

~ Crossroads ~

by Aurelia

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Right. Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. The windscreen wipers swept away the sprinkle of snowflakes that hit the glass. It was almost mesmerizing in its metronome swing, and Reggie pushed hard to stay awake.

It was a bittersweet trip to her holiday cabin in the mountains. It had been nearly three years to the day since she had lost Allie to a hit and run and two days to Halloween. Now the holiday was only a reminder of what was missing in her life and no longer the playground of greedy children. She couldn't stay at her apartment because the sound of children laughing was just too much for her to bear, and yet there was no joy at her hideaway either. There was nowhere she could hide. At least at the cabin she could grieve in peace and quiet without her friends telling her to get on with her life.

She didn't want to hear all the reasons why she should move on because there was only one thing that mattered. She had lost Allie before her time. They still had so much to do together and now it couldn't happen... wouldn't happen. Her life had been ripped apart by some faceless bastard who would never pay for what he took away from her.

Reggie stopped the car and lowered her head until it rested against the steering wheel. Why was she doing this to herself? She knew they were right but she just couldn't move on. It felt like it would be a betrayal of Allie's memory to do so but she also knew she existed in an eternal loop of pain and despair.

She sighed and lifted her head. With her foot on the accelerator Reggie continued her lonely journey up the mountain to the remote cabin. The wipers continued to swipe away the snow, forming arcs of clear glass on an otherwise white windscreen. The weather had closed in early this year. Normally it would hold off until mid-November before the snow fell. Maybe it was a sign. If it wasn't for the fact that she was almost there she was tempted to turn around and go home.

Dusk had come and gone and she was left to make the final part of the journey in twilight. She needed all her senses about her to negotiate the rocky track to the cabin, and it was with a certain amount of relief when the building appeared in the headlights of her SUV. So far she had survived but what about the rest of the weekend? Was her fragile emotion up to the challenge?

"C'mon, Reggie, pull it together." But the words held no comfort. Before the snow fell any

harder she maneuvered the car under cover. The cabin looked cold and uninviting, tempting her to change her mind. She found the power box and flipped the switch, hoping that the wires to her house were still intact. There was an emergency generator but she was in no mood for such exercise.

There was a dull click as the key slid into the lock of the front door, the sound of it turning was loud against the gentle pitter-patter of snowflakes. This had been their hideaway from work, family and the world. Now it was barren and cold.

Reggie flipped on the light switch as she walked into the cabin, checking for any break-ins by pesky wildlife. The chill sat in the air and before unpacking the rest of the car Reggie carried in a load of wood, starting a fire in the blackened fireplace. The familiar odor of burning wood brought back a lot of memories, all of them wonderful and all of them full of heartbreak. Maybe she should have just stayed back in the city.

* * *

Reggie lounged on the settee sipping her wine, trying to let the tension in her body slip away under the alcohol. There was no sound but the crackling of the fire and the shifting of wood settling in the fireplace. At one time it was a comforting sound, a time when her life was filled with joy...

"How about we try that new trail tomorrow?"

Reggie's head rested against her lover's chest as she gazed into the depths of the fire. "Hmmm?"

"I said, sleepyhead, how about we try that new trail tomorrow?"

"Sure, hon, anything you say." Reggie didn't really care. As long as she was with Allie they could walk to the moon. She reached for her partner's arms and pulled them close, wanting to feel every inch of the woman she was lying against.

"And now it's time for bed."

"You got that right," she grinned, turning in the embrace and planting her lips on her bedmate. Reggie dragged the unsuspecting woman over to the rug in front of the fireplace and pushed her down. "Bed. You know what that means?" she whispered.

"Sleep?" Allie laughed at her companion's enthusiasm.

"Well yeah, afterwards." Her lips descended to meet the warm, inviting skin below her, gently placing a chaste kiss on the waiting lips. "I love you." Every time Reggie uttered those words it sent a shiver through her body. It was like the words were sacred and to speak them blessed their union.

