!" I made to stand up.

"Nope. Siddown. I saw them gun cases out there. Not a chance."

Nora lifted an eyebrow at this which confirmed she knew what I was thinking. He didn't know we'd brought the guns into the cold locker. Inspiration hit me.

"Unghhh." I bent at my middle and held my stomach.

"Chet! Is it back again?" Nora asked on cue.

"Yeah. Damn stomach feels like it's full of acid again. I'll be all right in a second." As luck would have it, I felt some gas moving and gave it free reign. Within ten seconds the sound of flatulence echoed around the room.

"Damn! That's just awful," observed the guy.

"I've got some anti-gas stuff in the cold locker. Can I get it?"

Snowbound!

He tensed, but gave his permission. I rose carefully, hobbled over to the cabinet, and rattled some things around. I had my back turned to him and, in my doubled-over state I doubted he could have seen me slip the little .22 pistol down my belt and into my shorts. Shit! It was cold! I gave an involuntary gasp, which he probably took as a gasp of pain. So much the better.

I semi-turned in profile to him and again sat down. I put my head in my hands and remained bent over. "You gotta let me go out to the privy, man. You don't want me to let go with what's building up inside."

He thought about that for a moment. "Yeah. You can go, but just remember that I've got little sweet-cheeks in here with me. I'll be watching out the window for you. Stay away from that damn truck."

I lifted my arm in acknowledgement and hunched my way over to my coat. I pulled it on painfully and eased the door open. Taking little steps, I walked across the front and went around the side of the cabin. No doubt he's checked out the location of the privy so I played this straight. I went directly to it, opened the door, and then slammed it shut loud enough for him to hear.

Cocking an ear, I listened intently to see if he tried to follow me. He didn't, so I carefully crept over to the little wood door next to the fireplace. If he's seen this, then I just might get Nora hurt; but if not, then I have a way to disable him. I wasn't really keen on shooting him, but my anger was running pretty high that this asshole would do this to Nora.

The day was gloomy, which was a plus as no sun would flood the interior of the cabin when I cracked the door open. I was in the shadow of piles of wood also which helped. I immediately saw that my guess as to his position was right on the money. He was standing in front of the window, leaning to the left, looking right and waiting for me to reappear.

I had no desire to actually kill this jerk (although I was sure I could get rid of the body and it would never be found) but my cooler side prevailed; I'd just wound him. I quietly cocked the hammer, took aim at the fleshy part in the mid-thigh of his right leg, and pulled the trigger.

I saw the knife fly out of his hand and land over near the door. Nora dodged his swinging hand and kicked it under one of the beds. He fell to the floor screaming about being shot. As he fell, I noted that the log under the window now had another hole in it. The round had gone completely through his leg. Good luck there.

Nora picked up the washbasin and rattled his teeth by bringing it down on his head. This brought yet another howl of pain.

"I'm shot, dammit. I'm shot!" He kept screaming.

I slammed the little door and ran around the cabin as fast as I could and hit the door running. Nora stood there with her hands to her mouth and breathing hard. "Get me something to wrap his hands with, Nora!" I commanded.

She snapped out of it and ripped the belt off my robe. I looped it around one of his wrists and then used that leverage to wrap it around the other. I looked down and saw that the blood was barely oozing out of either hole in his jeans. I'd nicked him as a quarter-inch groove about two inches long. It would be painful as hell, but definitely not fatal.

"There, asshole! How's them apples?" I shouted at him.

"You shot me you son of a bitch! You shot me!"

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"What did you expect, man. You pop in here and threaten us and we're just supposed to roll over and like it? Not in my lifetime, pal."

"You gotta stop the bleeding. I'll die!"

"I doubt that very much. You will be in a lot of trouble though. You're the poacher that the Rangers are after, aren't you?"

He glowered at me. "So what?"

"So, I'm going to go get some help here and get you transported down to Winter Park. Nora, if he moves, shoot his other leg." I handed her the gun, which she, thankfully, didn't drop. She held it fairly steady on his good thigh. "She's a good shot too so don't even think about moving."

He glowered at me while I put my coat on and left the cabin. When I got outside, I circled the cabin. On the side of the hill, I spotted a tethered horse. When I neared it, I also saw another horse with a big pack on it. The tracks led directly down to the cabin from the tied horse. Definitely the poacher's trail. I avoided stepping on any footprints and went back to the cabin courtyard.

I fired up the truck, turned on the CB and switched to the emergency channel. "Anyone out there right now on Channel nine? I need some help here."

Three calls later, I got a strong reply. "Wild Beast here, what do you need?"

"This is Engineer up at Dave's Cabin. Do you have a cell phone and can you call Winter Park from where you are?"

"Lucky you. I'm parked almost in the center of town. Go ahead."

"I need you to call the Fish and Game office and tell them I have the poacher that Ranger Dan was looking for the other day. He's hurt - light gunshot to the leg - and needs some medical attention."

"Okay. Standby oneâ I waited for him to return. Five minutes went by and then another strong signal broke in: "This is the Colorado Fish and Game Service. You copy?"

"Five-by. This is Chet Willis. I'm staying at the cabin owned by Dave Marks and his family. Ranger Dan was by the other day and knows where I am. The poacher he's been looking for appeared at our cabin and did some threatening. He's been shot in the leg and needs medical attention but he's not in any real danger. Could you get that information to Dan and vector some medics up here?"

He paused for a moment, probably writing it all down. "Got it. We're calling him on VHF right now. Stand by."

I waited again. While I waited, I looked right in through the front window and kept an eye on Nora and the poacher. No change in their relative positions.

"Break for Dave's Cabin." The voice returned.

"Go ahead."

Snowbound!

"Ranger Dan's about five miles from you right now up canyon. He's by himself, but he told us how to get to your cabin. How is the snow - heavy?"

"Too heavy for anything short of a Sno-Cat to make it. I'd suggest horses."

"Roger that. We're saddling up right now. Two medical personnel, a Sheriff, and two rangers. Them, plus Dan, should be there in around two hours. Is the guy secured?"

"He's more interested in what's going on with his leg than anything else. The fight went right out of him when that happened. I took a look around and found where he tied his horse up. He's leading another horse with a large pack wrapped in plastic. I have not touched it."

"Roger that also. We'll stand by on this channel in case you need us again. Fish and Game on the side."

"Dave's Cabin out." I turned off the engine but left the CB on and rolled down the window after turning the volume up high. Battery drain was minimal in any case. I returned to the cabin.

"Authorities are on their way. They'll be here soon." I shook my head at the guy sitting painfully on the floor. "You should never have told me to drop the gun."

He looked up at me with a puzzled frown. "Huh? What you mean?"

"I doubt very much if I'll get in trouble for shooting you since you were in the act of holding my girlfriend hostage. That's a federal rap, you know. So, it would be in your best interests to just say the pistol fired when I dropped it on the floor. Nobody, but you, got hurt. Nora will go along with that and you'd better think about doing the same."

Nora looked doubtful, but eventually nodded her head. "Yeah. You have enough troubles just with the poaching charges. You don't need hostage-taking added to them. Make no mistake; I *will* tell them you held a knife on me you-you sumbitch!"

I turned to look at her with surprise in my eyes. That was the first time I'd ever heard her get really pissed off. There were red patches on her cheeks now and I could tell she was just really mad. "I'd believe her if I were you." I said to the guy.

He thought a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah. Just like you said."

I took the pistol from Nora again. She asked if I was hungry and I realized that it was almost noon now. "Yeah; actually I am hungry."

"I'll fix something for us then." She stood and hobbled over to the counter top and searched through our food box. She held up a small tinned ham and I nodded. She lifted a knife and cut off a few slices of the crusty bread we liked and made ham sandwiches with deli mustard. Feeling generous, we even made one for the sullen guy on the floor. While she was finishing up, I unbelted one hand and tied the loose end around his good leg. He could eat, but only with one hand. He also couldn't get enough leverage to get up from the floor.

Nora avoided him and handed me the paper plate to give to the guy. I still didn't know his name - and I didn't care. We ate our lunch in complete silence. From time to time I heard bursts of static and snatches of voice from the open window of the truck. I had good ears and was sure I could pick out anyone calling me.

Snowbound!

We finished eating and again settled down into watchfulness of our captive. Nora held the gun while I checked the hasty bandage I'd applied. There was some leakage, but not much.

"Bad?" The guy asked.

"Nah. Through and through groove. You'll have a scar though. I found your horse up the hill. I'm betting that what's under that plastic will be of interest to Fish and Game; right?"

He blinked, but didn't say anything. We waited some more. I thought of a detail that would be necessary to our story. I went over to the cold locker and lifted my rifle out. The guy's eyes got wide when he saw that.

"Yeah. The gun cases in the truck were empty, Dude. You should have checked." I slapped the bolt back, put a round in the chamber, and clicked it shut again. The safety was on, as I was sure he'd note. I handed the rifle to Nora carefully and reminded her how the safety worked. She flicked it off and then back on. The guy got the message - he'd be way too slow to cross the distance before she shot him.

"Nora, take this and back off over there. If he moves, pull the trigger. I'm going to add a bit of detail for the Sheriff to detect."

I unloaded the pistol and set the rounds on the table. When it was empty I was ready. I really didn't want to do this to my good pistol, but it would be necessary. Carefully, I picked the right angle and dropped the gun to the floor. The hammer hit first and gouged out a fair-sized piece of wood.

"There. Now we have the spot where it dropped and went off." I reloaded the pistol and took the rifle back from Nora. With my back to the guy, I winked. She smiled tentatively; but she did smile.

I heard a loud voice from the truck call for Dave's Cabin. I handed the pistol back to Nora and went out to answer the call. It was Ranger Dan reporting he was just coming down the last hill and would be here in about five minutes. I rogered the call and told everyone we would leave the channel now. Fish and Game, plus the original Wild Beast, signed off also.

I waited outside for him to show up. I heard them before I saw them. They were riding hard through the snow. When they arrived, horses puffing and blowing, they dismounted.

The Sheriff spoke first. "Where's the guy?" I pointed to the cabin and called out to Nora that the law was coming in. I hoped she'd put the rifle away before he got there. She had.

We went through the introductions and both Ranger Dan and the Sheriff, whose name was Davis, questioned the guy while the two medics cut his pantleg further and professionally dressed the wound. They pronounced it clean and should be fine. "Definitely a gunshot though, Sheriff." Said the lead medic.

"Yeah. I see that." He turned to me. "How'd it happen?"

I spun my tale, backed up with sentences from Nora and, surprisingly, the guy himself. This appeared to satisfy the Sheriff because he noted a few things in his little book, snapped it shut, and said "Well, sounds like a clean, accidental shoot to me."

I'd pointed out the gouged floor and, something I hadn't thought of until I was telling the tale, the small hole in the log where the round had ended up.

Snowbound!

"Not worth digging out. Those little .22's just shatter when they hit wood." He turned to Nora and me. "You got nothing to worry about."

Dan came back into the cabin. "Checked out the pack horse. Full of Elk. At least two of them I think. Just the tenderloins and flanks. I'd bet they'll match the remains back where I found them. Good going, Chet."

"Thanks, Dan."

We watched the Sheriff take the guy out and prop him on the spare horse. He was handcuffed to the pommel.

He continued. "You know. Providing help and/or reporting a poacher to Operation Game Thief nets you a two thousand dollar reward. I don't see why you two shouldn't get it you know. That'll be my recommendation."

"Really? Gosh, I could use some of that." Nora said, smiling for the first time in a while. When she stood, she cried out and sat heavily back in the chair. The medic noticed it and came over to her. "Did you hurt this capturing the guy?" He asked solicitously.

"No," she said. "I slipped on a patch of soap suds and slammed it into the table leg this morning. Chet's been taking care of me."

He rummaged in his case, pulled out another Ace bandage and several chemical hot packs, and handed them to her. "Here. These will help a lot."

She smiled at him and took the supplies. "Thank you very much."

"My pleasure, Ma'am."

In ninety minutes the excitement was over. Everyone had saddled up and left the area. Ranger Dan led the guy's horses and the Sheriff led the guy himself. They headed down the canyon towards the gate Nora and I had come through last week. Presumably, they had vehicles waiting for them at that point.

Nora sighed and let me hold her tightly. It was a nice feeling. She started to react to all the stress and began sniffing as the adrenaline drained away. I tilted her face to mine and kissed the tears away.

"Hold me, Chet. Just hold me tightly." I complied.

We stood there, arms around each other for a long time. Finally, the trembling of her shoulders stopped and she sagged slightly against me.

"I'm so tired now. I think I could sleep for a week." She giggled as I swept her up off her feet and carried her over to bear. I set her down gently, her arms still tightly around my neck, and kissed her again.

"You just went through a serious adrenaline burst, Nora. That's a natural reaction. I'm really tired also, but I want a cup of tea. You close your eyes and rest now." I propped her leg up on the rolled sleeping bag and even before I had the water hot she was buzzing softly in sleep.

Chapter 21: Snowbound! - Chapter 21

I messed about, building up the fire a little, tidying up the table, and sipping at my tea. Fatigue was creeping up on me also but if I slept now I'd never get to sleep tonight. I sat at the table and looked at the pistol. The hammer appeared to be fine. It was then that I realized a small flaw in my story. Nobody in their right minds carries a pistol with the hammer over a live chamber. I smiled at myself, thinking that the Sheriff probably knew that also; or more likely, he thought I was pretty dumb.

While I waited for Nora to wake, I started reading another of her bodice rippers. This one was set in a plantation in the Old South. It was filled with Southern Belles with no brains at all and large, firm, breasts. Interesting reading, but no basis in reality at all. I whipped through the book in two hours.

Gently, I shook Nora's shoulder. "Honey? It's five o'clock. Time for something to eat I think. You awake?"

"Mmmm. Yeh. Thirsty."

I brought her a cup of cold water which she drank down in several gulps. "Ah, much better. What should we have for dinner?"

"I've got that almost ready. We're having a steak and baked potatoes."

"Really?" She sat up, grimacing as her ankle hit the floor. "Ow!"

With my help, she hobbled over to the table and I served her the meal. The potatoes were very hot and melted the butter right away. The steaks were slightly rare, but that's the way both of us liked them. With gusto, we attacked the meal. Midway, I pulled out a small bottle of wine and poured us each a glass. She toasted me and we clicked glasses.

Nora spoke. "I have something to say. I'm probably going to fumble it a little, so don't interrupt me, okay?" I nodded.

"One of the things I've been trying to express is how much I admire - no, that's not right - *love* you, Chet. There! I said it! I've felt that way for months now and just couldn't work up the courage to say something for fear of shoving you away. I know you went through a really bad time a while ago and didn't want to seem like I was forcing you into anything. This whole trip up here has made me face myself. I think I've come to realize that loving someone isn't as bad as my mother made it out to be. You haven't done a single thing she gave me dire warnings about. You've been nothing but a true gentleman towards me."

She took my hands in hers, rubbing the knuckles with her fingers. "You've been like a rock to me, Chet; never demanding, never acting in haste. I know it's been tough on you; waiting for me to make up my mind but that stops now. I've made up my mind. I want you in my life, Chet and hope that you can find a little room for me. There, I said it!" She repeated, giggling nervously.

I cleared my throat - several times, and then began. "Nora. I would like nothing more in life than to be around you for a long time. I've also come to realize that both of us were simply dancing around the same thoughts. As it turns out, I've loved you for a very long time also but sensed your inner conflict and decided to let you make your own decisions. Until then, I just allowed 'us' to happen. I'm so very glad we've finally cleared up our relationship."

Snowbound!

I stood and knelt beside her chair and put my arm around her waist. She dropped her head to my shoulder and began crying again. I pulled back to look at her in surprise.

"No. No, it's not that. I'm just so happy now!"

We kissed. This time it was a kiss of passion. We clung tightly to each other for long minutes as we kissed each other's faces, neck and shoulders; laughing loudly at our antics.

She spoke first, whispering into my ear. "Tonight, after we clean up the dishes and relax for a while I want us to make love. True love, not disguised as an exercise, but just touching, holding, and pleasing each other as we should have long ago."

I simply nodded, afraid to speak at the time. When I finally found my voice, I agreed. "Yes, Nora. I believe it is time now for us to do just that; slowly, and with passion. This should be memorable for both of us. We can call it our 'first time' and think back on it fondly no matter what happens in the future."

"Agreed." She said finally. We shared yet another kiss; this one much more lingering and tender than all the rest before. Quietly, we held one another tightly; lost in our own thoughts. Then Nora stood and carefully hobbled back behind the curtain. I heard noises of zippers and the like as she opened her clothing bags. When she emerged, she held a much larger book than the one she'd shown me before. "Here," she said, handing me the book. "This can help us, I think. I kind of kept it in reserve just in case â in case I finally made up my mind."

I took it and read the cover. It was a nicely bound book of Kama Sutra.

"I-I've been reading it ever since Singh recommended it to me." She looked down shyly. "I've always wanted to try some of those positions. Sometimes I'd just lie in bed and imagine what it would be like to be doing them with you. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? How could I mind, Nora? I find it very flattering actually." I flipped a few pages. "Um. This is really something." I commented after seeing what she meant by positions. Some of them looked nearly impossible without being double-jointed; others looked very comfortable and sensuous at the same time.

"Does this make me a bad girl?"

I looked up sharply. "No! Not a chance. I simply means you are a woman, Nora - and I like that very much."

She gave a sigh of relief and sat down next to me as I paged my way through the illustrations. The proximity of her warm thigh pressed next to mine plus the illustrations themselves caused the inevitable physical reaction. The more I saw, the more my excitement rose. Soon, it was either adjust something or its cramped condition would begin to cause pain. I close the book and handed it to Nora.

"Here, Honey. I agree that this would be wonderful to try tonight. Put it away for now and we'll finish the dishes and set the stage for tonight."

She nodded. "Oh, yes, Chet! I will." She went back behind the curtain. I took the opportunity to stand and straighten a few things out before she came back. When she did, I was standing at the counter and dumping hot water into the dish basin. She added soap powder and we washed the dishes. Once they were rinsed and dried, we both made runs to the privy and washed up for bed - or as close as we were going to get to it tonight.

Snowbound!

Released from KP, Nora once again went behind the curtain while I stoked the fire up a bit. "Don't make it too hot, Chet," she called. "And, would you turn off that lantern?"

"Sure. Will do." I did as she asked and throttled down the lantern. It glowed to a stop and popped once before going dark. Except for the firelight, there was no other illumination in the room. Hearing all sorts of sliding cloth noises behind the curtain, my mind began conjuring up images of Nora yet to come. "Scene is set, Nora." I said.

"I'll be just a second. You want to change also?"

"Yeah," I said. "I probably should." I mentally went through my wardrobe and remembered the pair of silk sleeping shorts I'd bought a while back. I didn't particularly like them because they were constantly sliding around but tonight that might be a plus. "Can I come in?"

"Okay. Come ahead." I walked over and parted the curtain. As I did, Nora slipped out the far end, giggling as she went. "You change now while I get ready."