A wayward hand rose to cup her cheek. "I love you too, hon, with all my heart."

A lone tear trailed down Reggie's cheek as she looked into those pale eyes and she knew everything that was showing in those eyes were mirrored in her own. She descended once more, making a firmer contact that lingered on and on.

She hadn't been aware of it but suddenly she was naked as Allie's lips blazed a path down her body. The familiar sensation slowly swelled under her lover's knowing touch, driving her to a far-off peak where the air was thin but the view was spectacular. This was when she felt their love the keenest, the moment when their spirits soared in the heavens... together.

A loud thump from the fireplace drew Reggie out of her memories, leaving her alone in the slowly warming, but empty, room. Out of desperation she turned on the television, if for nothing else than for the noise.

The reception wasn't good at the best of times but tonight a heavy storm must have been approaching from the south. "Break... news..." The picture was fuzzy and wavering, occasionally sending the image into static.

"Damn it!" Even the elements were conspiring against her.

"Escapee... killer... Bargo..."

Reggie's body stiffened, anxiously waiting for more information. But none came. The picture died, idly sitting on static for the next few minutes. She flipped through the channels to find out more but there was nothing. Her heart thumped frantically, aching in her chest like a heart attack, because her cabin sat right in the middle of Bargo.

She rose, placing her empty wine glass on the table. What was she going to do? It was too late tonight to leave. Panic set in as her mind tried to make some sense of the news. "What to do, what to do." Reggie didn't even realize that she was talking to herself. Now if Allie was here... But that was the point. Allie wasn't here. She was on her own, now and forever.

She was about to make her way to the door when there was a loud knock. Reggie stood frozen in place. Could she make it out one of the windows in time?

The knock came again. "Hello? Anyone home?"

It was a female voice. But Reggie didn't know if the killer was male or female. The report didn't say, or at least the part she had heard didn't say.

"Please? My car broke down. It's freezing out here!" The voice pleaded for help.

Reggie couldn't very well act like she wasn't home. The lights were on and there was smoke coming out of the chimney. She could have said 'go away' but what if the person was really in trouble? Her mother had always encouraged her to lend assistance where she could.

It was like watching outside her body as her hand reached for the doorknob. Was she going to regret this? Certainly. Was she going to die tonight? Probably. At least she would be re-united with Allie. With that thought in mind she opened the door, flinging it wide as if to say 'take me now'.

Standing on the doorstep was, as expected, a woman stamping her feet on the ground in an effort to keep them warm. "Oh thank you. Can I come in please? Damn, it's cold!"

Reggie said nothing but stepped aside to let the woman in. She smiled as the stranger made her way directly to the open fire, her hands seeking the warmth of the licking flames. "Ooooh, it's nasty out there." The woman's head turned to look over her shoulder at Reggie. "You might want to close that door."

Reggie had been standing there dumbfounded, or was it in terror, as the intruder swept by her to find the source of the heat. "Oh." As the door clicked shut Reggie reached for the bolt and chain, either securing the cabin against intruders or locking herself in with a killer.

"I don't suppose you have a phone?" the woman asked hopefully.

"Cell, sorry." There was really no need for a landline as she and Allie used the cabin only occasionally, and a cell was fine for the other times they came to stay. "There's no reception because a storm is coming."

"I can see that." The woman's smile lit up her face. Snowflakes that touched her dark hair and eyelashes were slowly melting with the warmth, leaving behind damp hair that hung limply over her face. "Hi, I'm Brennan."

"Regina. People call me Reggie."

"Nice to meet you, Reggie. And thank you for the rescue."

"What are you doing out in this weather? Didn't the rangers warn you about the roads?"

"Yeah, they did," she sighed, "but I thought I could beat it before it set in." She sheepishly looked up. "Stupid, I know. I'm just grateful that I found you otherwise I'd be a human popsicle by the morning."