Anticipation really took hold of me as I fantasized about what was to come. There was no stopping my heightened state of awareness this time. I didn't even try. I pulled my clothes off, ran a wet cloth over my body, and even dabbed a tiny bit of aftershave even though I hadn't shaved. Oops! "Want me to shave?" I called.

"Not necessary." She answered quietly. "I like you just like you are."

I smiled to myself. This was going to be such a great night, I thought. I'll never have a better one. Checking myself all over, I decided I was ready and turned to the opening in the curtain.

When I passed through it, my steps faltered as I took in the scene. Nora was lying flat on her back on bear but she was dressed in yet another nightgown that I had never seen before. It was a pale pink and reflected the orange and reds of the fire like sparklers on Independence Day. The soft mounds of her breasts were accentuated by a white panel that scooped low over them - covering, yet not covering them. Traveling downwards, I saw that she'd crossed her legs at the ankles. The material was so sheer that she might as well have been wearing nothing. The effect was stunning.

Her eyes were closed, thankfully, because my directional indicator was rock hard and pointing the way towards her underneath the slippery fabric of my shorts. I crossed the room and knelt beside her. I put my hands on her shoulder so she wouldn't be startled and very carefully kissed her eyelids one by one. They opened to me. "I love you." She said simply, and threw her arms around my neck to pull me down a ways. She kissed me back on the lips tenderly.

"You are beautiful, Nora, in every way. And I love you very much."

We kissed again. She pulled my head down, causing me to shift so that I was lying with my head on her stomach looking up at hers, propped up on the pillow. Firelight danced in her pupils. Very carefully, I reached out and put my palm flat on her ribs just under her breast. She put her hand on mine and followed me up as I cupped her breast. This caused an immediate rise in the nipple under the sheer cloth. This I touched with my thumb.

"Mmmm. Touch me there again, Chet. Your hand is so warm."

Snowbound!

I did; and then I shifted to her other breast and did the same. She moaned her approval as I did. Without removing my ear from the nightgown, I moved my head closer and closer to the rise of her chest until I was able to close my lips around the nipple hiding under the cloth. Her hands went behind my neck and pushed gently until I was pressed tightly down into the valley between both breasts.

I lifted my head and looked at her again. She slowly began to unbutton the very top button. Done with the first one, she went on to the second one. When I reached for the third, she shook her head. "No. Let me do it. I want you to watch."

She continued downwards, loosening each button in turn, until she reached as far as she could without sitting up. Carefully, she pulled the two halves apart and brought her breasts into view. It was as if it was the first time I'd seen them. They were fully aroused; each with a tight little point sitting in a dark brown areola. They rose and fell gently with her breathing. I was fascinated; captivated, by the view.

"Now, you unfasten the rest, Chet. You've earned it"

Carefully, and at the same speed she'd done the previous buttons, I moved through the rest until they were all open. She pulled the cloth to the side and again revealed a treasure. I groaned slightly and let my lips trail downwards from her navel. As I approached her light brown bush, her stomach muscles twitched and she gasped. She cried out aloud when I finally reached my target. "Oh! Oh, God! Yessss," she hissed, as my tongue entered her.

I reached out with my two hands and held her hips steady as I carefully applied my lips everywhere. Shifting my weight a little, I began to edge myself around until I was between her legs. With my hands steadying her thighs I resumed my kissing tour of her inner thighs. I felt her hands now on either side of my head, grasping, and holding; guiding me to and fro; wherever she wanted me.

Her respiration rate began to go up; faster and deeper at the same time until she peaked in a huge intake of breath and then held it. Her hips jumped into my face and I cupped my fingers down and under her to lift higher and pushed my tongue in deeper. She began emitting little mewling cries of joy as her first orgasm began. I licked and kissed gently - stimulating her even more as she cried out.

I sensed she was beginning to wane so I renewed my efforts until she again cried out: "Oh, Chet! Chet! Oh, God, Chet! Oh! OH! OH!" Her impassioned voice echoed around the room as she began another orgasm. This one far more powerful than the last. She opened like a flower and I kissed her gently. I paused to take a breath.

"Hah! Oh, nooooooo. NO! Keep â€¦ going." She gasped; fearful I was going to stop altogether. She pulled hard at the back of my head to keep me positioned as I was. Her orgasm finally began to wane and I felt her begin to relax.

Then, limply, her legs opened out on either side of me. I lifted my head; she began gasping for air and trying to speak at the same time. "Shhh!" I whispered. "Just lie back and recover, Nora. Take your time. I'll still be here."

"I â€¦ know. But â€¦ I-Iâ€¦!" She began.

I stopped her with a kiss just below her navel. While I worked my way up her tummy, I could feel her relaxing and getting her heart rate under control. By the time I reached her breasts, she was simply breathing deeply, but not as hard as before.

Snowbound!

She finally got enough control to speak. "Several of my girlfriends told me about this, but I didn't believe them." Pause for breath. "Now I do. I can't begin to tell you how much pleasure I felt moments ago."

"Yes, you can, Nora. I already know. You already told me."

"I - I did? How?"

"By giving me something of yours that I had to earn. I felt you release at least twice. That's something that passes only if you want it to pass. I feel privileged to have received it."

She looked down at me, my head resting on one breast. I felt her heart beating under me with a slight rise and fall as it did. "Oh, how I love you, Chet!" She pulled me up and kissed me fully on the lips - tasting of herself in the process. She lifted her head, licked her lips, chuckled, and then resumed her kiss.

When she finally released me, she chuckled again. "You know, that's the very first time I've ever felt myself emerge like that. Not even lying in my own bed had I been able to do that. Thank you so very much."

This was unique for me - being thanked for an oral climax. The other two times I'd done it - which Nora didn't need to know about - I came away with the feeling that somehow I'd messed up. Not tonight. She was genuinely grateful.

Chapter 22: Snowbound! - Chapter 22

I rose to my knees, and then stood. "Where are you going?" Nora asked.

"Just getting a drink of water. Do you want one also?"

"Yes, please."

I filled two mugs with cold water and returned to her side. She had risen to her knees and was watching the interplay between my silk shorts and what was underneath them. Her eyes flicked from that to my face several times and a slow smile spread over her countenance.

She took the water I offered her, sipped it, and then set it down next to her leg. "Now," she said in a throaty voice. "It's your turn. Come over and lie back like I was." When I was comfortably reclining, head on pillow, she pulled the open nightgown from her shoulders, set it aside, and moved around so that she was reclining across my chest facing down towards my feet.

Her bare shoulders were inviting so I began a very slow massage. As my fingers roamed downwards along her spine, she began a little massaging of her own. Her warm hands started pressing downwards along both of my thighs; straightening out the silk of my shorts. I felt myself responding; regaining what I'd lost during my pause for refreshment.

Nora also discovered this hardness beneath the smooth material. Her palm drifted upwards from my thigh and ran along its length; pausing to lift it occasionally. "You are so beautiful," she breathed.

I wouldn't have labeled myself as 'beautiful' but an argument could be made that it might appear so to a woman. In any case, I did feel very masculine at that moment. With great care and tenderness, she lifted the elastic waistband of my shorts and gently pulled it downwards; making sure to clear me completely. As she did, I ran my fingers around the back of her head and neck.

"Mmmm. Wonderful." I wasn't sure to what she was referring. "Lift your hips just a little."

When I did, she tugged my shorts downward towards my knees. I saw myself appear beyond her hair and waver slightly as her hand wrapped tightly around the middle of the shaft. Her touch was electrifying; causing shivers of delight to race their way up and down my nervous system.

"Ahhhhhh," I sighed, increasing the pressure of my fingers along the muscles of her shoulders.

She slid her hand up and down my length. "So very hard and yet so very soft." She murmured. "I want to please you as you pleased me. I've never done it before though. Don't think too badly of me."

"I would never do that," I answered just as quietly. "There is no 'wrong way' to it, Nora. Whatever feel right to you is the right way." I chuckled down deep in my chest, which made her head bounce slightly. "I am in your hands." How true that was.

She joined me in the humor of the moment. I felt her warm breath as she moved her head further down my stomach. Her fist pulled me downwards and, after a moment, I could just discern the feel of her tongue as she touched it to the tip of my manhood. Next, her moistened lips found their way around the head itself and tightened on their way down.

Snowbound!

The feeling was incredible. She didn't move, nor did she remove her lips. Instead, she simply worked lips and tongue so that they covered the entire head. It was like no other sensation I'd ever felt. I groaned hard.

Her head moved back, lifting upwards. "Did I hurt you?" She asked, concerned.

"No. Oh, no, Nora. Not at all. It was simply so soft and sensuous that I couldn't help myself." I lifted my head and kissed her shoulder. "Perfect."

She replaced her mouth as it was before and pushed it downwards just a little further. This was accompanied by an inexperienced attempt to create a vacuum. Instead, it made a large slurp sound. Embarrassed, she giggled. "Sorry."

She paused a moment and then eased as much of my shaft as she could into her mouth. I felt her tongue moving and the rasp of it against the sensitive part under the ridge. She coughed gently and pulled her head back out a little. "Sorry," she repeated.

Her extremely slow initial attempt at fellatio continued, with slight variations, for a long time. Subjectively, I doubt it lasted more than five minutes but felt like hours. I felt (altogether too soon as far as I was concerned) my excitement rising and thought I'd better warn her. The sudden ejaculation might not be appreciated.

"Nora," I said softly. "I'm close to releasing now. Be ready for it."

She nodded minutely but continued to please me. Her hand, which had been carefully traversing up and down the portion of me she couldn't get into her mouth, eased downwards to cup my testicles one by one. Her hand enclosed them and lifted both gently. This, along with renewed suction, encouraged my orgasm to appear.

Given the warning, she immediately raised her head. The first pulse took Nora by surprise. She renewed her rubbing. This produced the desired effect and I emitted several more pulses which landed on my thigh. She was making mewling noises now, not distress, but passion; knowing she had finally and actively pleased me.

Eventually, inevitably, I spent myself. She sensed the tension leave my legs but continues to fondle me as I shrank down to normal size. Once that occurred, she simply released the hold she had on my limp penis. It cooled in the air as she moved upwards on my chest, still watching.

"So soft now." She said quietly. "So wonderful. Did Iâ Did I do right?"

"You were wonderful, Nora. Perfect." No other words were necessary. She rolled over on her back, head on my stomach, and looked at me. Her eyes went from one of my eyes to the other. Seeing no lie there, she smiled at me. "I love you."

"And I you." She rose up and I bent down to receive her kiss. I tasted myself slightly, but that was of no consequence. We'd shared our love now and had created 'The First Time'. However, we weren't finished yet. That moment would arrive soon enough. I did want to be absolutely sure I would be as good as new the next time. "Hungry?"

"For some reason, I am. I can't imagine why." She said with an enigmatic smile.

"Chocolate chip cookies. That's what we need!"

"And marshmallows!"

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We laughed and she sat up to allow me to rise. I got up and went to the kitchen area to retrieve the items. On the way back, I refilled out mugs with some milk. Calcium, I'd heard, helped to refill the male body more rapidly.

When I returned and handed her the plate, she took it and put it between her crossed legs. She was back in her initial exercise position now. I tried to do the same, but couldn't. I ended up putting my legs out on either side of her hips under her knees.

"One of these days maybe I can do that, but not tonight." I chuckled. "My knees and hips won't let me do it."

"It's all in training. You do it slowly; in stages. Singh can show you how."

We snacked on the cookies and sipped at our milk while just talking. It didn't seem to bother her that I would occasionally drop my eyes to her body and take in the delights I found there. Her breasts had relaxed and were simply soft mounds. I ate my cookies and drank my milk. Nora took one of the marshmallows and held it between her lips. As she used her index finger to push it in, she began applying her tongue around it. The sight was very reminiscent of what I'd felt earlier.

"Lucky marshmallow," I said. She snickered.

The plate was soon empty. She lifted it and put it aside. "Now. This may take a while because it is supposed to. So don't get anxious. Okay?"

"Okay." I promised.

"It begins just like the last time we were facing each other like this. First you massage my shoulders, arms, and wrists and then I do yours."

She composed herself, closed her eyes, and nodded. I lifted my hands and began. Slowly and with tenderness I ran my fingertips from her neckline down and over her shoulders and along her upper arms. When I reached her wrists, I lifted my hands and started over. Each time I did this, I followed a slightly different route. Soon her skin appeared to take on a glow which I was sure not caused by the fire.

As I massaged, I would occasionally watch the tips of her breasts. When her nipples rose and hardened I knew it was time. "Me now?" I asked quietly.

"You now." I dropped my hands into my lap; extending my palms down along my thighs. I'd felt my erection rising slightly, but didn't want to spoil the moment by checking to make sure; thinking that, no doubt, she would.

She began with the same exercise I'd just completed. Each pass downwards she also chose a new path until I knew for certain I was fully hardened yet again. When she murmured she was done I felt just the slightest brush of the back of her hand across the taut skin of my manhood.

As mood-altering it might be, I had to pause. "Nora? What about some form of protection?"

She eyes were downcast. "I want this to be perfect, Chet, but you're right. We should act cautiously here. I know I don't want to, butâ!"

"I know what you mean, Nora." I reached back behind me next to the little footlocker and found the foil pouch I'd put there. As unobtrusively as I could, I donned the condom it contained. "I don't want this either but it is

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much better than the alternative."

She smoothed it carefully. "I agree."

She looked up at me again. "I would like us to be face to face so we can see each other's pleasure. Get comfortable now."

I wiggled my butt slightly then drew up and extended each leg to make sure they hadn't gone to sleep. When I finished, she lifted her legs out of their cross and extended first one and then the other on either side of my hips. Once done, she reached out and wrapped her hands under my arms and held them flat against my back.

"You do the same to me now." I did as she said. When we both pulled, we came very close together indeed. Her breasts pressed against my chest. She giggled.

"You chest hair tickles me." She said with a smile. "Now, this is the best part I'm told."

I processed that statement: 'I'm told'. This absolutely meant that the other jerk never got this far. That made me very happy.

She shifted her arms up and over my shoulders and pulled her entire body upwards. I felt her hips pressing into my stomach; a slippery warmth kissed my navel and moved downwards as she began slowly lowering herself. Without actually noticing the very moment, I realized I was slipping upwards into her.

She stopped for a moment, poised as she was with my hardness at her most special place. "I've waited for this moment between us for almost two years now and it's finally happening," she breathed. Gently, very slowly, she continued to lower herself down onto my shaft until she enclosed me fully. With a deep sigh of contentment, she turned her head aside and clasped my upper body tightly.

"Oh! So warm! So filling! You're everything I've dreamt about. I've waited a long time for this."

We certainly had; both of us. I was buried into her as deeply as I could be. This position allowed full and complete penetration. As pinned to the floor as I was there was no way I could move. Instead, she began to move. She pulled on my shoulders and lifted upwards a couple of inches. Then, sighing each time, she slid back down. There was no doubt in my mind: she was making love to me.

After several slow up and down movements, she would pause and take the time to run her hands around my shoulders, past my neck, and pull my head forward so we could share a kiss. Then, her hips would move again with careful deliberation. Back and forth she maneuvered her body; forcing my penetrating manhood first to one side and then the other within her. The feeling was exquisite; like being held entrapped in the grip of some very soft - and warm - quicksand.

"I feel so completely filled up by you. Every inch within me is stretched taut, ready to burst. I can feel you pressing right up against the center of my being." I noted she began to wax very poetic when she got excited. This was something I could listen to all night.

I leaned back myself, holding her by the shoulders and looking downwards to where we were joined. "I wish I could stay here forever, Nora. How could we ever have had such feeling for each other and not let them show?"

"We - both of us - just didn't know, did we?" She answered. "We do now though. I also want this to go on forever. I know, in my heart, it won't, but I want to make this first time last as long as we can." She stopped

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moving; content to just relax and let us catch our breath.

I kissed my way up her arm to her shoulder and onwards to her neck and chin. Finally we touched lips and at that moment, Nora mewed softly and began her orgasm. She moaned deeply as the warmth flowed around me. I refrained from any movement at all but simply allowed her to shift slightly as she dictated. She took a big breath, held it, and then hissed it out between clenched teeth. "Ssssssss. Oh. Ah. Mmmm." She moaned into my ear.

With care, I sensed it was time for me to move again. When I did, she gasped as my manhood moved within her; rubbing sensitive tissues along the way. Two more such transitions and she started another orgasm - this one harder than the last. I prolonged the sensation by alternately tensing and relaxing my muscles enough to cause me to move inside her. She held tightly to me and bit my shoulder as waves of pleasure overtook her.

Finally, as all good things should, I had reached the time for me to supply my contribution to the lovemaking. With a small cry of joy, I began ejaculating deeply into her. Each tiny movement caused her to give a little yip. Surprising even myself, I managed to last longer than I'd never done before. She clung tightly to me, pressing her breasts into my chest as I continued pleasing her.

Both of us completely drained, we intertwined our fingers and looked into each other's eyes. She spoke first. "You gave me four wonderful releases, Chet." Four? I only counted three, but what the heck. "The last time was the same time as you did. I felt like I was coming apart. No, not quite right. I felt like I was opening like a flower in spring. You were in my center; pleasuring me."

She did sound like one of those books she liked reading. That didn't matter right now. What did matter was that she meant every word of it. I formed a good response. "I was inspired, Nora. This was to be our first time. I wanted a memorable time of it. For me, I think we have it. For you...?"

"Definitely. I will never forget this night - ever." She hugged me tight again, which caused her hips to slide downwards. Unwillingly, I felt myself receding. She moaned, yet pulled away. I took a second to glance at my watch. We'd been making love for over an hour! It had felt like many hours, but at the same time it felt like only seconds.

There was no doubt in my mind now. We had become a couple. I carefully slid backwards and lay flat. This pulled her over on top of me. A sheen of perspiration covered us both, but it was rapidly fading in the cool air. She shivered and I pulled the quilt up and over the two of us.

Still lying atop me, she put her head down on my chest and used her fingers to toy with my chest hair again. "Am I too heavy?" She asked softly.

"Not on your life, Nora. You stay just where you are."

She looked hard at my shoulder. "Did I do that?" She asked, meaning the small ring of teeth marks right on the point.

"Yes, but I hardly felt it. Don't worry about it. You can bite me any time."

She giggled. "Still; I am kind of heavy." she said. "I should probably get off and lie beside you." She looked up at me. "Shouldn't I?"

"If you wish." I held out an arm and she slid off me and down; to be cuddled up next to my ribs with my arm around her. I felt her fingers fondling me gently.

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"It's funny." She said.

"What?"

"How much joy this simple physical thing can bring to me. Capable of becoming large enough to fill me, yet so small and soft now."

"I never thought of me like that, Nora. I'm just a simple guy with needs and desires that, until tonight, I thought might never get totally satisfied. I know better now. I've found what I've been looking for my whole life. All is right in my world now." I bent and kissed the top of her head. She responded by tightening her grip on me.

"I am so very sleepy right now that I could sleep all night."

"I'm a bit more relaxed than I was a couple of hours ago too. Just do what you wish, Nora. I can wait - we have a lot of time left up here."

She moved off me, slid down so she was pressed lengthwise against my side, and then put her head in the crook of my arm.

With that, we drowsed until sleep overcame both of us.

Chapter 23: Snowbound! - Chapter 23

I cracked an eye open and groaned at the morning. Nora stirred beside me, but didn't wake. She had turned away during the night and was now lying with her warm fanny pushed up against my side. My watch told me it was already after eight, but I really didn't care. The excitement of yesterday, plus the pure pleasure we'd shared last night, simply would not release me from the mantle of half-sleep.

Surprisingly, and under normal circumstances, I thought I'd be as taut as a bowstring being next to such a warm body as Nora's, but I wasn't. Moving carefully so that I could reach her shoulder with my hand, I bent and kissed her neck. This time she moved, stretching her legs out straight and humming in her throat.

"Hmmm. Oh, my! What a deep sleep that was. I don't think I even woke up once." Nora said softly, reaching back and putting her hand on my hip. "Roll up next to me, Chet. I don't want to get up yet. It's so nice and warm here next to you." Her fingers moved back and forth. This time it was causing a reaction and I found myself stirring almost at once at her touch.

Nora moved slowly, almost languorously, until she encountered what she was seeking. "Ah. There you are." She whispered, exploring me with her fingers. "I had a dream about you, Chet. You and I were outside, somewhere, and it was warm. We didn't have any clothes on except some skins of some kind; very primitive. We were next to a tall waterfall that threw mist on us. The water wasn't cold though, it was warm. Are there any warm springs around here?"

"I don't know, Nora. The nearest one I can think of is maybe Glenwood Springs. People claim that there are hot springs up above the town, but I don't know if anyone has found any. Something like that would be pretty cool though, so to speak."

"Yeah. A soak in a hot pool of water would be great right now. I really relax at home in my parent's hot tub."

"Well, I can make up a tub for you, but it won't be especially big. Remember that tub I used before?" She nodded. "That's the biggest one I can get for you. If you want, I can start heating water right now. You build up the fire and I'll go out and grab some buckets of snow."

She broke into a huge grin. "Yeah! That would feel very nice right now. Having that creepy guy in here made me feel really bad somehow. It really ruined the atmosphere; I don't know - ambience, maybe - that we had going for us here." She rolled over onto her back and then further snuggled onto my outstretched arm. "I'm certainly not going to let that stupid old poacher's intrusion here mess things up for long though." She dragged her fingernails back down along my stomach, making me quiver. "But right now, all I want is a warm bath. Maybe the two of us?" She chuckled.

I sighed at the thought of the two of us in the tub. "I *know* there's enough room in there for both of us but I will go get some water hot for you, Nora." I said ruefully.

As I rose to my knees, Nora followed me up and gave me a raspberry-style kiss on my tummy as I passed her face. "I'll be waiting, big boy."

I got to my feet and went behind the curtain to get dressed. While I did my morning ablutions, I reflected once again on the changes that had come over both Nora and I. Instead of being a little reticent about even talking about sex, she was getting bolder by the hour. Even a week ago I doubted that she would even have entertained the thought about what she and I had done last night.

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I clumped out the door after pulling on my coat and went first to the privy. Once that was taken care of, I ran the truck for a bit while gathering up a couple of bucketfuls of snow to heat. In all, I hauled six buckets into the cabin and dumped them into the tub which Nora had dragged over next to the fire again. She'd also added some more logs to the fire; building it up. The sides of the tub were getting warm already.

"Nice fire." I said, after closing the door. "Should heat up the water in no time. Let me put these two buckets even closer so they'll boil."

Nora had turned to the window and was peering out. "It's really cloudy today, Chet. Are we going to get some more snow?"

"I don't know for sure, Nora. I called the Weather Service down in Denver the other day and they said we might get some, but from what I'm seeing outside I think we will."

"Will it be bad?"

"Probably not. We'll get a bit of wind first and that will flatten out the open spaces and build up the drifts against the trees. Nothing to worry about."

Nora busied herself by heating water for tea and leafing through a magazine she'd found on a shelf. I judged that both buckets were hot enough so I dumped them into the tub and refilled them with more snow. It wouldn't be long now.

About an hour later, the tub was a third full of fairly hot water. So hot, in fact, that Nora had to add just a little cold water to it before she pronounced it ready and dumped in a small scoop of bubble bath. She swirled it around until it foamed up and then took her robe off and settled down into the lilac-smelling bubbles; closing her eyes in the process.

I put both buckets of faintly steaming water within her reach. "Here you go. Just add them when you need to. Take care not to burn yourself. I'm going out and locate a log to chop up for more firewood.

"Okay," she sighed, never opening her eyes. "I'll be right here."

I watched her for a few moments and then turned for the door, putting my jacket on as I left the cabin. I looked across the parking area and into a small copse of woods. In it I knew there were several fallen logs. Some were pretty large and, since I didn't have a chainsaw, I made a mental note to add one to any list I might make for future use. I would have to just use an axe or my metal crosscut saw.

I swapped the warmer gloves I was wearing for tough work gloves and dragged out the double-bitted axe that was normally kept in a small shed at the back of the cabin. Tramping through the snow to the trees, I warmed up a bit by swinging the axe overhead. I knew I was going to be warmer yet after this workout.

Chopping three to four inch thick branches into manageable pieces about six feet long proved surprisingly easy. The wood was cold and dry so I was able to make short work of it. Soon I had around a dozen of the small logs. Now it was time to drag them over to the back of the cabin - not an easy task. As I contemplated the work ahead, my brain finally kicked in. Why not use the winch to drag the whole bunch of them over? I worked the angles out and saw that if I positioned the truck back behind the cabin, I could run out the cable, wrap it around the bundle of logs, and power them across the clearing.

I set about putting my plan into action. First I let Nora know I was moving the truck so she wouldn't get nervous. Then I backed it up against the line of trees that sat next to the privy and set the parking brake. I also

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jammed some rocks against all four wheels. Then I unpacked the remote winch control from its plastic box and plugged it in under the hood. Once the winch brake was released, I could pull the cable across the parking area.

Wrapping the cable several times around the whole bundle, I tucked the hook under the incoming cable. Now it was time to test my theory. Picking up the remote control, I used the toggle switches to put tension on the cable, and, once it was stretched taut, I stood a ways off and flipped the toggle a final time. The winch whined, slowed, and began to tug the pile easily across the packed snow.

Soon I had the whole pile out in front of the truck. I unwrapped the cable and used the controls to wind it up on the winch neatly. I noted my first practical use of my new winch! Now, all I had to do was use the crosscut saw and break the six-footers into bite-sized pieces and split the big ones. Woof!

It was hard work and I paused several times to get a drink of cold water. My second trip inside the cabin found Nora out of the tub and huddled on bear in her flannel nightgown perusing another novel. She hardly looked up when I came in and left. Finally, I had all the wood split nicely and piled up outside the log door. After I tugged the tarp over the whole pile, took off my work gloves, and re-parked the truck out in front of the cabin, I went back inside.

Nora looked up when I came in. "Done already?"

"Already? It's been three hours."

"Really! I had no idea. I saved the bath water for you if you want."

The room was filled with the scent of Nora's lilac bubble bath. *'Well, what the hell,'* I thought. *'Nobody up here but us two anyway, so why not smell good.'*

I nodded, almost to myself, in acknowledgement of my musings. "Okay. Let me add some more warm water and set up two more buckets of snow." I went out, filled the buckets again, and put them next to the fire to melt.

Surveying my handiwork, I went behind the screen and stripped. Wrapped in only a towel, I went back to the tub and stuck a hand into it; judging it still warm enough - for now anyway. Slowly I eased my way down into the hot water, slipping a little on the galvanized bottom due to the bubble soap. There was no way I could stretch out full-length, so I made do with what I had. Nora looked over and cracked up at me with my knees in the air.

"You look just like I did, Chet! Either your knees get cold, or your chest does. You can't get everything into the hot water. I'm glad you put it next to the fire though - helps warm things up."

"Yeah. I'm going to suggest a horse trough for next year when I see Dave again. Maybe we can figure out a way to have some tubing installed in the fireplace so we can have hot water. It could work."

"Now, that would be nice to have. I'd vote for it!" Nora went back to her book and I went to work with a washcloth.

When I was done, I carefully stood up and grabbed the towel to wrap myself up. Standing in front of the fire, I dried off and hopped over behind the curtain to dress. Since it was only just past noon, I opted for a flannel shirt and jeans with nice warm socks. Smelling of lilacs, I went over to the table and kissed Nora on the head. She mumbled something that I didn't catch. She was really engrossed in the novel.

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"Yoo hoo! Nora?" I called. "Want some lunch?"

She looked up at me and smiled. "I'm famished. Yes. What do you have in mind?"

I rummaged through our larder and came up with a can of chicken noodle soup, which I held up. "How about this and PB and J sandwiches?"

"Sounds good. I'll cut the bread if you'll get the PB and J. Oh, and hand me the butter also."

I did, and then put down all the other stuff she wanted. I opened the can of soup and dumped it into a pan; then added water and set it on the burner to heat. While I was waiting I looked out the window. The clouds had lowered even more and were now hiding the peak to the west of us. It looked like we were in for some more snow. I didn't want to worry Nora though, so I just held my tongue.

Nora slapped down the knife she'd been using to make the sandwiches and pronounced her work completed. I pulled the hot soup off the burner and set it down on the table also. Silently, we began to eat.

"How's your book going?" I asked.

"Swell. I wonder why the hero and heroine always have a couple of fruitless encounters before they actually make sparks. Almost every book is like that."

"Sells books, I guess. Who wants to read a book that doesn't go anywhere or one that starts right out with the main characters jumping each other's bones?"

She laughed at that. "Yeah, I guess so. It does make for good storytelling though. We acted that way also if I'm remembering correctly."

I thought a little and agreed. "Yeah, I guess we did. Maybe we're just characters in a book and don't know it. Wouldn't that be strange?"

"Yeah," Nora giggled. "Maybe we are, in a way. I've read a couple of books that had a storyline almost like ours. Not in a snowbound cabin, but close - a skiing chalet in France."

"This is hardly a skiing chalet, that's for sure."

"And, I'm not similar to the heroine at all. She was 'large-bosomed, free, and uninhibited'," Nora quoted. "That's not me."

"Hmmm," I hummed, miming myself shaping her bosoms. "Nope. Just fine for me though."

Nora colored up her neck. "Stop that, Chet. I told you my books were silly. You read them too, remember."

"Yeah. Just kidding." I chuckled. "I think we might get some more snow today."

She looked up. "Really? How much?"

"Can't say for sure, but maybe a few inches. The wind's picking up some too."

She craned her head to look out the front window and watched flurries of snow being blown up from the ground. "Pretty."

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I stood and walked to the window with my arms crossed. "I've always liked winter. The snow. The cold. I've never been happier than when I'm surrounded by snow. Must have been my upbringing in Alaska."

"You've been in Alaska?" Nora said with rising inflection. "For sure?"

"Yup. Lived there for two years when I was younger. I even learned how to drive a dog sled with four dogs."

"I bet that was fun."

"The most fun I've had with my clothes on. Um ... that was pretty tasteless. Sorry."

Nora laughed heartily. "I've never heard it put that way exactly, but it fits somehow."

Still chuckling to herself, she continued reading. I stood there in front of the window; hands locked behind my back like some sea captain on a bridge, and watched the snow swirl and the clouds lower further. No, wait. Those weren't clouds; they were a wall of snow coming downhill towards us.

"Nora!" I called. "Come over here and watch. We're about to get hit with a big flurry of snow."

She looked up in alarm. Then, noting my calm demeanor stood slowly and walked over to me. She slipped her arm around my waist and hugged me to her. I bent down and kissed the top of her shoulder at the junction of her robe and her skin. She purred at me.

We watched the rows of trees in the distance disappear as the snow moved towards the cabin. Soon, it was directly across from us. Stray flakes moved about, slamming themselves up against the porch and the truck in the yard. In a minute or so, the main front engulfed the cabin. One second we could see across the clearing and the next it was hard to make out the truck; and it was only twenty feet in front of us.

"Gosh! That's a lot of snow. Will it be bad?"

"Probably not. When it arrives like this, there's a lot of wind behind it. With wind, the front will move through pretty fast."

"Good. Oh, pooh! I have to use the privy. Wouldn't you know it."

"Dress warmly for the wind."

She did. Her fur-lined coat wrapped up tightly about her, she slipped on her boots and clumped across the porch, dropped off the end, and went around the corner. I waited, staring out the window, until she returned.

She stopped at the porch and shook the accumulated snow off her coat then pushed the door open. "Wooh! Very windy out there. I got snow up my nose even."

"Go stand by the fire then, Nora." I pointed. As she passed, I brushed more snow off her hair. She stood facing the fire and let me wrap my arms around her waist. I bent and kissed the back of her neck. "Would you like some tea?"

"HMMMMM. That would be heavenly."

"I'll put on some water to heat then." Reluctant to let go, I was still holding her a minute later. She jolted my reverie.

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"Ahem. About that waterâ!"

"Oh, sorry. Woolgathering." I kissed the top of her head and went to fix the tea. When the water boiled, I made us both a cup, and then called her over. Her nose was pink and her cheeks were flushed with warmth. "Feel warmer now?"

"Definitely. Pass the sugar."

I handed it to her and watched as she dropped in two spoonfuls into her mug. I took the spoon and did the same. We remained silent, clinking our stirring spoons and staring into the tea. I heard the wind picking up as it occasionally blew snow up against the window. This may not be such a small front coming through. I began to wish I'd asked for more information when I had the chance. On the other hand, I decided to remain carefully calm to avoid upsetting Nora.

Chapter 24: Snowbound! - Chapter 24

Nora went back to reading. I began to wonder if we'd brought enough material to keep us busy if we really got snowed in. I stood and went over to the cupboard next to the fireplace and began to browse through the various little doors and slots. The first thing I found was three decks of cards. I didn't know if Nora like to play cards, but I did. In one cabinet there were several puzzles and three game boards: checkers, Parcheesi, and Monopoly. I couldn't find any of the Parcheesi pieces however so that was out.

Another cabinet yielded something even more interesting - a dice cup and a box full of dice. "Hey, Nora!" I called. "I found some dice. Want to play Checkopoly?"

"Play what? I've never heard of that before."

"Of course not, I just made it up. We can use the checker board, the Monopoly pieces, some dice, and a deck of cards."

"That sounds silly. So tell me, you do you play it?"

"I haven't a clue but we can have fun making it up."

She laughed and put her book aside. "Well, how do we begin?"

"First, we put several stacks of cards on some of the squares of the board. Then we put little houses and hotels on some other squares. Starting here, we move our pieces one die roll up and down the rows. If we stop on a deck of cards, we both draw and low card has to recite a quote from something - anything - just quote it. Then we continue. If we land on a house, we have to buy it with Monopoly money. If we land on a hotel, we have to skip a turn. Now, you add some more rules."

"If we roll two dies, and we get double-sixes, we can jump from one row of squares to the next one. Rolling snake eyes makes us jump one row back. I feel silly, but the game sounds like fun."

We began a raucous game of Checkopoly, making up more rules as we went along. Laughing at every move, it helped to pass time quickly until the room began to get dark. I rose and went to the window. "Snow has eased a little. We got about six inches."

"That much?" Said Nora, coming over to my side. "Wow. I guess so."

The truck was again buried under snow and I decided to just let it stay that way. We didn't need anything in it, and wouldn't until morning when we got out some more butter and bread which I kept frozen in the truck.

"Ah, never mind, Nora. We can have some more beef stew tonight."

"That, I like." She said. "I'll even make us some toast if you'll build up a good bed of coals up front for me."

"Done". I walked over and did just that while Nora opened the big can. She pumped up the stove and lit it. After dumping the stew into a pot, she set it to heat. I pulled several slices of bread out and slid them carefully between the jaws of a couple of weenie cookers, then latched them shut.

I handed the long-handled toasters to her over my arm. "There you go, Milady. Hie thee to yon fire and commit toastery."

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"Are you always this nutty?"

"Only when trapped in a cabin with a lovely lady. Then, for some reason, all reason leaves me."

Nora made a rude noise. "I wilt toast, O master!" Then she walked across the room holding the toasters out like two scepters.

In the darkening gloom of night, I lit the gas lantern but Nora told me to turn it off and set out several candles. "I like candles better. Much nicer than that horrible white glare."

I had to admit that she was right. Candles were far more romantic than a lantern. We ate in silence, each with our own thoughts. I was very contented today for some reason. Over the last couple of days, my fire had been banked and, I suppose, Nora's had been also. Today, we just generally yukked it up for laughs. Maybe it was a reflex action caused by the relief our emotions had gotten last night.

After dinner, I made a trip to the privy and Nora followed in my footsteps. She managed to get snow into her boots, so we spent ten minutes warming her toes by the fire. She got up again and went behind the screen. When she came out, she was wearing her cotton granny gown. There was no doubt in my mind she was nude under it. Fair is fair. I'd done the same thing and was now in my sleeping shorts. Then we unfolded the bear for sleeping and lay back watching the firelight flicker and smoky eddies dance up the chimney.

Nora rolled to face me. "Chet?"

"Hmmm?" I said with my eyes closed. "What, Honey?"

"What's going to really happen to us when we get back to Boulder? I know we've had a wonderful interlude here, except for the gunplay, but what happens when we get back to our own lives?"

"I really don't know, Nora. You know, now, how I feel about you so maybe we just might make a go of it as a couple."

Her hand slid across my chest, tickling the hairs thereon. "I can think of several people who just won't believe it. Willa might though. She was the one who urged me to go."

"You mean you originally didn't want to?" I asked.

"Ah, well. I did and I didn't. Willa was the one who pushed me over the edge. My main objection was just that even though we've known each other for quite a while, I just never thought of myself as particularly romantic." She air-quoted the last word.

"I defy anyone to share what we've shared these few days and not bond together tightly. We've made beautiful music together and each time it will get better."

"Do you mean that?"

"I certainly do!"

Nora scooted closer and lifted her leg over mine. "I am so pleased to hear you say that. You know. There were times before that I wished with all my heart you'd just hold me, kiss me, and tell me you loved me. Damn, I was shy. At least I'm not now. Not any more now, I guess."

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"No," I said slowly, thinking back over the last few days. "I guess not."

"I just love this about you - us - me; whatever. We can just be ourselves now without any of my shyness. A month ago I would have been embarrassed to be even thinking of us up here. And now, it just seems so natural to be doing it."

"It is natural, Nora. Natural between two people who are finally at rest with their own fears and doubts."

"Oh, that's a heavy thought. Did someone say that in a book?"

"No, I don't think so. It just sort of popped into my head."

"Well, I like it.: She said with a nod. "'Finally at rest with their own fears and doubts'. Yeah, I like it."

"It's yours."

"Thank you, Chet." She lifted her leg again and rolled away from me, then pushed her fanny tightly against my hip. "Roll over against me, please. I want to have you just hold me tight."

I did as she asked.