"The rangers tell you for a reason--"

"Don't lecture me, alright?" Brennan stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry. I think I'm just angry at myself for taking a risk like that. I'm usually pretty level headed about such things."

Reggie had been watching her carefully, trying to gauge the woman's sincerity. Was it all a ruse to gain her trust or was she genuinely in trouble? The rangers had let her through because she was a resident. Reggie hadn't passed anyone broken down and no one else would be allowed on the road after her. Brennan was lying. Was there a car at all?

Whatever the truth was if she survived the night she was out of here in the morning. "Where's your car?"

"I'm not sure. I lost my bearings a while ago. I smelled the burning wood and followed that for a while until I saw your lights."

"Were you still on the main road?"

"I think so. The snow got so heavy it was hard to tell."

"You might have done better to stay put until it blew over."

"I did for a little bit then the battery died. No more heat." Brennan smiled impishly at Reggie. "If I'd stayed put then I never would have met you."

If Brennan was making a play for her she wasn't interested. These few days were about reflection not about getting laid. Reggie walked away before the banter went any further, returning with a towel. "Here. Dry yourself off." The words were clipped and monotone. She was in no mood for conversation.

"Thanks." They were standing there in silence, Reggie staring at her while she toweled herself off. "Errr, any chance of a coffee?"

"Oh. Oh!" Where was her mind? She knew where it was, mentally going through Brennan's coat to find any hidden weapons. "Sorry."

"Look, if it's a problem..."

But Reggie could see that Brennan was desperate for something warm to fill her cold stomach. "No, no problem." Reggie could use a coffee as well. And she hadn't eaten since she had arrived either, instead taking comfort in a glass of wine. That was probably the wrong thing to do knowing that she would suffer for it tomorrow but it was what she needed. The cabin had overwhelmed her, filling her senses with sights, sounds and smells that brought it all back to her. Maybe subconsciously she knew that would happen and came here on purpose, vainly trying to hold onto the past as she contemplated her future.

Reggie watched her visitor with some suspicion as she made the coffee. The woman seemed quite at home standing in front of the fire, steam rising from her damp clothes. Whether she was a killer or just someone stupid enough to be traveling the roads in a blizzard Reggie just wanted to be left alone.

"A cosy little place you have here." Brennan made polite conversation but she had a feeling that the owner of the cabin wasn't in a communicative frame of mind.

"Yeah." Reggie handed over the hot mug to her houseguest. She sat down on the settee, lounging over the scattered blanket covering it.

"Had this place long?"

"Yeah." Dark eyes stared over the top of the cup.

"Are you here alone?"

It may have been an innocent question but Reggie knew the right answer. "Nope."

"He's out hunting for dinner?"

"Nope. He's taking a nap." As far as Brennan was concerned Reggie was sticking to the story of a boyfriend.

Brennan finally sat down but it was obviously too close for her host, who shuffled herself up the other end of the couch. "I don't bite," she murmured.

"Good." Reggie sipped her coffee, her senses on alert for any sudden movement. She was exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally but she knew she had to stay awake. Any faltering on her part could end in death.

This person who called herself Brennan had a good disguise. Pretending to have broken down, well that was old hat, but she was perky and upbeat, giving an air of someone who wouldn't possibly even *think* of killing someone. It was a clever ruse that could have easily worked if it wasn't for the fact that she had heard the bulletin. No, Reggie's defenses would be up until she stepped through the door of her own home.

"So what do you do around here for fun?" Reggie was certainly making Brennan's job even harder. It was hard work trying to keep up a one-sided conversation.

"Read." Reggie just didn't have it in her to answer any more than one word at a time. She had been looking forward to a silent few days.

"What about the television?" Brennan's head nodded in the direction of the dilapidated box.

"Storm."

"Look, I'm sorry if I ruined your plans. It wasn't intentional, believe me."

"I'm just tired, I guess."