"You are so warm, Chet. I like having you up against me. It's like all is right with the world now. Do you want to make love?"

"Only if you do, Nora. I found out long ago that I'm one of those guys that just likes the contact and not necessarily the act of love. Where I am now is just fine with me."

I reached over her ribs and cupped a breast gently in my palm. "Now, if you wish, we can just go to sleep."

"This all feels so wonderful right now. I could stay like this for a very long time."

"So could I, Nora. So could I."

We fell asleep, spooned together. Sometime during the night, I woke and rolled over the other way. Sleepily, Nora woke a little and followed me over. Now it was she who spooned my back. Her hand flopped over my waist and pulled tightly against my ribs. She kissed my shoulder and began softly snoring again.

Chapter 25: Snowbound! - Chapter 25

We woke the next morning well after eight in the morning. It wasn't that we'd overslept, but that the world outside was still fairly dark. I got up and built the fire up a little more with some kindling and bigger logs. I looked over at Nora and decided to let her sleep while I made some hot chocolate. She did stir, but didn't wake, when I waved the smell of cocoa over at her sleeping form.

Finally, when I'd come back from the privy, she woke and stretched - reaching for the roof. "Good morning, Chet! Any more snow?"

"Just a little more. Nothing to be worried about." In actuality, we'd had another six inches and the ground was now a foot deep in snow around the truck and across the small clearing. I poured her a cup of chocolate and brought it over to her. She pushed down the top of bear and lifted the mug.

"Ooh. Hot!" She grimaced. "I'll have to wait until it cools." She set it back down. "Right now, I have to use the facility."

"Dress warmly, Nora. It snowed around six inches last night."

She got up, pulled on her long-john style leggings and a woolen top, and then went towards the door. She peered out the kitchen window and then turned to me. "Is that going to be a problem?" She asked again, pointing to all the snow.

"Probably not. It may be gone by the time we're ready to leave. In any case, I still have the winch and we've traveled the road on foot. We can do it."

"I sure hope so. I gotta go." She drew the door open and slipped out into the wind. She followed my footsteps, lifting her feet up and over into the next footprint, and setting them down. She seemed to be walking much better this morning as I watched her go around the corner. I turned to the kitchen to fix a more substantial breakfast. Pancakes, I thought. That's what we need this morning.

When I finished mixing the batter, Nora came back, shuddering and flapping her arms around her waist. "Damn! It's really cold out there. No more snow, but it's blowing a bit. I need coffee instead of tea today!"

I swiveled around, picked up the coffee pot, and poured her a mug. She added a little milk and a spoonful of sugar, then sat down and sipped it.

"We're going to be here in the cabin all day?" She asked.

"Unless you have a better idea."

"How about we do some more snowshoeing? I liked it before."

I gave it some thought. We could just go walking around and see how badly the drifts were. No harm in that. I voiced my reflections.

"Sounds good to me." She said enthusiastically. "I'm going to leave these leggings on and add a nice warm undershirt also. Then my snowsuit."

"You have a snowsuit in that baggage?" I asked. "Wherever did you hide it?"

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"In the yellow nylon bag. It is a self-contained suit. Skiers use them all the time. The whole thing fits into a tiny little bag." She crossed the room and went behind the curtain. She emerged seconds later and tossed me a yellow bag about the size of a catcher's mitt. "Here it is."

I examined the bag and unsnapped the top. I could see the suit must have been tightly packed. "How can something that flimsy keep you warm?"

"It's made of space stuff. Like the survival blankets they sell. Keeps you warm in a hundred below temperatures or something like that."

I snickered. "Doubt it!"

"Well, you know what I mean. Can I have a pancake or two?"

I hustled about, pouring more batter into the pan and built her a huge pancake the size of a dinner plate. She was sitting at the table and when I plopped it on her plate she laughed. "Wow, that's the size of a building!"

"Eat up. You'll need your strength."

She slathered butter on it, then syrup, and dug in. I whipped up one for myself and turned the fire off. We ate in silence until both pancakes were gone. When she finished her coffee I picked up all the plates and stuff and dropped them into a pan of hot water. Nora added soap chips and we both washed and dried them.

"Chet? We're going to have to get the snowshoes if we're going to use them outside aren't we?"

"Probablyâ" I slapped my forehead. "Well, shoot! They're out in the back of the truck. Good thing I left the snow shovel on the porch, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You get started and I'll heat more water for cocoa. It's better than coffee for cold weather."

"Okay." I began dressing warmly. Once I was all zipped, buckled, and fastened into my outdoors clothes I clumped over to the door and turned back to her with a raised hand. "If I don't return, pace yourself with the remaining food. Spring is just a few short months away." Nora giggled.

The snow was indeed deep. I broke trail that, in places, was around fourteen inches deep. In the lee of the truck, it tapered off to around six inches. Luckily, the back end was clean so I didn't have to clear around the tailgate. Along with our snowshoes, I gathered up our hiking poles also. When you're out in deep snow it is a pretty good idea to carry a pole to check in areas where you aren't sure logs or stones exist. They can also help you get back on your feet if you fall.

After taking all that over to the porch, I went back and grabbed two loaves of bread and a few other food-type items we were getting low on. I knocked on the door and handed the food to Nora, telling her I'd be back in a bit after shoveling a trail to the outhouse.

Twenty minutes later, panting with exertion, I pushed the door open after stomping the snow off me as best as I could. Nora met me, dressed similarly to me, and announced she was headed out back.

"Don't freeze anything off I might miss," I called after her.

"If you didn't, then I won't," she countered. I laughed.

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Breakfast over, we sat and mapped out route for today. Nora was filled with adventure and wanted to take her camera. I figured it was just below freezing so her batteries should be fine for a while, but warned her to carry a spare set buried deeply under her coats.

We buttoned ourselves back up and sat on the edge of the porch to put on our snowshoes. I carried a backpack and Nora carried a small lunch haversack. "What in the world do you have in there?" She asked, clearly puzzled.

"Extra water, a couple of flares, some beef jerky, and three big chocolate bars. One never knows if we'll get stranded somewhere and need a fire."

She looked thoughtful. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But - where did you hide the chocolate until now?"

"In the truck. It stays hard that way. In here, it would get soft."

Nora stared at me, a smile quivering on her lips, until I reviewed what I'd just said. "I can't believe I just said that."

"You did," she snickered.

"Oy!"

After strapping on our shoes, Nora took a few tentative steps into the snow. "My ankle feels fine now. Must have just been bruised and not sprained. Come on, let's go!"

I shuffled after her. "You lead for a while at your own pace. I'll just follow."

We slogged through drifts until we reached the small logging road that was somewhat sheltered by the overhead pine trees. Squirrels, who should have been sleeping in their nests, scolded us all the way. We took out time, stopping frequently to lower our heart rates, until we approached the cutoff for either the mine or the flat meadow.

"Which way?" I asked our intrepid trailblazer.

"What if we just went straight ahead? Where would that take us?"

"Eventually, we'd end up over the Continental Divide. In the short term, we'll drop into a small valley with a little lake at the center. In the summer it makes for good fishing."

"Well, let's go that way then. I want to see everything up here before we go back."

"You mean today?"

"No, silly. I mean before we go back to Boulder." She paused. "Gosh. That's only three days from now. Will we be able to get through?" Clearly, she was still worried about that.

"Sure," I said confidently. "No problems. Like I said, we might have to winch a bit, but we'll make it."

We approached a small saddle in the terrain. The wind had swept it clear of snow but the small stones and lichen underfoot made things a bit slippery. Nora fell - heavily - and lay on her back for a moment.

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"You okay?" I asked, concerned that she may have hurt herself again.

"Yeah. Just let me catch my breath. When I fell, I hit on my back and it knocked the wind out of me."

I eased my backpack off and sank to my knees. Rummaging around, I pulled out a big bar of chocolate and whacked it on a stone. Inside the wrapper, I felt it shatter. Carefully I tore a corner of the package off and fished out several nice chunks and handed them to Nora.

"Oh, man. That looks wonderful to me." She stuck a sliver into her mouth and moaned. "Gooooood!" She closed her eyes. "And cold too."

We sat on a downed log and sucked on cold chips of chocolate while taking sips of water. The snow had frosted the trees all around us and, due to the warming of the sun, an occasional 'plop' could be heard when the accumulated snow slid to the ground. One tree, directly across the clearing from us, released a very top layer of snow. This, in turn, crashed into lower branches and started an avalanche effect. Eventually, the entire tree was denuded of snow.

This caused Nora to look upwards into the overhanging branches above us. Sure enough, there were snow-laden areas there also. She quickly stood up and walked out from under the tree. "I just bet one of those is going to drop on us." She said with conviction.

"Nah, probably not." I had no sooner uttered the words when the lowest branch dumped snow down my back. Nora began laughing and pointing to me as I struggled to pull snow from the back of my neck. "Verrrrreeee funny," I grumped. This caused her to renew her laughter. Finally, I just had to join in.

"Oh, you're a riot, Nora. A regular riot!" I said in my best Ralph Kramden voice. "One of these days - to the moon!" I pointed skyward.

She looked blank for perhaps a few seconds and then the reference hit her. "The Honeymooners! I get it. I haven't thought of them in years. It sure was a funny show."

"Yeah. I guess we'd better mush along, Nora, if we want to get to the lake by noon." I repacked my knapsack and slung it over my shoulders. She picked up her walking stick and handed me mine.

We pushed off, shuffling along on our snowshoes. The snow appeared a bit windblown and crusty on top so it was good we were wearing our snowshoes. Even then, we would occasionally crunch through the sink into powdery snow under the crust. If we weren't careful, we would lose our balance once again; or Nora would re-injure her ankle. This time I broke trail for the two of us.

Just before noon, we crested a small rise and the vista laid out before us was breathtaking. Traversing from left to right were groups of bare-branched quaking aspens interleaved with dark green evergreens. The snow had drifted downhill from them, forming ridges of around a foot or so in height between the treeline and the edge of the lake. We could see no open water at all. The snow had covered the ice but we could tell where the lake was due to the smoothed-out areas where the wind had scoured it flat.

Across the lake and down the valley, the course of the stream was outlined in willow bushes and large stones rolled down from the surrounding hillsides. Over to the right was a small rock wall with stunted pine trees clustered at its base. Sudden movement startled both Nora and I.

She pointed, but didn't cry out. I saw perhaps ten or twelve head of Elk grazing through the lower valley. The wind, which was holding steady up-valley towards us, didn't give away our scent. I touched Nora on the

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shoulder and motioned her back to sit on a large stone with me. Silently, she eased her backpack open, pulled out her camera, and began taking photos of the herd.

"They're beautiful!" She whispered to me. "Look at those antlers!" She pointed to a large bull off to one side.

He did indeed have a great rack. I pulled up her camera and used the viewfinder to zoom in on the big guy. Nine points on one side and eight on the other. I told Nora this and handed her the camera back. She took a picture of him.

While we watched, one of the cows let out a loud squeaking grunt and two calves came into view from the underbrush where they'd been sleeping. Nora took pictures of them also, exclaiming in a low voice that they "looked so cute."

"Well, cute or not, the mom would try to run over you if you got near them."

"Really? What about dad?"

"He wouldn't care. He'd just take off in an opposite direction and leave the harem."

"That's cruel. Really? He'd do that?"

"Yup. When I've been hunting I've seen a bull Elk send two or three females out into a meadow to check for hunters before he'd appear. It's their way of survival, I guess."

"Well, I think its mean."

"Tell that to the Elk."

The herd eventually moved down the valley so we got a bit closer to the lake and under the cover of several large boulders that formed a small open area devoid of snow. I went over and broke off several dead branches and kindled a tiny fire. "Not supposed to do this, but I don't think there's any danger of fire right now. Anyway, it's the best way to have hot dogs."

"You brought hot dogs? I love roasted hot dogs! Yummy!"

I pulled my knife and whittled down a couple of cooking sticks from a willow branch and then jammed a dog onto the tines. As soon as I handed Nora hers, she held it out over the fire. I did the same when I had mine impaled. As they cooked, Nora slid over next to me. "What else did you bring?" She nibbled my earlobe.

"A can of peaches and the chocolate - but there isn't much left of that. I have enough hot dogs for three each. Is that going to be enough?"

"For me it is. For some reason, though, I get really hungry out in the wild."

"Maybe it is just the good living, fresh air, and all that."

"Maybe it's just the sex." She said, giving my earlobe another workout. Then she flushed. "I can't believe I just said that. I guess I really have changed - a lot."

I had no comeback for that.

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When we finished our impromptu lunch, I kicked snow over the fire and made sure it was out by stirring more snow into the mix until steam stopped rising. Using one of my snowshoes, I scooped several more loads of snow over the ashes.

"I think its dead, Chet." Nora chuckled. "We can make sure if we come back this way. What's out beyond the lower part of the lake?"

"A big cliff. In the summer, there is a waterfall that drops around ninety feet into a deep pool. In the winter, all you can see is a lot of icicles stuck together all the way down. There is a path, but it would be kind of dangerous in winter; being covered in ice."

"That's the only way down?"

"Yup." I pointed across the small valley. "Over there is another mine shaft. This one is vertical. Goes down a long way."

"How far?"

"I have no idea. I dropped a big stone in once and five seconds later I heard a splash. At just over thirty-two feet per second per second that makes it deep."

"Are there many of those around? I hope they're marked."

"There are a few. In well-traveled areas, they try to keep them marked. In this area, probably not much. As I recall, there was an old rotten wood fence around it and a rusty warning sign."

"Well, let's stay away from that one then." She shuddered. "We could go back."

"Sure we can. I'll show you another route back that we haven't been on yet. First we have to climb a bit, and then its downhill all the way."

She picked up her little pack and threaded her arms through the straps. I hefted mine and we started out towards a large stand of aspens on the side of the hill. By the time we were halfway through them, we'd started up a steep incline. In order to reach the top, we ended up pulling our way using tree trunks. Puffing hard, we topped out on a rocky ridge.

There was a shallow bowl before us filled with rock scabble that had fallen from a cliff. Around the edges of the bowl were larger rocks but a small game trail was visible. The gaps between some of the rocks were so narrow we had to go single file. I led. Since we were on the south side of the cliff, and it was reflecting the dull rays of the sun, the snow was nowhere near as deep as we'd come through on our way here.

As we approached the ridgeline, the wind picked up and began to ruffle the surrounding bare branches. Once we topped the ridge, we felt the full brunt of the wind. It was very cold and took our breath away.

"Now, that is a cold wind," said Nora, tugging her coat collar closed against it.

"We'll be out of it as soon as we go around that flank off to the right and into the pines." With no further chatter, Nora headed that way and I followed.

We reached the comfort of the trees in ten minutes. Our eyes were dry from the constant wind so when we finally got out of it, they teared up. She dug a tissue out of her pocket and we wiped the wetness off.

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"Can we rest a bit?" She asked.

"Sure." I sat down on a log and patted the bark next to me. "Have a seat."

Chapter 26: Snowbound! - Chapter 26

We sat on the log for a while, resting. Nora pulled out her camera and shot some pictures of the evergreen trees against the grey of the hillside. I watched her while she took pictures. She had a good eye for composition.

"When we get back to the cabin," I said. "We can go through the pictures and see how they look under lower-light conditions. Right now, they probably look washed out in the sunlight."

She pressed the menu buttons and reviewed some she had just taken. "You're right. I can barely make out some of the features. Will they look better in the cabin?"

"Sure they will. Bright light doesn't play well with LCD screens unless they have a very bright backlight."

"Ah. I see."

She stood and brushed snow off her bottom. When I started to get up also, she motioned for me to stay put. "Just going over there to the base of the cliff and see what's there. I'll be back."

"Okay." I lay back, laced my fingers behind my head, and leaned back against a tree trunk. She worked her way up the slight slope by taking huge steps and sinking down to her knees in the drifts. She wasn't struggling, so I let her go. When she reached the cliff, she turned back to me and waved. I waved back.

The air was crisp and once the sun had broken through the low cloud cover, it was almost warm. I unbuttoned my coat and flapped it several times to let the moisture under it evaporate. One good thing about being at this altitude was that moisture of any kind dried up very rapidly. This is why we had to keep the bread in sealed plastic containers.

Nora startled me when she tapped my knee. I hadn't even heard her coming back down the hill. "I didn't see you coming."

"I know. I found a little trail over there in the trees. It was easy to follow because there wasn't any snow. I saw five rabbits!"

"Really?" My interest perked up. "Want some more rabbit for dinner?"

She thought a moment. "Sure. Why not."

We left our packs on the log and crept back up the trail she'd come down. I had my pistol out and at the ready down by my leg. I wasn't quite prepared for the burst of white that sped across the trail and didn't even get a shot off. The rabbit plunged into a small bush and disappeared.

"Pooh!" Nora said. She cast around and pointed. "Over there. Another one."

I raised the gun and fired. The rabbit jumped up and then lay still. Nora started forward, but I held my hand in front of her. "Wait a second. I think there's another one right behind it."

We waited a few seconds and then, sure enough, another snowshoe rabbit appeared. I dropped it also.

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"I'm not sure you really want to see this, Nora. I'm going to skin them right here and put them into the empty sandwich bags."

"I want to see, Chet. If it gets too bad, I'll leave."

"Okay." I drew my knife and approached the two animals.

Partially blocking her view, I attended to the first one. When I had the pelt clean, I turned and laid it on the snow to dry. The second rabbit was even easier. Nora took a couple of pictures of me as I cleaned it. I guess I needn't have worried about her as she was more curious than anything else. At least she wasn't squeamish.

She picked up the second pelt and ran her fingers across it. "So soft!"

"Like I said, rabbit fur makes great glove liners. It's been a while since Scout camp, but I think I could do it again."

"I was a Girl Scout," said Nora. "They wouldn't really let us go camping without all kinds of supervision. Even then, we never did stuff like you're doing now. We had to learn things like basket weaving and making things out of clay. It was the guys that got to do neat things. I really wanted to do them too."

"Well," I said, as I finished packing the cut-up rabbits in snow and stuffing them into the plastic bags. "If you want, I'd be happy to bring you up here in the summer. We could have a great time along with David and his family. I could pitch a tent for us in those trees across the parking area."

"That would be great, Chet. I'd like that."

I stood and shouldered my pack. I helped Nora with hers and we began our trek back to the cabin. The sun continued to shine even as it headed for the horizon. The wind dropped also and soon it was almost warm. I took off my coat, which left just the heavy flannel shirt, and tucked it into my pack. Nora decided to leave her coat on. "Still kind of chilly to me for that."

I nodded and we resumed walking. The snow sparkled in the sunlight and when we got to the small stream we found that it was running rather well. Most of the ice had melted. I made a mental note to check the thermometer in the truck when we got back. I had a feeling this warming trend was going to continue for a while. If it did, the water that was produced could be more of a problem than the actual snow. I kept that information to myself.

We reached the cabin just as the sun went behind the ridge. I took a look at the thermometer and found it sitting right at forty-three degrees. If it was this warm, or warmer, next morning we were in for some nice weather. Nora pushed the door open and yipped loudly.

"Chet!" She said. "There are five of them!"

I ran towards the door and looked in. Five field mice were happily noshing on a chewed open bag of gorp in the middle of the table. They didn't seem too anxious to leave, but scattered when I slapped my hand on the table. One of them, making a last dash to the bag, stuffed three peanuts into its mouth and then dropped off the table, scampering across the room and behind the footlocker by the fireplace.

"Now, I suppose we'll have to leave milk for them." Said Nora, giggling.

She looked at the bag and noted that it was almost empty. "What do I do with this?"

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"Dump it on the porch. Field mice usually leave undesirable things behind when they make a raid."

"Oh â oh! I understand. Ewww!" She picked up the bag with two fingers and headed for the door. I opened it and she went to the porch and poured what was left on the edge. It would be gone in no time.

Nora drew a pan of water and I added a little salt to it. We dumped the rabbit meat into it to soak. "Are we going to fix it the same way this time, Chet?" She asked.

"How about southern fried rabbit? Sound good?"

"Oh yeah. Sounds fine. Do we have any canned beans?"

"I think I brought some baked beans. Try that cabinet or the bag next to it."

She poked around and came up with a the can. "Here it is. I'll put them in a pot."

We gathered up everything we might need to cook up the rabbit. Pan fried rabbit was a favorite of mine so I was elected to prepare it. Soon, the aroma wafted its way around the cabin. Nora, from behind the curtain, said it smelled wonderful.

"You ought to be out here smelling it. I'm starving!" I said.

"So am I." Nora said, coming out in her buckskin-colored shift.

She put her arms around my middle as I stood frying and hugged me. I looked over my shoulder and she kissed me on the cheek. "I love you," she said softly. "I've wanted to say that so many times before but now I can say it any time I want."

"I love you too," I said emphatically. "But, right now, I'm about to serve our fried rabbit. Get the plates."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" She said, saluting me with a smile.

She set two plates and two small bowls down for the bean. I picked up the skillet and dealt out the morsels of meat. Fried a light brown, they looked delicious. She spooned beans into the bowls while I got two sodas for us. I handed one to her.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

We ate quietly, occasionally commenting on how good the rood was. As we ate, the sun continued to drop until the cabin became quite dark. I let the lantern and set it on the other end of the table. The white light was bright in the gloom.

"Chet?"

"HMMMM," I responded.

"What's really going to happen to us when we get back to Boulder?"

"Happen? What do you mean?"

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"Will we get involved with the other people in our lives again and lose what we've shared here? I don't want that to happen."

I looked up at her, reading her expression of genuine concern. "Never going to occur, Nora. We can never go back there. I, for one, consider that lost time and I don't want that to ever happen again." I took her hands in mine. "We have a great beginning here and as far as I'm concerned it can continue just fine back in civilization."

Her eyes glistened with tears. "Oh, Chet. That's the most wonderful thing I've heard in a long time. Willa will be thrilled to hear it. Well, maybe not *all* of it though." She blushed gently. "I'm not going to tell anyone about that."

I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Willa sounds like a very good friend. Tell her whatever you wish. I had a friend once that I'd tell anything to."

"She is. I've known her since grade school. You're right. I would tell her anything. You don't mind?"

"Why should I?"

"I just wondered."

I didn't say anything, just smiled at her.

We read by lantern light for a while until I began yawning. The third time I did it my jaw cracked. I gave up and closed my book. "I'm going to hit the privy and then the sack." I announced.

She looked at the clock on the counter. "Oh, it is late isn't it?" It was nine-thirty.

When I got back from the privy, Nora passed me on the porch. I stoked the fire, banked it, and readied myself for bed, waiting for her to return. When she did, she looked crestfallen.

"Of all the damn, stupid, inconvenient things to happen!" She grumped.

Alarmed, I lifted my head from bear. "What?"

"I wasn't sure until just now. Of all times for this to happen. Dammit, it isn't fair!"

"What?" I repeated.

"I â I, um, just started my moon cycle. I wanted so much to make love again tonight, and now we can't."

"Hey, Kiddo. It's not the end of the world. We can wait. Maybe it's for the best anyway."

She frowned down at me, wrinkling her brow. "What do you mean?"

"This gives us a chance to really make sure of our emotions. We can sit back and think seriously about where we're headed and how to get there. I know I need to do that."

"Well, I guess I do too." She crossed the distance between us and dropped to her knees. I put my arms around her and held her while she sniffled. "I really wanted to please you again, Chet. Really I did."

Snowbound!

I stroked her back. "I know that, Honey. I know that. You just take all the time you need. I'll be here for you."

She looked up and I kissed her. "See; no problem at all." I said gently.

She smiled wanly and rose to change into her nightclothes. When she came back, she seemed back to her old self and snuggled up to me. I tossed the blanket over her and then tucked the bear arms over her chest. "Nighty nite." I said, kissing the tip of her nose.

She wrinkled it and kissed me back on the lips. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Chapter 27: Snowbound! - Chapter 27

We slept later than usual for us. I'd woken up early in the morning and noticed that it wasn't as cold as it usually was. I didn't even add any wood to the fire because of this. Nora was sleeping soundly even after throwing off the top layer of blanket. It *was* warmer than normal.

When I woke the next time, my watch told me it was almost eight-thirty. Nora was up and behind the curtain washing up. She must have heard me yawning.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Take a look outside."

Curious, I got up and padded over to the window. What greeted me was a very bright sun, no clouds, and water dripping off the roof at the front of the porch. "Holy cow!" I said. "We've got ourselves a Chinook."

"What kind of schnook?" Said Nora.

"Shee-nook," I pronounced. "It's actually an Eskimo word, I think. It means 'warm wind'. This could be a good thing - or bad - depending on how much snow melts and how it runs off as it does."

"Oh, I didn't think of that. Wet dirt makes for mud, eh?"

"Yup. And mud is very slippery. Our trip out of here could be kind of tricky. But, we've got two more days and anything can happen. I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Yup, so am I," she said, coming out from behind the curtain.

She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a lighter-weight flannel shirt. She looked great and I told her so. She dimpled and made a mock curtsy. "Thank you."

While she pattered around the kitchen making her some breakfast, I drew water and went behind the curtain to wash up. As I dressed, I asked her what she wanted to do today. We tossed out ideas and settled on heading uphill to an overlook that gave a breathtaking view of the valley. This wasn't the little valley, but one that dropped all the way down to the river and the outskirts of Winter Park.

"It's quite a climb though, Nora. Is your ankle okay with that?" I asked.

She stuck her foot out from under the table and wiggled the ankle all around. "Sure. See; just fine now. We can always stop if it begins to hurt, can't we?"

"Sure. I'll carry that elastic bandage the med tech gave you in my pack if it starts to bother you."

"Will there still be a lot of snow where we're going?"

"Probably not much. The hillside is on the south and that gets a lot of sunlight. If it's windy, we might get blown about. Bring a scarf to wrap around your neck against the cold."

"I was outside just a little while ago and it felt warm to me."

"Yeah, down here. But when we get up on the ridge that wind will be colder."

Snowbound!

"Ah."

We had some breakfast, washed the cereal bowls, and made a hefty lunch for us. Hiking always gave me a big appetite. Judging by the size of the ham sandwich she made for herself, she expected to get hungry also.

It was beautiful outside. I checked the thermometer in the truck and saw that it was a balmy fifty-one degrees. We were definitely in the middle of a Chinook. When we got to the untrampled snow at the edge of the woods we found that the snow was actually evaporating rather than melting outright. This was a good thing. At least at this altitude. Who knew what was happening a little lower.

Our path today started out behind the cabin on a low ridge. There was a game trail that wandered to and fro through the rocks and trees that made the going easy. In fifteen minutes, we both stopped to adjust outer clothing to take advantage of the new warmth of the sun which hit us as soon as we left the cover of the trees. We'd purposely left room in our day packs for our coats.

"I can't believe how warm it is right now, Chet. This â Chinook â is a real thing?"

"Yup. I've seen temperatures rise from way below zero to above freezing in a single afternoon. The Eskimos used the warmth as an excuse to throw a celebration. Their favorite bit of fun was a blanket toss."

"A blanket toss? What's that?"

"They use a bunch of animal skins instead of a blanket actually; usually made of caribou or moose hides sewn together into a large blanket thing. Then kids, one at a time, get into the middle of it and the adults grab hold all the way around the rim. On a command, they pull back hard. The kid gets shot into the air quite a ways. It's sort of a community trampoline. Each time the kid drops back, they snap the blanket and he, or she, flies back up. They did that to me once up in Point Barrow."

"Sounds really cool. I wish I had traveled like you did, Chet. I've hardly ever left Colorado. My family is from the Western Slope around Grand Junction. The furthest East I've been is Kansas. Kind of a hick, aren't I?"

"Not really. You just didn't have the chance to travel. Me, I had no choice. We went where my dad was stationed. I spent my teenage years in Europe. That's how come I speak German."

"You do? Say something in German."

"*Was willst du von mir h ren?*" I said.

"Huh?"

"Literally, I just said: 'what will you from me hear?'"

"That sounds funny."

"In German, lots of verbs are at the end of the sentence. Here's another. '*Es ist so ein sch ner Tag heute. Sollen wir haben etwas zum Mittagessen?*'"

"And what was that?"

"It is one beautiful day today. Shall we have something for lunch?"

Snowbound!

She looked thoughtful. "That's a pretty handy language to know, isn't it?"

"Helped me out immensely on bike trips, field trips, and traveling around with the Boy Scouts. We did a lot of mixing with the German kids. You know, they allow girls in their troops and don't think a thing about camping out in mixed groups. American parents used to have a cow; especially the parents of girls."

"Yeah. Mine would be included in that group. Did you ever camp with a mixed group?"

"Sure, lots of times. It's a cultural thing - not a sexual thing. They just ignore any connotations and have plenty of fun. Campfires at night are usually songfests; loads of guitars and the like. I learned a lot of bawdy songs as well as some drinking songs."

"Drinking songs?"

"Oh yeah. A German can hardly have a liter of beer anywhere without have at least one oom-pah band in the room."

"Oom-pah? Is that a word?"

"Sure. Think of how a tuba sounds. Poomba, poomba, poomba. Everyone joins in and sways while they sing the song. This usually causes the inevitable spilling of beer."

Nora giggled.

"I will now regale you with a traditional song." I limbered up my voice and sang three choruses of "In MÄ¼nchen steht ein HofbrÄ¼haus". By the time I was through, Nora had thoroughly cracked up. We had stopped walking and I had picked up a small tree bole to use on a log in much the same way as a beer stein; thumping on the log to keep time.

By the time I was finished, she was sitting next to me wiping the tears from her eyes. "That's just too funny. Seriously, they do this?"

"Absolutely." I crossed my heart. "I've hefted many a glass of dark beer in between choruses of this song."

(Parenthetical Note: In case anyone is interested, here are the lyrics:

Verse 1:

Da, wo die grÄ¼ne Isar flieÄ¼t,
Wo man mit "GrÄ¼ Gott" dich grÄ¼t,
Liegt meine schÄ¼ne MÄ¼nch'ner Stadt,
Die ihresgleichen nicht hat.
Wasser ist billig, rein und gut,
Nur verdÄ¼nnt es unser Blut,
SchÄ¼ner sind Tropfen gold'nen Wein's,
Aber am schÄ¼nsten ist eins:

Chorus:

In MÄ¼nchen steht ein HofbrÄ¼haus:
Eins, zwei, g'suffa . . .

Snowbound!

Da l uft so manches F chen aus:
Eins, zwei, g'suffa . . .
Da hat so manche braver Mann:
Eins, zwei, g'suffa . . .
Gezeigt was er so vertragen kann
Schon fr h am Morgen fing er an
Und sp t am Abend kam er heraus
So sch n ist's im Hofbr haus

Verse 2:

Da trinkt man Bier nicht aus dem Glas,
Da gibt's nur "die gro e Ma !"
Und wenn der erste Ma  krug leer,
Bringt dir die Reserl bald mehr.
Oft kriegt zu Haus die Frau 'nen Schreck,
Bleibt der Mann mal l nger weg.
Aber die braven Nachbarsleut',
Die wissen besser Bescheid!

Chorus: (repeat)

Verse 3:

Wenn auch so manche sch ne Stadt
Sehensw rdigkeiten hat,
Eins gibt es nirgendwo wie hier:
Das ist das M nchener Bier.
Wer dieses kleine Lied erdacht
Hat so manche lange Nacht
 ber dem M nchener Bier studiert
Und hat es gr ndlich probiert.

Chorus (repeat)

(I know you're all fascinated with this little bit of trivia.)

"That sounds like a really fun time you had." Said Nora, standing and pulling me to my feet. Rest time is over."

"Humph! No rest for the weary."

We traversed another alpine meadow and entered a dark green section of original growth pine. Lots of fallen logs were in our path so we had to take things slow. Nora turned to me and asked if I really knew where we were going.

"I thought *you* did?" I said with a puzzled look.

"What!" Then my lip quivered and she caught on. "You   ! you   ! Oom-pah!" She said, laughing. "Seriously, where are we going?"

Snowbound!

"A spot I know that is right on the edge of a big cliff. You can stand and look out over a whole series of valleys. It'll be perfect for our lunch."

She nodded and allowed me to take her hand. We walked a crooked line through the fallen trees; sometimes going under them, sometimes over. It was tricky. One small valley we went past had dead trees in it, but they were lying atop one another in a circular pattern - no beginning, no end.

"What on earth happened to those trees? They're all curled up on each other like dominoes."

"Microburst, maybe. Sometimes the jet stream above us does funny things. If it happens to dip down into the ten thousand foot range, it can come whistling down a canyon and start a tiny little tornado-thing. Then, once the wind is swirling, it touches down and twists everything around when it does. I actually saw one of them once."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was hunting with my dad and we were sitting on a rock when we heard what sounded like a jet plane engine getting close. Suddenly, the trees across the way began to twist and branches flew all over the place. The noise got louder and louder and then quit suddenly. Some of the taller trees had their tops broken off."

"Wow! And that was one of those mini-tornadoes?"

Yeah. My dad had to explain it, but it sounded right to me. Just the wind after being curled through a narrow canyon."

She considered this. "Freaky."

"Freaky." I echoed.

We crossed a wide area of scrub brush and willows and hadn't gotten halfway though it when it finally dawned on me that we were walking over ice. I looked down and saw that there were wide patches of frozen water amid the clumps of vegetation.

"Nora. We've managed to walk into a swamp. I think we'd better turn back. Try to step where we've already stepped."

She turned and moved to the side. Her foot squished through a thin layer of ice and sank down to calf level. "Aaaak!" She cried just as she fell over backwards and landed on her rump. Fortunately, she had fallen over a small willow bush which broke her fall and she didn't get muddy.

I bent over and pulled her foot out of the muck. It was black with decomposed grass and dirt. It made a sucking sound as it was released from the ground.

"Ewww! It stinks."

"Sure does. Let's get back over there in that dry grass before we try anything else."

I supported her with my arm around her waist and lifted while she struggled to stand. In the process, my foot sank a bit also. We were in no danger, but it sure was stinky.

Snowbound!

Finally, after some hopping and large steps from grass tuft to grass tuft, we managed solid ground. Nora dropped to the ground and began using handfuls of dry grass to wipe the muck off. I went over to a snow bank and carried back a double handful of snow. Between us, we managed to clean off most of the smelly gunk. We continued onwards, avoiding the central portion of the little valley.

We came to a rock fall and climbed a little ways using a game trail until we stood at the summit. This particular point was taller than most of the ones around us so we were afforded a great view down the valley. I pointed out the tiny bit of smoke from the fire in our cabin. It was hard to see because it was mostly heat and not smoke.

Following my pointing finger, I showed her most of our route in to the cabin and the eventual way we would have to go out. I also noted that a lot of the snow seemed to have been either blown away or melted. I didn't want to think of all the water that it had created. I'd much rather go through snow than mud, but, if we left early enough, we might catch all of it still frozen from the night before. I filled Nora in on the plan.

"Good idea," she said. "I'm going to take some pictures for the gang back home. This is a really beautiful place, Chet. Could we come back sometime in the summer?"

"I'm sure that Dave or his family wouldn't mind. I'd just have to coordinate our trip so we'd be alone. I think they take their vacation in July. We could come in August."

"Cool." She put her arm around my waist. I minute later, I felt it sliding upwards and fiddling with the openings of my pack. I had the food.

"I feel a mouse sneaking into the food." I said.

"Squeak! Squeak!"

I laughed. "Okay, we eat now then."

We used my vest to make a temporary table and laid out the food. We had four boiled eggs from a couple of days ago, a packet of lunchmeat that really should be eaten before it went bad, and some apples. Nora made the sandwiches while I peeled the eggs. I laid the naked eggs on the plastic bag we used for the bread.

"How do you do that?" She asked, pointing to the eggs. "I always hack them up so they looked diseased or something."

"The secret is to take them right from boiling to cold water and let them cool off all the way. This helps separate the shell from the egg."

"Oh. I didn't know that." She poked around in the knapsack. "Pooh. No salt."

"Oh well. They'd be better with salt, but we can hack it."

"Yeah."

We munched on our lunch and took in the vista. Afterwards, she brought out her camera and took loads of pictures. I shot some also, having moved a little ways away, and ended up taking pictures of Nora. She wasn't aware of them so they were perfectly candid.

She stopped taking pictures, stowed her camera, and came over to join me.

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"It's almost warm here out of the wind." She took off her coat, leaving just the flannel shirt, and then lay back in the yellowed grass. I took another picture of her. "Oh, stop wasting pictures on me, Chet."

"No waste - digital, remember? This memory stick has room for over seven hundred pictures at medium resolution."

"That many?"

"Yup. I'll never run out since I have another memory stick just like it back at the cabin. What I don't want, I can just delete."

"I just never thought about it that way, I guess. Mine is digital too, but I don't know how many pictures I have left right now." She let me take the camera from her.

I paged through the menu until I located the resolution area. According to the setting, she had over four hundred pictures left and she had taken about fifty. I got curious. Glancing over to Nora, I saw she had her eyes closed and was lying back with her arms behind her head soaking up the sun. I went to the review section and paged through some of the pictures.

The first set was some shots taken around Boulder with her friends. They were goofy shots, with lots of smiling and tongue sticking out. Then there were a few more from around her apartment. The next series made my eyes widen. There were about a dozen shots which could only be classified as 'art' shots. They were done tastefully, but Nora was nude in all of them.

Chapter 28: Snowbound! - Chapter 28

Feeling like a snoop, I used the zoom feature and looked at all of them. The lighting was perfect and seemed to change every three or four pictures. The camera never wavered from its initial position. I'd have bet they were done using a tripod and a remote trigger. Back when these were taken, I doubted Nora would have allowed anyone else to see or take them.

I continue onwards but found no more like those shots. She had a good eye and most of the pictures were well composed using both background and foreground items for reference. There were lots of pictures of Willa, her best friend. I was surprised to find a few shots taken outside my apartment. Several of them had me in the picture also. I never knew she was there and had to think back as to when she could have taken them.