"Point me in the direction of the books and you go and snuggle up with that man of yours."

Reggie looked at her watch. It was barely eight o'clock. She rarely went to bed before ten but trying to keep up a mundane conversation with someone she didn't want to know was just too hard to maintain. Her finger pointed to the rough-hewn table against the cabin wall. "Over there."

"Mind if I try the television as well?"

"Sure, knock yourself out." Reggie left the room in search of spare blankets and pillow. She returned to the warm room as Brennan flipped through the channels in search of something to watch. There was a moment of clarity in the broadcast, and the newsreader was making an announcement.

"I repeat, there has been a breakout at Coral Bay Penitentiary. Cara Roberts, who is currently serving life for a double murder, is among the handful of escapees on the run. They are believed to be heading in the direction of Bargo. Roberts, girlfriend of Harley Abercrombie, is two years into her life sentence for her part in the brutal murder of two teenagers...." The transmission was cut short.

"Hey! Why did you turn it off? That was important!"

"Do we have to listen to the gruesome details?"

"Yes, if you happen to live in the area of Bargo!"

"This is Bargo?" Brennan pressed the remote. "Ohhh great! Not only am I late but now I'm in danger of waking up dead?"

Reggie threw the pillow at her, forcing Brennan to drop the remote. "Here! Now go to sleep!"

"What's eating you? You have that boyfriend of yours to protect you."

"Yeah," Reggie muttered as she wandered to the kitchen area, "I do." Pretending to drink a glass of water, she watched her houseguest carefully as the woman sifted through the choice of reading material. Reggie slowly opened the cutlery drawer and took out the biggest knife she had, slipping it ever so carefully into the waistband of her jeans. One false move and she wouldn't have to wait for the escapee to find her. She'd already be dead from self-inflicted wounds. But she was armed now and if Brennan was who she thought she was then the woman was going to have to kill her with a vegetable knife.

"Are we safe in here?" Brennan inquired nervously.

"The door is locked."

"Is that enough? You know-"

"It's enough! Unless the killer has a battering ram on her." Reggie walked slowly and carefully towards the door to the back rooms.

"Something wrong with your leg?"

"Errr, no. Just a cramp."

"Here let me-"

"That what the boyfriend is for." Reggie winked at Brennan saucily.

"Ohh,yeah. Right." Brennan almost looked disappointed. "Well then, goodnight."

"Yeah, goodnight."

* * *

Reggie lay in bed wide awake. Her body desperately needed sleep but her mind wouldn't let her, even though she knew she was about as safe as she could be. A chair was wedged up under the door handle and the knife was safely tucked away under the mattress. She had wanted to have it under her pillow but she was a restless sleeper and in all likelihood she would slit her own wrists with all her moving about. Allie had always said it was like sleeping with a bucking bronco with the amount of thrashing around she did.

So what was Brennan doing out there? Or maybe she should say Cara. Still, Reggie had to admit the woman dressed pretty snazzy for an escaped felon. Cara could have very well waylaid Brennan and stole her identity and clothes. Maybe she stole the car too but that had broken down.

Then why this charade? Maybe this was all a game to Cara. Making her think she is someone else and then picking the moment to eliminate the threat? There must be killers out there who enjoy the thrill of the chase as much as the kill itself.

But the cabin was off the main road and unless someone knew where it was the police could well drive by without knowing of its location. She was alone and facing a very real threat. Reggie's hand reached for the knife as if to reassure herself that she had protection. She could have used that make-believe boyfriend right about now. But who she really wanted was Allie.

In the dark she could imagine Allie's arms around her, to feel her warmth, to smell her scent... to breathe the very air of her lover. Allie had a way of making everything alright. She needed that reassurance now, in the dark of night.