It was time to back out before I found anything really embarrassing - for either of us. I powered down the camera and turned towards Nora. She was looking over at me.

"I, um, took some self-portraits. Did you find them?"

"Nope," I lied. "Found some nice pictures of the Flatirons though." I said, naming some of the ones towards the end of the list.

"Yeah. I walk around up there a lot. Mostly in the summer or early fall though."

"Nice pictures." I said, getting to my feet, handing the camera to her, and walking a little ways away. Now, more than ever, I was convinced she had the heart of a lover, but simply didn't know how to initiate relationships. Well, we'd certainly come a long way now. I kicked a small rock over the edge of the cliff and heard it hitting the trees at the bottom.

Nora came over and slipped her arms around my waist from behind. "Whatcha thinking of?" She said, laying her chin on my shoulder.

"Not much. Just wondering how this little trip is going to affect our relationship when we get back to civilization."

She snorted. "You make it sound like we're on a deserted island somewhere trying to survive. We'll be fine, Chet. We might even make up for all the stumbling around we did before we came up here. I know I'll handle things better."

I looked over my shoulder at her, but didn't say anything. I watched a slow flush spread from the hollow of her throat upwards to around her ears as she reviewed what she'd just said. I waited.

"I mean, ah, that is to say, umâ" Now she was really flustered.

I decided to save her. "Yeah, me too. Now we can just go on real dates instead of just meeting somewhere. It'll be much more fun that way I'm thinking."

We walked back to the vest on the ground and sat. Nora bundled up the left over scraps and pushed them into a paper bag. I drained one water bottle, opened another, and handed it to her. She took a long draft and handed it back to me. "I'll carry it," I said. "I guess it's time we headed back. I sort of hate to since the day turned out so nice but once the sun heads for the canyon walls it will get chilly fast."

Snowbound!

"Yeah. And dark too. Did we bring a light or two?"

"Yep. I have my trusty crank flashlight."

"Your what?"

I dug into my backpack and pulled out a stubby flashlight with a black handle recessed into the side. I flicked the handle out and started turning the crank. She watched, fascinated, as I built up a bit head of steam. Finally, I stopped cranking and folded the handle back into the recess. When I flicked the switch, the LEDs glowed brightly.

"See. No batteries needed at all. Just a few cranks of the generator and the light shines forth."

"Where did you get that? I love it!"

I think it was that mountaineering shop on Pearl Street; the one down by the little coffee shop on the corner."

"Oh, I know that one. I'm going to get one of those when we get back. I'm forever picking up a flashlight and finding the batteries are dead - or worse; leaking all over the thing."

"Definitely a bummer. Ready to go?"

In answer, she picked up her day pack and slung it over her shoulders. I did mine and we headed back to the cabin. It was an uneventful trip and by the time we neared it, darkness had pretty much overtaken us. We were resting on a log and looking up at the star-filled sky.

"Did you ever wonder if anyone was looking up at us from their planet?"

"Oh, deep thought. Yes, I sometimes get that feeling. It stands to reason that with the billions of stars out there that there might be at least one planet orbiting one of those stars that had intelligent life on it." I paused for effect. "And then there is our planet."

She giggled. "Yeah. Sometimes we can be really silly, can't we?"

"To an extraterrestrial observer we probably are but, they might not know when we're just joking or we're serious. I mean, think about it. If a saucer landed on a farm they might try to get a horse to talk like Mister Ed."

Now Nora really laughed. "Or they'd see ALF and figured that aliens already invaded and were eating cats now everywhere."

We went on in this vein for a while until we ran out of ideas. I noticed she had stopped laughing and was just looking at me. I stopped talking in mid-sentence and bent down. We did a slow kiss and then wrapped our arms around each other.

"Oh, Chet," She said softly. "I had no idea we were so clearly meant for each other. We even think alike. All that time we were just dancing around the subject both of us wanted to bring up."

"Well, we can make up for it now, Nora. We have lots of time left. Come on, we'd better get back."

Holding hands, we made the rest of the walk to the cabin in about ten minutes.

Snowbound!

We opened the door and the little chipmunk we'd startled previously was sitting in the middle of our table munching on something. When he saw us, he dropped off the table and shot across the floor. He hit the small pile of logs near the fireplace and jumped to the windowsill. From there he landed on the curtain and ran up it to disappear through a knothole in the pine board near the ceiling.

"So that's how they get in." Said Nora, turning over the peanut he'd been gnawing on. "I wonder where he got this."

I poked around our tin box of supplies but didn't see anything amiss. It was Nora that found the small plastic bag of gorp with a hole chewed in it. She held it up. "Found it! Little bugger was eating my gorp!"

She took a small palmfull of nuts, seeds, and berries and placed it under her bed. "I know - I know - I'm just giving the mouse his cookie, but he's cute."

"And he'll have his whole family in here by tomorrow." I added with a chuckle.

She shrugged. "Yeah â well â no big deal."

"Speaking of food. How about we have those last two steaks tonight? You can fix the potato and I'll grill the steaks. Medium-rare, right?"

"Right! And not a degree warmer."

She and I got started after filling and igniting the lantern on the table. We didn't say much as we prepared our meal and by the time it was ready, we just sat down and ate. From time to time, I would look up and see Nora watching me. We'd catch each other's eyes and return to our food. I decided she looked very nice in the dim light even after all the exertion we'd done during the day.

This got me started on whether or not I'd need to wash up for the evening. "Shall I fill the washbasin for us tonight? If so, I need to heat some water over and above the dish water."

She thought a moment. "Yeah, probably. I do feel kind of gritty."

We washed the dishes and set them out to dry and then I put on a larger pot of water for our use. While it was heating, I went behind the curtain and pulled off my shirt and pants. I was surprised when I heard the sheet being pulled along the wire behind me.

"Do we really need this now?" Nora asked.

"Probably not any moreâ!" I turned around.

Nora had taken off her shirt and jeans also and was standing there in just a bra and panties. "Yeah, that's what I thought also." She reached up and tugged the whole sheet all the way down the wire and secured it against the wall. "There. Now this room seems a lot larger."

I admit it; I watched her every move as she handled the curtain. Philosophically, it was inevitable that we could come this far down the new road we had created. I just didn't know if we were ready to take this step. Apparently, she did and was going to do something about it. I raised my eyes to meet hers and found they were crinkled with silent mirth.

"If we're gonna do it, let's do it right!" She said enthusiastically and came towards me.

Snowbound!

We met at the foot of our beds and hugged each other. It felt good having all that warm skin pressed against me and her lips on mine. I also felt myself responding to the situation and knew she would feel it also. Not wanting to appear overly-eager, and knowing her current situation, I released her and headed for the hot water. 'Holy cow,' I thought to myself. 'I can't believe it's *me* that's breaking away here.'

Dipping my fingers into the water on the stove, I announced that it was hot and ready for washing. Nora brought out two washcloths and a bar of soap for us to use. So, like to old married persons, we soaped ourselves up and rinsed off. We toweled each other dry and went back to put on our nightclothes. Before Nora dressed, she decided to do some floor exercises and headed for the bear.

I watched, with growing admiration, as she did her series of exercises. She had taken off her bra; and she looked very graceful as she worked herself into a sheen of perspiration. All I could do was admire her as she went through some of the more intricate exercises. Like virtually any male on the planet who would have watched this, I was terminally erect. When I fully realized this, Nora called to me.

"Chet? Come on over and help me with a couple of exercises. We'll need to know how to do them if we get to Singh's classes so you might as well start learning now."

I moved towards her but then she raised her head, smiled, and asked me if I wanted to get rid of the shorts. I stopped again. She saw me hesitate and chuckled. "Come on. Don't be so shy!"

I smiled wryly, but shook my head. Here she was calling me shy after I had her figured as being very shy from the moment I'd met her. Turned out I was completely wrong about her and it was time for me to change my way of thinking. I went over and sat across from her.

She completely ignored my state of arousal as she detailed the exercise we were going to attempt. As she described it, I began to doubt I could get through it without embarrassing myself. It involved using each other's legs, thighs, and arms as tension points for a sort of mutual pull-up. We both sat facing each other and she put her legs up over my legs and tugged my ankles until they were locked around her waist.

I felt like the tendons in my calves were going to break, but I didn't utter a sound as she reached out and we clasped hands like we were doing a double handshake - that is, across left to left and right to right.

"Now, just let me lean back while you try to hold me upright and then we reverse as you lean back."

She slowly leaned back and I put tension on her arms as she did. I pulled hard, but she had a small amount of leverage by being slightly shorter in the torso. I held back, but eventually let her lean back as far as she could. Now it was my turn. I pulled her upright and then sank backwards as she restrained me. She was right; it was like doing floor exercises against rubber bands.

We worked against each other's resistance for perhaps a half hour. I was drenched in sweat and she had increased the shine coming off her body. Our breathing rates had increased and I was sure my heart rate was way up. I also noticed my erection was gone; lost amid the exertion of our exercise.

As we came upright, she stopped and let go on my hands. "Want to stop, or you want more?"

"What diabolical torture do you have up your, um, sleeve, now?"

She giggled. "Just one more, but it's kinda hard on the partner because you have to take almost all of my weight at a couple of points."

Snowbound!

"I guess I can handle it." I said between light gasps for breath. "Just let me catch my wind."

I took a couple of deep breaths and held them as long as I could. Then I indicated I was ready.

"Basically, this is called an 'assisted upward bow'. What I do is bend over backwards and bow my stomach upwards. You have to help me as I fall backwards and put my hands on the floor. Then you hold me around my rib cage and pull lightly backwards to raise my stomach higher. It sounds harder than it is."

She turned away from me and lifted her hands over her head. I caught them and took her weight as she bent over backwards. Soon, she was facing me, but upside-down. Not done yet, she told me to hold her waist now as she put her hands above my knees for support. I shifted to her waist and she let go of my knees and dropped to the floor with her hands. It looked incredibly painful, but she did it without a grunt or groan.

"Now lift - *gently* - and try to pull my stomach higher."

I ignored the physicality of what we were doing as I was intrigued by the mechanics of the process. She was completely bent over backwards with her hands and feet on the floor, but bowed upwards. This, I decided, was a feat I definitely could not duplicate. I concentrated on what I was doing and lifted - *gently* - on her ribs.

Her spine (or something) popped loudly and I stopped lifting. "Keep going!" She admonished. So I did.

We held that rather enjoyable (and frightening) position for almost two minutes and then she told me to slowly lower her a little. I did as she asked and when she put one hand on my knee, I let go and guided the other hand to my remaining knee. Puffing with exertion, she pushed herself back upright and dropped to her knees.

"Whew! That one always takes a lot out of me."

"I can see why. It takes a lot out of me just to watch you do it."

"Do you want to try it? It might not be a good idea though until you get a little more limber though."

"I agree. Let's wait a bit. Cold water time for me. You want some?"

"Yeah."

I crossed the floor and dipped out two cups of water for us. On my way back, I realized that my erection had returned. I saw Nora glance at it, and then her vision returned to my face. She thanked me for the water as I handed it to her.

Draining the glass, she said "What shall we do now? You want to do some more basic exercises?"

I was so tempted to just blurt out what I do dearly wanted her to do, but held back at the last moment. Feeling like a wimp, I allowed that I could try a couple of basics.

"Okay. Just sit down here and I'll show you the Lotus position." She sat and lifted one ankle and dropped it over the calf of her other leg. I groaned inwardly but knew that this was a very basic position. If I couldn't do it, then I was doomed. She waited while I settled down in front of her. When I was ready, she helped me lift my leg and very carefully edged it up and over my other calf.

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It hurt a bit, but then the tendons and muscles seemed to stretch a little and the initial pain went away. I held myself that way for five minutes. At the end of that time, I noticed that my erection had waned also. Pain apparently was a great way to counter that sort of thing.

Calmly, Nora lifted her other leg and dropped it on the alternate calf. I tired, really I did, but I was unable to get that damn ankle over my calf. I grunted, strained, and sweated but I just couldn't do it. The closest I came was hanging a heel on it. I just couldn't get it to 'snap' into place. I did feel that with a little practice I could do it though and Nora said she was encouraged.

We finally quit for the evening. "After that workout, I'm completely ravenous!" Said Nora with gusto. "I'm totally ready for that steak now." She hopped up, jiggling nicely in all the nice places, and went to the washbasin. She splashed water around and wiped off again; then she dropped the nightgown down over her head and headed for the kitchen table to peel spuds.

I got up, carefully, as I felt like both my legs had come a bit unglued at the joints as I toddled over to the basin to wash up also. Once that was done, and the blood was again flowing to my legs, I put my robe on again. After my display of maleness, it felt funny to be covering up, but one simply does not cook steaks over an open fire nearly nude. No way, JosÃ©.

Eventually, the steak, potatoes, bread, and dessert (canned peaches) eaten, we washed dishes and lay before the fire. I'd turned off the lantern so once again we had just firelight in the room. Now, I figured, it was time for some serious talk and/or activity. Nora surprised me by speaking first.

"This is just so very comfortable. I never would have thought I'd be able to lie down next to an exciting guy without dying of embarrassment. And, now I am - doing just that."

"I never really considered myself 'exciting', Nora. I'm just an average guy who happens to find you easy to get along with. I think we fit together very nicely."

"Oh, we do. No mistake about that." She reached for one of my chest hairs and wound it around her finger. "I feel really comfortable around you, you know. Now that I've put aside my original fears and ... hang-ups ... we've gotten along very well." She tugged gently.

I looked down and she chuckled and then released the hair. Then she sat up and got to her feet.

"Can I get you something?" I asked.

"Nope. Heading out back. Nature calls." She smiled down at me.

Now that she mentioned it, the tea we had drunk at dinner was beginning to wend its way through my system. I thought that a visit out back would be in my best interests also. "Okay. I'll go when you get back."

She tied her robe tightly and shrugged into her overcoat and boots. Clumping out the door, she went down the porch and stepped off. Her footsteps faded around the side of the cabin as I relaxed back onto the bearskin rug and put my hands behind my back. I reflected on the short conversation we'd just had and came to the conclusion she was telling me something. Maybe it was time to step up the pace a little now that we were 'comfortable' with each other.

Nora came back, flapping her arms in the cold air. "Phoo! It's cold out there." She said with a shiver to her voice. "You're lucky you don't have to expose yourself much like I do." She laughed.

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"Maybe it'll freeze into an icicle."

"Then I can have a lot of fun defrosting it." She looked stricken and put her hand over her mouth. "I can't believe I just said that!"

"Don't worry. Your idea has merit, I'm thinking. Let me heat out back and when I return we can continue this train of thought." I chuckled.

Taking down my heavy coat and sliding my feet into my very cold, and stiff, boots was not fun, but I eventually managed to get out to the privy and take care of business. When I got back, Nora was snuggled down into the bearskin with nothing but her face showing. When I doffed my outer storm gear and headed towards her, she lifted the corner of the rug.

I saw, from the flash of white thigh, she had taken off her granny gown and was very probably almost nude under there. This got my interest but, due to the cold I had just endured, nothing had taken shape yet. That began to change the instant I slid under the covers and moved next to her."

"Yow! You're side is cold," she said with a yelp as I moved next to her. "Just for that, you get to light some candles so we can enjoy the evening." She pushed at me. "Go on; light the ones over on that little table over there."

I did as she wanted me to do but before she'd let me back in she held out her hand. "And take off those shorts, Chet. They aren't doing you any good now."

I looked down and saw immediately that she was right. What hadn't stirred before was now standing tall. Returning to the rug, I paused on my knees and tugged the shorts down and then sat to remove them. She again lifted the edge of the rug and flapped it over me. We were now encased in three inches of warm fur and hide.

"I know we can't make love tonight, but can we just hold each other? I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about at all, Nora. I'd be happy to hold you. Just close your eyes and drift away."

I stroked her shoulders, smoothing her hair down; taking in the light soapy smell she exuded. Before I began drifting off, I had a fleeting thought that now we were together emotionally as well as physically. And, I thought, just maybe we'd stay together for a long time. Eventually, we slept as the candles guttered in their dishes and went out one by one.

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I had shifted around during the night and was now lying on my right arm. It had gone to sleep and, as I tried my best to wake it with the least amount of movement, I apparently woke Nora up.

"It is far too early to be getting up, Chet." She mumbled from under the covers.

"My arm is totally dead. I can't feel a thing. I must have slept on it crooked."

She eased around until she lay on her side facing me. "Really?"

"Really." I slapped my bicep and poked at my arm all the way down from my shoulder. Nothing.

Nora reached out and closed her fingers around my wrist and began massaging her way upwards. Pins and needles of nerves coming alive began. I cringed, awaiting the onrush of feeling.

"Oh, stop being a baby." She laughed, changing her grip to my fingers - bending them back and forth as she rubbed them.

In a rush, feeling began to return in earnest. It began at my elbow and went both ways. "Ah!" I cried out, shaking my fingers rapidly and slapping them against my thigh. "Wow! At least I can feel my fingertips again. Thanks for the assist."

"You're welcome." She slid her hand under the covers and touched a fingertip to my rib cage. "Cold?"

"Nope."

She continued onwards until her hand was almost at my back; and then pulled me forward. Our lips met and we held a long, lingering kiss.

We pulled back just a little. "Wow!" I repeated. "That was wonderful." I bent forward again but she giggled and rolled away from me, tugging on my shoulder.

This caused me to roll further over and end up with my head on top of the covers but directly below I could feel her soft breasts. She giggled again and pulled my arm completely under the covers. Holding my hand, she pressed it in the valley between her breasts. I could almost feel the rapid beating of her heart. This movement also brought into contact my morning erection and her stomach. I felt myself pressing tightly against her. Letting me know it wasn't an accident, she pushed her hips towards me, making the contact even tighter. "Good morning," she whispered in my ear.

I turned to face her directly and before I could say anything, she got a determined look on her face. While I was puzzling it out, she pushed back forcefully on my shoulders and rolled me onto my back and finished by rolling on top of me. Her legs straightened out and she put her arms on either side of my shoulders and did a partial push-up.

"I want you to make love to me so badly, Chet." She said, looking down at me with a serious visage. "But I can't." She rolled off to my side. She had tears in her eyes and closed them tightly to try to stem them.

"Nora, please don't cry. It just doesn't matter right now."

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She leaned over and kissed me softly. "No, silly. I'm crying for happy. You are perfect for me."

"And you are for me also." I said softly, turning to face her. I used a finger to wipe her tears away and kissed her on the cheek. "Just perfect."

As warm as we were in the bear rug, we both realized that the room was colder than usual. I looked at the fireplace and saw why: it had gone out almost completely. Then I realized why. By now, I would have been up and re-stoked it. But, I was distracted this morning and failed to do it. Now, I was going to have to get up into a cold room and build the fire up. I wasn't looking forward to that at all.

"I'd better get the fire going," I said. "I'll also heat up some water for washing up."

"I can do that while you build the fire." Nora said, sitting up and holding the cover over her chest.