Reggie woke in total darkness, not remembering the moment she had fallen asleep. It was cold, it was dark and it was frightening. She listened hard for any noise out of place. The wind rustled the trees outside her window, long wood tendrils scratching at the building as if trying to get in. It was unnerving but Reggie knew there was nothing she could do about that. As if a murderer on

the run wasn't enough, it was as if nature itself was trying to scare her to death.

Suddenly there was a scratching at the door, like a cat trying to get in, and it put her already raw nerves on edge. Slowly her hand descended to the base of the mattress, seeking the comfort of the knife handle touching her shaking hand. The scratching continued, rising from the floor to the door handle. A slight click could be heard over the noise outside. Someone was trying to get in.

Reggie sat up in bed, her heart fluttering wildly with fright. Adrenaline flowed through her body and it was like a shot of pain to her heart. So, was this the end? Would her body ever be found?

There was a creak that cut through the darkness like a whip. Whoever it was had the door handle in her hand. It was Brennan, she was sure of that now. The woman she had let into her home was now taking the opportunity to strike while she was asleep.

But Reggie wasn't going down without a fight. Grasping the knife firmly, she climbed out of bed. She stood facing what she knew was the door, trying to decide how to launch her own attack, but as she contemplated her next move the intruder backed away and left the hall. The chair had done its job and held the door firmly shut.

Reggie staggered back and sat clumsily on the edge of the mattress. Her head dropped and her eyes closed as she tried to rein in her out-of-control heartbeat. She felt sick.

She waited a few minutes before moving the chair and opening the door, tip-toeing on slippers towards the faint light emanating from the living room fire. Her ear pressed against the door to listen for signs of movement but there was nothing but the faint echoes of the wind blowing through the trees outside the cabin.

Steeling herself, she opened the door carefully stopping once or twice when a squeak was about to give her away. Once the door was fully open she looked at her sleeping houseguest, trying to decide whether in fact she really was asleep. If she wasn't then she was doing an admirable job of acting like she was.

Reggie moved closer, the knife in front of her acting like an invisible barrier, ready to protect her at a moment's notice. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the sleeping woman. There was no elevated breathing or tense body, only her eyelids fluttering and her body twitching from REM sleep. As far as Reggie could tell Brennan was well and truly asleep.

Reggie moved towards the kitchen area to get a drink and it was then that she noticed the door. Now as far as she could remember she locked that door but now it was unlocked. Before she had time to think she walked over and re-locked it. Someone had got in or, more importantly, someone had gone out. Reggie looked at Brennan. What would take Brennan out into a night like this? She was sorely tempted to find out but what if she investigated only to find Brennan had locked her outside? She was in no state to do so, either physically or mentally, deciding instead to take her chances in the relative comfort of the cabin.

Reggie leaned heavily against the locked door. What was supposed to be a quiet weekend was turning out to be anything but. She only wished that she either had a phone or a television that worked. For now she was cut off completely from the outside world, alone and unprotected, with a woman who was looking more and more like a homicidal maniac on the run. There was no way she was getting any sleep tonight.

* * *

Reggie awoke and it was just light. She had stayed awake as long as she could but exhaustion sapped her body of the energy to obey her mind's wishes. In the dark every sound had a double meaning. An errant tree twig scratching against the window became a fingernail trailing down the glass. The shifting of the logs in the fireplace sounded like faint footsteps in the hallway.

She was still alive. Even though the chair was once again under the door handle, she felt that it was not enough. It would only be enough when she was safe at home tucked into her own bed.

Reggie rose and got dressed, foregoing her shower for the moment because she knew that was when she would be the most vulnerable... naked, with soap in her eyes and no knife in her hand. She approached the lounge room door with some trepidation, only opening it when she gave herself a stiff talking to.

But the room was empty and the outside door was open. She half-heartedly thought of locking the door while Brennan was outside but there was still that sliver of common sense that told her the woman may be actually telling the truth. Tentatively she approached the entrance, her gaze quickly scanning the landscape in an attempt to find where Brennan was.

Nothing. Had she left? She had hoped so. Her eyes were drawn to her car. Something was not right. Despite her wish to stay put inside the cabin Reggie just had to look. She moved down the two steps to the undercover carport. While the driver's door was closed the hood was ajar. She already suspected what had happened even before the hood was opened. Brennan had sabotaged the car.

Reggie cast a cursory glance over the motor to see if anything was where it shouldn't be. But she wasn't a mechanic so there was no point to trying to be one. Everything looked in place as far as she could see, so that only left the driver's seat. Almost reluctantly she opened the door and climbed in. At first she noticed the scratches around the keyhole and then wires hanging down from underneath the dashboard. Brennan had tried to hotwire the car and she suspected that the car's immobilizer had kicked in.

"Damn it," she muttered angrily. Now her car was useless as well. In disgust she climbed out of the car and slammed the door. What was she going to do now? As she paced around on the snow-covered ground trying to decide her next move she noticed a splash of red about ten feet away on the rocky path leading to the cabin. Her interest piqued, she tip-toed down the slippery path towards the colored patch. There was a small pool of what looked like spilt blood glistening in the early morning light. A series of drops led off down the rough track and into the surrounding undergrowth. What it Brennan or maybe some animal? Whatever it was she wasn't

going to go chasing out into the snow-covered forest.

Reggie retraced her footsteps to the cabin, locking up her car and collecting a load of wood before entering the relative warmth of the cabin. She added the wood to the pile sitting next to the fireplace before going back and locking the door. She then slumped into the cushiony softness of the sofa. She was feeling guilty, having just turned her back on a woman in need, and it was only her utter confidence in the fact that Brennan was a murderer that stopped her going out into the harsh environment to find her.

Still, blood had been spilled away from the car. Something had happened that didn't involve her vehicle and had left someone or something injured and staggering off into the snow-covered forest. "Awww... Shit!" She just knew she was going to regret this...

Reggie stood and walked down the hallway to her room. She threw open the wardrobe and found her ski suit and hiking boots. Was this the right thing to do? Her legs were already out of her jeans and being fed into the bulky suit as she considered the question. The fact that she was changing to go out into the snow pretty well answered any doubt she had. She couldn't leave another human being out there injured if she could help it. Now it was only a matter of whether the rescue would cost her her life.

She grabbed her backpack and put some supplies in it. The first aid kit was added and finally a blanket. She hid the car keys on top of the kitchen wall cabinet and made her way outside, turning around to lock up the cabin. The sun had finally emerged, forcing her to put on her sunglasses. It was going to be hot work and would add to her irritability no end. In case she was being watched, Reggie made a show of inspecting the car, disappearing behind it for a moment to hide the house key in the secret key holder in the tire recess. If she got caught Brennan couldn't use the house key.

Reggie set off to look for Brennan following the blood drops like Hansel and Gretel, hoping against hope she didn't suffer the same fate as the two storybook children. At first the way was easy going and the drops were easily found, but after half an hour the trail started to break down. It was only by luck that she found any sign at all with an errant smear against here and a drop of blood there.

She was about ready to give up and go back when she saw something collapsed on the ground ahead. Approaching carefully Reggie's eyes swept the area. Was this a ruse to catch her unawares? As she got closer she could see it was a human and not an animal, confirming it was Brennan when she was nearly next to her.

"Oh God, Brennan! What happened to you?" Reggie whispered in reaction. She had forgotten that this woman was a murderer, seeing only a human being in trouble. She immediately noted the splash of red on the woman's jacket. Brennan was in trouble. Her fingers reached for a pulse and found a steady, even rhythm. She was still alive.

She couldn't help herself and went in search of where the spilt blood came from. Brennan had a head wound and another wound on her back. She perched her sunglasses on the top of her head

and removed her backpack to find her first aid kit.

"She won't be needing that." The disconnected voice made Reggie jump.