"Okay, you're on." I got up and padded over to the woodpile and selected several thinner sticks. Once I got them arranged on the grate, I used the small bellows and managed to coax a flame. In five minutes, there was discernable heat filling the room.

Nora, in the meantime, had tossed on a robe and was adding water to the pot on the stove. "Hot water very soon," she announced as she headed back to her kit bag for more clothing. "Take a look outside."

Intrigued, I went and looked. "Well, I'll be... The snow is almost gone."

There were still drifts to be seen, but the majority of the snow had been evaporated from the open areas around the cabin. We grabbed a quick breakfast, dressed, and went outside to use the facilities. I walked a short distance down our eventual exit path to check on conditions. There were small puddles of frozen mud in a couple of the low-lying spots, but the rest was definitely passable. We shouldn't have any trouble leaving here tomorrow. I passed that information on to Nora.

"What shall we do our last day up here?" She asked me after we joined hands in the clearing in front of the cabin. "It seems a shame to waste such a nice day doesn't it?"

"It does indeed. I can't think of anything we need to do before leaving the cabin since I've cut all that wood and stacked it. How about we go back to the mine and let me try to shore up the entrance a little? You can go down to the stream if it isn't frozen and do some more panning."

She thought about that for a moment and then nodded. "Sure. That sounds okay to me. I'll fix us a lunch." She pecked my cheek and headed for the cabin.

I went to the back of the truck and opened the lid. Things were in slight disarray due to our haste in grabbing the groceries during the snowstorm so I climbed inside and set about straightening up. In ten minutes I'd repacked our little-used items towards the front. All we'd have to do now was pack our items from the cabin.

It seemed strange to think of us as leaving in the morning. I'd had such fun up here being with Nora and without a doubt she had also. We'd both managed to get a handle on our new relationship and at least I was comfortable with it. I thought about what had happened this morning and came to the conclusion that it was spontaneous and not something that was tied to anything other than our newfound closeness.

'Now,' I said to myself. 'We can see how our changed relationship gets affected by other people and a more intrusive lifestyle.' I climbed down from the tailgate and slammed it.

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Nora came out on the porch carrying both our knapsacks. She held up mine. "Here's yours. I think everything you need is in it. I'm carrying the lunch. I used the last of the lunchmeat. I hope you like mustard."

"Mustard is fine." I took the offered bag and settled my arms through the straps, giving a couple of shrugs to get comfortable.

On the way past the remains of my tree-cutting operation I remembered what I'd forgotten - the bow saw and axe. I quickly went back to the truck and grabbed them. "Hard to cut framing without tools," I said, chuckling.

"You could have karate-ed them down."

"Only Chuck Norris can do that." I countered with a smile. "He's a badass."

"Oh, pooh! I'm more of a Bruce Lee kind of woman. He was a silent badass."

I laughed and she joined in. We struck out down the trail for the mine. Our little pine cone tossing squirrel was home and managed to hurl three of them before we were past him. I picked up one of them and tossed it back. That seemed to shut him up for a moment but then he let loose a torrent of squirrel abuse and fired a last cone down at me. He sure was persistent.

We arrived at the mine to find that the warming weather had managed to loosen up several more rocks at the top of the shaft. They had dropped down and I would have to remove them first. It wasn't quite warm enough to take off my jacket when I started but after I'd been at it for fifteen minutes I did remove it.

Once that area was clear, I went in search of a suitable tree to use for framing. I didn't like to cut live trees so it took me a while to locate a nice dead pine. When it fell, most of the limbs broke off so I didn't have to trim it very much. I cut it into rough thirds and hauled the parts over to the mine.

The log slipped into place at either side nicely, but I couldn't get the top log to stay. Nora suggested I go to that old shaft and see if there was a board I could use instead of the top log. A good idea.

I did find a nice one that fit and once it was in place I plastered around the larger rocks above it with loose dirt and small rocks. When I finished, it looked good. I wondered if I'd get back up next summer to check on it.

I glanced at my watch. Two hours had passed and I was very thirsty. Nora had left my pack on a log and I took out my water bottle. I was so thirsty I nearly drained it. Downhill, I could make out Nora's red plaid shirt as she knelt at streamside shaking her gold pan. She was so intent on what she was doing she didn't hear me come up behind here.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"Yow!" She almost jumped into the stream at the sound of my voice. "You snuck up on me!" She said, chuckling.

"Snuck up? I shuffled my feet the last thirty feet. You were concentrating too hard."

"Yeah? Well, check this out!"

She held her poke up in front of me and shook it gently. There was a big lump down at the bottom that was the size of a lima bean - a big lima bean. I thought at first it was just Pyrite, but when I took the vial and had a closer look I saw she had indeed found a nice nugget.

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"Great work, Nora. This one's worth about fifty dollars." I said, beaming down at her.

She rose to her feet, arching her back with her hand on her hips. "Awrrrrrrrh! My back is sore."

"Go over to that big flat rock and lie face down. I'll rub your back for you. You should have taken a break."

"I tried to, but I found that big chunk almost right away and wanted to find more." She grinned. "Yeah, I know. I've got gold fever."

She turned and walked slowly to the rock, spread out her coat, and bent over it. I came up, stood behind her, and began massaging her back muscles. She moaned. "Ooooooh that feels soooooo good."

I continued the massage despite my growing erection. When I reached far up on her back to rub her shoulders, she moved slightly and our jeans came together at the waist. She snickered.

"Is that you, Chet?"

I feigned ignorance. "Of course it's me. Who else would it be?"

She backed up, rubbing against me again. "I meant this ... that... "

No point in lying. "Yeah. That's me."

She straightened up and turned to face me, putting her arms on my shoulders. "I am truly sorry, Chet."

"Hey. No big deal. I'll go away."

"Maybe. I just wish I could do something about it right now." She paused; then smiled. "Boy! Am I hungry!"

We spread out our lunch on the rock. Talking would have ruined the moment, so we kept our own counsel as we ate. We exchanged 'significant looks' as they say, but no words. Once again I thought about how much our relationship had changed in just two short weeks. In addition, I wondered how much more it would change in the future.

After lunch we cleaned up the area and wandered back down the valley to the cabin.

Chapter 30: Snowbound! - Chapter 30

The daylight was waning by the time we arrived back at the cabin. We hadn't hurried; in fact we'd taken a longer way around just so we could have time to talk. Most of our conversation revolved around what had just occurred between us and served to exchange what we felt about it.

There was no doubt in my mind. I had fallen in love with Nora. My pulse quickened when she smiled or laughed at one of my lame jokes or the way she would glance at me using her peripheral vision. In fact, my concentration on this was so profound that I almost walked into a low-hanging branch because of it. I was definitely smitten.

She, on the other hand, gave me the impression she thought we may have moved just a little too fast into this phase of our relationship. I couldn't define just what led me to this conclusion, but it was there nonetheless. Once again I vowed to let her take the next lead in whichever direction she thought our bonding should go.

Lost in thought, I didn't hear her ask me a question.

"Chet? Yoo hoo. You there?"

I snapped back into the present. "Oh. Sorry. Woolgathering."

"I'll bet. It wouldn't have anything to do with me and you would it?" She asked; her eyes alight with laughter.

"Could very well be." I replied, pushing the door to the cabin open.

Our little chipmunk wasn't present even though we looked for him. Taking both our packs, Nora set them on the table and pulled out the trash from lunch and tossed it into the garbage can in the corner.

I glanced at my watch. "Too early to have dinner yet. Want to just read for a while?"

She smiled. "Sure. I can always read; anytime, anywhere."

"Me too."

We located our books and sat on opposite sides of the table and began to read. The silence was companionable and except for an occasional light cough or pop from the fire, not a sound could be heard. Even the wind had died down.

Light faded until it made me set my book aside. "How about our last two steaks tonight? I think we also have three potatoes too."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'll do the spuds, you do the meat."

I nodded and went over to our cold box and pulled out the steaks which were tightly wrapped in aluminum foil. Setting them on the drainboard, I unwrapped them. They looked good enough to eat right here and now. Carefully dripping the last of our teriyaki sauce onto each piece, I set them aside to marinate for a while.

Nora pulled up a big pot and began peeling the potatoes, shaving them with a peeler. As she completed each one, she sliced it into chunks and dropped them into the pot. Once all of them were done, she filled it with water and set it on the stove that I had lit for her. She had even added a small bit of salt to the water -

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something I always did.

We continued to read until the potatoes started boiling. As they did, I clamped the steaks into their holders and brought them over to the fireplace. Stoking a spot with coals from all over, I built up a small cove that was much hotter than the surrounding area. One steak at a time, I seared it to keep the juices inside and then used a brick on each handle to hold them in just the right position.

"Five minutes ... maybe." I called out.

"Okay. I'll start mashing the potatoes." She added a little canned milk, a little water, and a big pat of butter to the pot and used a huge spoon to whip them into shape.

As soon as I figured the steaks were ready, I held Nora's over the aluminum foil so it wouldn't drip and brought it to the table. I set it on the plate.

"Wow! That one's pretty big." She said, cutting into it. "And, just the way I like it."

I did the same with mine and then sat down next to her. We were almost hip to hip, but with enough clearance to keep from banging elbows as we dug in.

Talk was rather desultory as we enjoyed our last evening meal here. I felt rather sadly about that. If there was some way we could have extended our stay I think Nora would have agreed. But, both of us had other commitments back in Boulder that we couldn't get out of. She was going to attend a bridal shower of a friend and I was going to help a friend move into another apartment.

The meal ended. Nora stood, scooped up the dishes, and put them in a pan, adding hot water from the kettle by the fire. I watched as she washed all the dishes and then wiped them as she put them on the countertop.

"Just like an old married couple," I remarked.

"Yeah," she said softly.

"I think, before we do anything else, I should turn the truck around so we can get to the back easier. Good plan?"

"Probably. I know I'd appreciate it."

I pecked her on the cheek and got into my jacket to go outside. It was cold, but not overly cold. Apparently, the warmer temperature trend was still in effect. Before I moved the truck, I walked a ways down our 'road' to see what conditions were. Some of the mud underfoot was a bit soft, but for the most part it looked like we'd make out all right tomorrow. I did want to get started before the sun had a chance to warm the ground.

Once the truck was positioned nearer the porch, I went around back and made sure we'd have enough wood for tonight. I estimated that the wood I'd cut just about equaled the amount we'd already burned. I wasn't going to have to cut more before we left.

When I pushed the door open, I was greeted by the sight of Nora doing her exercises. From what I'd learned previously about them, she was about halfway through. I sat quietly and watched her.

Within five minutes, she spoke. "You want to do yours also?"

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I hadn't thought of doing that, but now that she mentioned it, I reconsidered. "Just a minute and let me get into something more comfortable."

"That's my line," she quipped, bending down and touching her forehead to her knees.

I laughed and went over to my clothing bag and selected a pair of cut-off sweatpants. Changing rapidly, I turned and joined Nora on the bear. She had a slight moustache of perspiration on her upper lip, which I found very sexy for some reason. I sat across from her with my legs outstretched on either side of her. She reached down, lifted my ankles, and placed them in her thighs.

"How about a nice foot massage?" She asked, eyes twinkling.

"Only if I can do yours afterwards. Deal?"

"Deal."

She began by encircling my calf with the fingers of both hands and working them around and upwards to my knee. Then, on the way down, she pressed her fingertips hard into the muscle and drew them down to my ankle. I felt some pain, but the rest was purely sensual.

I groaned. "Oh, wow. That's sensational, Nora."

"Remember what I'm doing because then you can do it to me."

I concentrated on what she did and how she went about it. Finishing with one knee-to-ankle massage, she did the other in exactly the same manner. I felt my tensions going away and I relaxed back against the bear's head and closed my eyes.

She shifted slight, bringing her knees inwards until they were pressing my inner thighs. Next, she began massaging from my knee upwards in the same manner as my calves; pressing gently on the upstroke, and harder on the way back down. I felt myself responding and hoped she wouldn't be offended. But, I reasoned since she suggested this, she should know how I would eventually respond.

I felt myself drifting a little. After all the activity while parking the truck, and the walking we'd done earlier, I was all but asleep. Nora stopped for a moment, and I opened my eyes and saw her watching me.

"Hold out your hands," she said. "I'll massage them also."

I did as she asked and she took one of my arms and propped it over her knee using her elbow and began stroking it lengthwise. Once again, I felt the tension seeping away. This time I did fall asleep a little I guess because when I woke up, she was softly rubbing my erection through the cloth of my cut-offs.

"You know, Chet, you have a beautiful body. Nothing seems out of proportion at all." She said softly. "Some guys have overly long arms, or are short-waisted and like that. You're just perfect." She continued her stroking. "And so is this," she said in a whisper so quiet I barely caught it.

I moved my arms and let them drop to my lap. In one motion, she reached over her shoulders and untied the knot at the top of her leotard. As she tugged it down and off her arms, her breasts came into view. They appeared firm and pointed; she was definitely excited as near as I could tell.

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Looking directly at her, I received tacit permission and reached out to touch them. She gave a slight groan the instant my fingertips grazed across them. A slight flush began in the hollow between them and grew outwards, seemingly following the traces of my fingers. It was her turn to groan a little. "I love your touch, Chet. So gentle."

We leaned forward towards each other and I slipped my arms around her shoulders. We shared a deep kiss as she shifted slightly towards me again until we were pressed together as far as we could go. My legs were now curled around her hips and hers were doing the same to mine.

I bent downwards and touched the tip of my tongue to her nipple. It moved slightly; hardened. The other one did the same. I felt her hands go to the back on my head and gently pull me towards her. I inhaled the musky scent of woman just as I kissed her between the breasts.

Nora took a deep breath. "I think we ... we should have less clothing for this exercise. Don't you?" She whispered in my ear.

"I agree."

We shifted a bit, untangling our legs until they were free. As I removed my shorts, Nora slipped her leotard off also. I mentally shook my head in wonder as the beauty she displayed for me only. She was beautiful in my eyes.

In seconds, we were back to our original positions, legs over top of each other and ankles clasped behind each other's backs. She reached down and caressed me as I touched her breasts yet again. Her fingers flew gently up and down my shaft, teasing me, urging me.

I shifted my attention, running my hands down her ribs on either side; pausing at her hips. When I moved inwards, she sighed and when I touched her vaginal lips she sighed yet again. "So wonderful," she whispered, continuing to slide her fingers up and down.

When I felt she was ready, I slipped my hands under her thighs and lifted. She rose up slightly and then pressed down, capturing me, pressing me deeply inside her. We paused, breathing heavily, clinging to one another; almost afraid to move so as to not spoil the moment.

Gently, in tiny increments, we began moving against one another. I felt myself entering and retreating as we slowly made love. The air was now filled with small gasps, groans, and sighs. The pace began to quicken. No matter how much I wanted these moments to go slowly, I knew they wouldn't. We quickened our pace yet again; now rocking back and forth in our passion.

"Oh, Chet! Now!" Nora exclaimed.

I felt myself tensing, pausing for a moment, and then releasing in a burst of energy. Nora followed me into heaven as we clung to each other in mutual climax. We pushed, groaned, and even giggled as our emotions ran wild.

All too soon, we began coming down from our induced high. Each of us, breathing hard, peered into each other's eyes as we recovered.

"A perfect end to a perfect vacation," said Nora softly.

"I agree. A perfect end."

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After stoking the fire, she and I wrapped up in the bearskin and fell into a deep and satisfying sleep.

Chapter 31: Snowbound! - Chapter 31

Daybreak. I rolled over and ignored it for as long as I could, but pressure on my bladder forced me to get up and walk hurriedly to the privy. When I got back, Nora was dressing up to do the same.

"Good morning," she chirped. "We have six eggs and seven strips of bacon. Should we finish them?"

She certainly was chipper this morning. I felt almost the same way. In fact, I felt great. "Sure. We can add some grated cheese and salsa to top it off. I'll get the cheese."

We sashayed around the kitchen, dodging each other adroitly, while manufacturing our breakfast. We even had two kinds of cheese: a nice cheddar and a bit of unidentified yellow cheese. When we sat down to eat, we bantered about our upcoming trip this morning.

"Will we have any trouble getting out, Chet?" Nora asked.

"I doubt it. The road will still be frozen, or almost so, and by the time we hit the really steep parts, the sun won't have enough time to warm the mud up. We might also have some deep snow in the hollows. Probably won't have to winch though, darn it."

She wrinkled her brow at me. "Why darn it?"

"I really wanted to check out my new winch," I said ruefully.

"Well, maybe we'll get lucky ... or unlucky ... or whatever." She chuckled.

"There is that!" I said, standing and gathering the plates and silverware. "We need to make sure we wash all this and put it away properly. Wouldn't do to have David and his family think we're slobs."

"No, of course not." She said, adding soap powder to the big tub. "Get me those steak cooker things and I'll scrub them up."

I went over to the fireplace and brought back the utensils. Then I went back and put a couple of logs on the fire. Picking up the bear rug which had faithfully served us, I carried it outside onto the porch and gave it a good shaking. Laying it down, I folded it carefully and then placed it back in the box beside the hearth.

"Faithful Bear," said Nora sadly. "He served us well."

I carefully closed the lid. "Yeah, that he did."

"When I get back home, I'm going right out and see if I can find a bear rug."

"It won't be the same though. They all probably come from China or some place like that. This one came into this cabin legitimately; David's dad shot it. One year, he got lucky and managed a lottery win for a license. Got this one on the very last day of the season. I was there."

"You were! How big was he on the hoof?"

"Looked huge to me. We had him cornered, actually, and when he reared up on his hind legs he looked ten feet tall. I thought I was gonna crap my pants. I wish I'd have brought my recorder though. He gave a huge

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roar that really shook the trees. His dad stood there, raised the rifle, and pulled the trigger. The bear took two steps and dropped."

"Wow." She looked a little wistful. "Poor bear."

"Don't feel too sorry for him though. The ranger looked up his tag and found he'd been caught raiding garbage cans twice and relocated. Eventually, he would have become dangerous."

"Just the same..."

"Yeah. Me too. Rest in peace, bear."

We continued washing all the utensils, pots, and pans. This time we dried them with dishtowels though and put them away in cupboards. After that chore, we began gathering up our personal gear and packing it.

I left for a moment and opened the lid to the topper on the truck and lowered the tailgate. When I came back inside, Nora was sitting at the table, her head resting on her arms.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded but didn't look up. "I'm sorta okay. It's just that I ... I hate to leave, Chet. We've had so much fun and now its time to go back to our other lives."

I stood behind her, stroking her shoulders. I bent down and kissed her on the nape of her neck. "Hey, Nora. We have a new life now; a third life. Both of us are in it. Instead of going or separate ways, we can do a lot more together now. Don't be sad - be happy!"

She lifted her head, tear tracks down her cheeks. "Will we? Will we actually?"

"Of course we will. It's a promise." I dried her eyes with my fingers, bent down, and kissed her gently. "We're an item now. Um, that is, if you want us to be one." I added hastily.

She stood up and threw her arms around me. "Of course I do! I'm in love with you, Chet." She kissed me back. "Don't forget that - ever!"

Now, more than ever, I really didn't want to leave either. But, we both had commitments and there would be other opportunities for us. Especially if we joined Singh and his classes. Actually, I was looking forward to them with anticipation.

We continued packing, shaking our blankets, replacing the sheet that was hung on the wire between beds, and trying our best to find where else the chipmunk was getting in after we stuffed a wooden plug I'd whittled into the knothole. We never did find where.

In about two hours we were ready to leave. Nora swept the floor while I tidied up the woodpile behind the cabin and staked down the tarp so the wind couldn't lift it. I thought I might have added maybe one more log, but we didn't have time to do that now. I'd tell David how much we'd left for them. They might not come up here until spring so that really wasn't a problem.

Soon it was time to pack the back of the truck. We'd placed all our stuff on the porch and now, with me up in the bed and Nora passing me items, we began stuffing them into the truck.

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We didn't say much. I know I didn't because I really didn't know what to say. We did have a great time. I learned an awful lot about myself this trip that I didn't know. I think that Nora had a similar experience. Maybe on the trip back we could talk it over; although the time for talking was long gone. We had moved way beyond that stage in our relationship. We had moved up several levels.

As I slammed the tailgate shut and lowered the lid our packing was complete. Except for the things we would keep in the cab, we were ready to go. Separately, we looked around to see if we'd missed anything. Nora found a hairbrush she'd dropped under the corner of the bed. Reluctantly, I closed and turned the wooden hasp of the front door closed to help keep out curious critters.

I'd just gotten into the truck when I snapped my fingers. "Almost forgot!"

"What?" Nora asked.

"Didn't lock the little firewood door. All kinds of animals can get in that way. Be just a second."

I hopped out and ran around behind the cabin to lock the door and block it with wood. Once that was done, I got back into the truck and started the engine. I let it run for a moment until the heater began blowing warmer air.

"Well, we're off!" I said; perhaps a little too heartily.

"Makes me sad to leave, Chet. We've had such a good time up here." We leaned towards each other and kissed. I reached behind her shoulder and patted her back. Maybe we can come up here next summer. There'd be a lot more things we could do then - even braving the cold water of the lake if you wanted to."

"Yeah ... maybe," she said wistfully.

She looked around as we pulled from the parking spot. I put the truck into four-wheel but left it in high range. I didn't expect any trouble for at least a few miles; or until we hit the first depression that had filled with snow earlier last week.

We kept silent for the most part; keeping counsel of our own thoughts. I knew I certainly had a lot to think about, and I imagined Nora did also. First and foremost in my mind was what to do about our new relationship. Over the last two weeks we had become one - literally - and all that entails. Once Nora got back to 'civilization' would she drift away from me? I thought about that and realized that I didn't want her to do that. I found I wanted to keep her closer to me than before.

Nora interrupted my thoughts. "Chet?"

"Ummm?"

"The first Yoga class we can get to is on this coming Saturday night. Will you be available for it?"

I mentally scanned my calendar hanging on the wall of my kitchen. "I think so. Most of the rest of this month I'm free. What time?"

"Classes start at six in the evening." She paused. "That would be, ah, eighteen o'clock on your weird watch," she said with a chuckle.

"Gotcha! Want me to pick you up, or vice-versa?"

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"I'd better come get you since you don't know where it is."

"Okay."

We bounced over a small log across the road and Nora grunted as her elbow hit the arm rest on the door. "Damn!" She rubbed at it, shaking her fingers. "Made my arm go numb."

"Sorry. I should have warned you on the way in. The best way to ride is sitting a little forward in the seat keeping your elbows away from the door and the gearshift - especially the gearshift. If you hit it, we could pop out of gear and we'd lose traction. Going up or down a steep hill, that could be dangerous."

She looked at me and slid as far forward as her seat belt would allow. "Okay."

We rounded a sharp corner past a towering pine tree and came to our first real obstacle. The road dipped down into a rather deep bowl. We had reconnoitered it before, but that was when it was full of snow. Now, after the Chinook, most of the snow had melted, leaving a coating of mud at the bottom.

"Wait here a second and let me check this out." I said, unbuckling and stepping out of the truck.

I carefully stepped from grass clump to grass clump to avoid building up a layer of mud on my boots. I had mats down in the cab, but even then I could track a lot into the vehicle. From the very edge of the bowl I peered down into it. Testing the mud's dryness with the toe of my boot, I took a couple steps down the slope.

It appeared dry right on top, but the underlying layer was slightly slippery. The band of wetter mud was only an inch deep though so I saw no problems here. I walked down to the bottom and picked up one of the stakes we'd left as a marker. It had fallen over due to lack of snow. Probing with the sharper end, I found that the ground which was still in shadow was frozen hard. No problem at all.

I walked back up the slope, kicked off the accumulated mud, and got back into the warm cab. "No sweat, Nora. It's still frozen down there." I said, putting the transfer case into low range. "Hang on."

Giving it a little gas, I eased down over the lip and into the bowl. We slipped sideways a little, sliding off a large rock, which made Nora gasp and then giggle at her outburst. I chuckled also. We ground down, engine whining and acting as a brake until we hit the bottom. Since the road turned a little, I had to follow it. When I turned the wheel and fed some gas, the cleat on the right side tire let a big gob of mud fly up into the air. It hit the hood with a dull thud.

"Well, we're gonna get a bit dirty I can see that now," I said unnecessarily.

"I'll help wash. Okay?"

"Okay." I grunted as we hit a small hole.

Now we were headed up the far side. I added some more gas and we slithered sideways a little bit and then straightened out and flopped up over the far bank, landing squarely in the middle of the road.

"Can we stop for a minute? I want to get some pictures for Willa."

"Sure." I reached back and got my camera also as she opened the door and got out.

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According to the tracks, we'd done a fair amount of sliding around. We'd stayed near the middle of the track so no new terrain had been torn up. By spring, even the grooves we'd made would be gone. I thought ahead to the bigger valley we would have to cross next.

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We were back in motion now and the rutted 'road' we were following started meandering through small groups of trees; taking the path of least resistance. We spent a fair amount of time dodging large rocks and easing over smaller ones carefully so as not to hit the front differential. No matter how careful I was, we occasionally scraped a rock with a grating crunch. A random aspen branch rubbed down the side of the truck once in a while. I'd have to check later to see if they did anything permanent.

"Did that last rock hurt anything?" Nora asked.

"Nah. We just grazed it. Now, around this next bend we'll see how much snow has piled up in the big hollow."

Easing around a large stand of willows, we did just that. I stopped and let the truck idle.

"Want to go look?" I asked, opening the door and stepping out.

"Sure."

Nora and I walked to the crest in the road and peered down the hillside. It was quite a bit better than I feared, but it was still going to be a task just to get to the bottom, much less climbing out the other side. I could see hummocks of grass here and there, standing taller than the surrounding snow. It didn't appear deep, but it wouldn't hurt to check.

After I'd stepped back to the truck and killed the ignition, we carefully picked our way down the slope. I kicked at the ground and found it suitably cold and frozen in shadow, but the sunnier patches were very slick with mud. Up here, mud was hardly ever thicker than perhaps three inches because of the granite base under the dirt. If I kept to the shade, and tight up against the trees on the one side, we'd make it fine.

We went back up and got into the truck again. Carefully, I eased down over the crest of the hill, keeping the transfer case in low range and first gear. After I asked her, Nora put her hand on the gearshift and held it in place as I used both hands to steer. It wouldn't do to have the transmission jump out of gear on the way down.

Slithering sideways at one point, Nora yelped lightly. "Whoops," I said, chuckling. "Slippery here." I added unnecessarily.

We made it to the bottom, throwing only a slight bit of mud onto the hood. Nora told me it was going to take a while to clean the truck. She added again that she'd help me. I told her that with a pocketful of quarters and a half-hour the self-serve carwash would do just fine.

The entire face we were about to climb was in shadow due to the angle of the sun. Another hour and it would be in almost full sunlight - not a good prospect. Calculating just where I would go, I set us up for the climb.

Halfway up, the wheels began to spin and we lost about six feet but then traction returned and we crawled up further. I thought when we reached the top, that this hill was probably our greatest challenge and we'd made it out to the gate just fine.

We reached the gate where we had eaten lunch that day and stopped for a moment. Nora took some pictures and we paused to eat a bit from a bag of chips and drink some water. I unlocked, opened, drove through, and then relocked the gate.

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Our route was now just below a rocky outcropping on a road chiseled into the side of the hill. Because it wasn't wide enough for two vehicles to pass, this portion was marked as one-way - a sign pointed out our way.

"Is this the place you told me about? Where anyone coming the other way had to go around the hill?" Nora asked.

"Yep. Did you see that little red arrow tacked to the tree about three hundred yards back?"

She nodded.

"Well, that's where the other route comes back to the main road. When we get to the other end of this stretch, you'll probably recognize where we split coming in."

Just then, a rock the size of a softball squirted from a tire and spun down over the side of the cliff. It made a loud popping sound that took Nora by surprise.

"What was that?" She asked, turning to me with eyes wide.

"Rock. They get spit out from the tire sometimes. I had one about five years ago do that from the driver's side and it hit the cliff and bounced back into the windshield. Cracked it. I had a hell of a time explaining that to the insurance company. They only agreed to pay half the cost of replacement because I was using my 'recreational vehicle' for 'recreation'." I emphasized the air-quotes. "Hey, shit happens."

"Bummer."

"Tell me about it."

We finally exited the one-way section and, when she turned around and looked, she saw the red arrow for uphill traffic head right and go across a meadow.

"Was that it?"

"Yup."

We entered an area that had been swept clean by the wind. Now, lower than the cabin by perhaps eight hundred feet, the air was noticeably warmer. The wind had picked up however and rattled dead pine needles against the side of the truck. As we passed a large boulder, the wind howled and the trees bent and swayed.

"Some wind."

"Yeah, but it will get quieter as we near the main road. It's more sheltered by trees."

"That okay. I like the sound of the wind."

Clearing the last bunch of trees, we got to the junction with the main road. I pulled to the side and stopped.

"What's up?"

"Have to unlock the front hubs and wet down a spoke."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "What spoke?"

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"It means I have to go pee. Settlers in their wagons years ago had to keep their spokes damp to make sure they swelled enough to not get loose. My dad used to use that phrase all the time."

She shook her head and smiled. "'Wet a spoke'. It sounds practical, but I'll bet frontier women didn't use it though."

I laughed. "Probably not. Easier for us guys. Back in a little bit."

I headed over to some willows and watered the plants. When I got back, Nora was gone. I waited and then heard her behind me.

"No wagon wheels, just satisfaction." She quipped, hopping up into the truck.

Our trip back to Boulder was uneventful. Traveling early on a Sunday afternoon made traffic a little tamer. I shuddered to think of what it would be like tonight when the ski crowd started back to Denver. It was usually bumper-to-bumper at twenty miles-per-hour then.

We arrived around five. It was already dark with the false evening that was caused by the hills to the west of town. "My place first, or yours?" I asked Nora.

She thought a moment and then said "Yours."

Slowing in front of my apartment, I backed up to my garage to make equipment removal easier. When I got out and stretched, Nora moved in close and put her arms around me. We kissed and then held each other tightly.

"You know what I could use right now?" She said softly.

"No clue. What?"

"A nice hot bath. In a tub that is longer than three feet." She snickered.

I gestured to the open garage door. "Be my guest. Bubble bath is on the shelf to the left."

"You have bubble bath?" She said with amazement. "You old softie, you."

I felt myself flushing a little; happy that it was dark enough for her not to see it. "Yeah, wellâ"

She pecked my cheek and dashed inside. I made several trips to carry my gear in and drop it in the kitchen. The unused food, what little there was of it, went either into the refrigerator or the cupboards. I heard water running and the happy sound of Nora as she hummed a tune. My mind's eye was visualizing all sorts of cool things.

When she mentioned it, I never really thought about Nora's decision to have a bath here at my house. Now, I began to wonder about that. I sidled up to the bathroom door and tapped. "Nora? Want me to separate your stuff out so you can take it to your place?"

"Can I stay here tonight?" She asked quietly. "I don't want to go home just yet."

I swallowed, clearing my dry throat. "Sure. I'll just go and tend to the car and lock everything up."

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"You do that," she said huskily. "I know my way around."

As quickly as I could, I returned to the truck, slammed doors and tailgate shut, and keyed the locks. I lowered the garage door, turned off the light, and went into the kitchen. There wasn't a sound anywhere that I could hear.

I probably shouldn't have because we were so tired, but I grabbed a couple of wine glasses and filled them from a bottle we hadn't tapped yet. Carrying them carefully, I headed for the back of the house.

"Nora? Where are you, Babe?"

She giggled, but not long enough for me to localize the sound. It did appear to be coming from down the hallway. There were only two places there - the bathroom and my bedroom. I let my imagination run wild and pictured her on my bed, covered in the quilt I liked to have around.

"Yoo hoo, ma belle female type skonk! I am seeking somewhere to find you!" I said in my best Pepe Le Pew accent.

That broke her up and she chuckled enough for me to find her. I was almost right. She was curled up in the chair by my bed in the light of just one low-wattage bulb from across the room.

"Go take a bath, Chet. The night is young," she whispered throatily. "I left you some bubble bath."

"Bath takes way too long. Shower it is for me." I said, shucking clothes as I crossed the room.

I almost fell while trying to remove my pants over my boots and this cracked her up again. I felt like an idiot, but finally freed myself from the trap and dragged my old, ratty bathrobe from the hook in the closet.

"Back in a moment," I said, practically running across the hall to the bathroom.

I had barely begun my shower before my anticipation got the better of me and the next thing I knew I was sporting wood; glorious wood. My erection neither diminished while I dried myself off nor did it wane as I spritzed on a tiny amount of after-shave (even though I hadn't shaved). In fact, I had difficulty closing my robe in front over it.

Finally, feeling like a toreador entering a bull ring, and hearing the music from Bolero in my head, I turned out the light, opened the door, and crossed the hallway to Nora.

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"Oh, my," she teased, looking pointedly at the blunt object under my robe. "Just what I ordered." She flushed and snickered behind her hand. "I can't believe I'm saying things like that now!"

She seemed to be saying that a lot lately. "Maybe I'm a bad influence."

"Could possibly be." She put on a serious face. "We need to talk, Chet."

Oh, crap! "About what?" I managed to get out through my suddenly dry throat. My erection deflated rapidly.

"Before you stop me, I have to get this out." She held up her hand. "Our relationship. Up there in the mountains was one thing, but down here we both have a lot more going on in our lives. I know that I'd love nothing better than to make our last two weeks much more permanent. I need to know how you feel about that."

I knelt at her feet and took her hand. "Nora. As far as I'm concerned, nothing is more important than our relationship. If you'll have me, I want to be near you all the time. Enough of this casual dating thing; just 'happening' to meet each other for dinner. I want real dates. I know now that I love you very much and I want our new relationship to continue for as long as we can make it go."

She leaned forward, taking my chin in both hands and stared deeply into my eyes. "That's what I want also, my love. With all my heart."

We kissed, sealing our newfound love. It escalated slowly, passion building up; bubbling over, until I lifter her into my arms and carried her over to the bed. I laid her gently down on it, lifting, and then throwing the coverlet back. Her robe had parted, putting her entire body on display.

It was exciting to me, as made obvious by the strong return of my erection. She reached under the hem of my robe and grasped me gently in her hand.

"Come. Make slow love to me." She whispered, tugging at the belt on my robe until it fell open.

I needed no more invitation than that. Tossing the robe aside, I slipped onto the bed, sitting next to her, reaching across her body to hold her against me. Her breasts pushed firmly against my chest as we shared a long, lingering kiss - touching tongues through partially open mouths. Her soft hand, busy in my lap, slipped up and down as we groaned in our passion.

Our kiss broke. I lowered my head to take her nipple between my lips; flicking gently against its firmness. Leaning backwards, she pulled me over on top of her. My head now lay in the warm valley between her breasts. Her free hand cupped the back on my head, holding me steady as she whispered in my ear. "Love me; love me, Chet."

I released her breast and lifted her legs so that they lay out flat. When I bent over her I trailed a rain of kisses down her stomach, slowing as I neared my target. The instant I touched her with the tip of my tongue, she cried out, pressing at the back of my head; urging me forward. My lips found purchase and I feasted on her womanhood.

Her knees became restless, rising and then falling back to the mattress. She groaned and urged me onward, pressing my head downwards; allowing me to touch her soul. She cried out again and gasped as she reached

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her climax, shaking her head from side to side. Her fingernails raked down my back and still she pushed me onwards. She took in a deep breath and then released it slowly, hissing her approval almost subliminally. My mouth filled with the fruits of her release.

Slowly, she subsided, her frenetic movements stilled, and she relaxed with her head back on the pillow. I kissed my way back up to her chest, then her neck, and she turned her head to let me kiss her lips - to taste of herself.

"Oh, Chet. I've â I've never had such a huge thrill like that. It was what I imagine dying and being reborn to be like. Can I â can I please you again, like I did before?"

"Not necessary, Nora. I only want you to be happy."

"But it *is* necessary, Chet. Very much so. I want to please you in every way." She rose up and I rolled back to allow her to do so. She knelt by my side, grasping me in her warm hand. "I've only done this just the one time. I may not be very good."

"Remember, there is no 'good', Nora, only degrees of wonderful."

Apparently, that was the right thing to say because she looked almost relieved as she bent over my hips. She paused for a moment, licked her lips, and then bent further to take me into her mouth. She was tentative at first, strengthening as she continued. I said nothing, reveling in the pleasure she was causing me.

She stopped a moment to look up at me. I smiled and nodded. She continued, now experimenting occasional; gripping me differently or sliding her fingers along my length.

I groaned. "Did I hurt you?" She asked.

"Definitely not." I replied softly.

She continued until I felt the first twinges of imminent release. I stilled her head, stroking her hair, warning her of what was about to happen. I put my hand over hers.

She looked up into my eyes. "Time?"

"Time." I felt myself letting go of my built-up tensions. Her hand followed mine as I ejaculated onto my stomach. Her breath came rapidly, matching mine, as I climaxed. As my erection waned, she pressed and fondled it; kissing the tip.

We moved around until we were lying side-by-side; flushed with our recent efforts. She cradled my chin and kissed me. This time, I tasted of myself. She nestled her head under my arm and rested it on my chest, running her fingers through my chest hair.

"We are so good together." She said softly; almost to herself.

I had no argument with that. "We certainly are."

We remained silent for a while until I realized that she had slipped off to sleep. In moments, I fell asleep also with my nose buried in her hair; smelling of lemons. I knew then that our future was in good hands.

* * *

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Author's Note: I decided to temporarily end this tale here - on a very happy and loving note. If anyone wishes me to continue with the adventures of newly self-discovered love between Chet and Nora, let me know and I'll be happy to keep going. I've outlined quite a few more chapters, dealing from the reactions of their friends to their new romance; to Yoga classes and the sessions that follow - both humorous and serious; and general socialization in and about town.

T. O.

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