She looked down at Brennan's face but she was out cold. Her eyes looked over her shoulder and found the source of that voice. A woman with short-cropped bleach-blond hair stood facing her clad only in drab gray pants and shirt. A number was imprinted on her shirt and sat over her right breast. But what was more important was the gun in her hand pointed directly at her.

"Get up," the blond muttered.

Reggie was not about to argue with a woman with a gun and did as she was told.

"Back towards the cabin, and no sudden movements."

Reggie stood slowly, her hands held up in surrender. "What about her?"

"What about her?" The blonde growled.

"You're not just going to leave her out here, are you?"

"She's not my problem." The cool detached eyes of the woman flickered down at her victim.

"She'll be dead soon enough."

But..."

"Get moving unless you want to wind up like her."

With one final glance over her shoulder at the stricken Brennan, Reggie started to walk back towards the cabin. She said a silent prayer for her and hoped that one day she would be forgiven for ever doubting Brennan's sincerity.

Reggie knew that Cara was behind her. She could feel the freeze from the woman from where she was. So this was a cold-hearted killer, and from what Reggie had observed so far Brennan and Cara were light years apart.

The journey was slow and arduous. Reggie's mind was racing in all directions. Considering what had happened to Brennan what was in store for her? It probably did her no good thinking about what might happen, but it was also human nature to worry about the future. Any chance she had of getting help was in her backpack and that was now in the hands of her captor. She was well and truly alone.

"What do you want with me?" Reggie asked. It was more something to occupy her mind rather than expecting an answer to the question. Considering who the woman was Reggie knew she could not expect any favors.

"Firstly, you can keep your mouth shut." The menace in her tone told Reggie that she meant business. If she asked another question it was at her own peril. "Secondly, you have a cabin."

"You mean a hideout," Reggie said matter-of-factly.

"For one. Warmth and food for another. Still..." The rest was left unsaid.

Reggie risked a glance and found her captor's eyes fixated on her ass. When her gaze rose to Cara's face the woman gave her a sly smile.

"You would have been a popular girl in prison. Maybe you could have been my bitch." She laughed at the discomfort she caused her prisoner. She sobered, "No, you would never find yourself in prison, unless you were visiting. If I've got the time I'm sure I could give you a lesson or two about prison protocol."

Reggie turned her gaze back to the path she was walking along, trying to hide the shiver that ran through her frame. Was Cara trying to unnerve her or did she really mean it? She hoped to God it was an idle threat.

They reached the cabin far too quickly for Reggie's liking. At least her biggest danger outside was that she would slip over and break a leg. Inside was a whole other ballgame and it was certainly one she didn't want to attend. She was left with limited options as she faced her front door.

"Open it."

"No."

A hand grabbed her hair and pulled hard. "You do not want to piss me off. Now, open it!"

"I don't have the key."

"Then find it!" Cara shoved Reggie towards the carport.

"I can't remember." But she was fooling no one.

Cara fired her pistol at the doorknob but it refused to budge. She turned the weapon on a waiting Reggie, "The next one is yours."

"You do that and you'll never find it," Reggie muttered, trying to bluff her way out of the situation.

"And if you don't find it you'll do it with one arm." Cara threatened. "Just remember your buddy we left behind. You know I'll do it."

Reggie had no doubts about that. After all, the woman had been in prison for murder. "She's no

buddy of mine. I want just helping her."

"Riiigghht! That's why you called her by name. Nice try. You have ten seconds."

Reggie stood her ground. She didn't want to give in on principle but, on the other hand, she didn't really need a gunshot wound either. Then there was also the threat of molestation, which she didn't want to think about. No, if she refused the worst the woman could do was kill her. At least she'd be reunited with Allie.

She was at the crossroads in her life, so maybe this was her defining moment. If she was ever going to go forward with her life then she had to pack away Allie and put her in that compartment in her heart that had always been hers and hers alone. If life's cards fell the other way for her then she would join Allie in the afterlife. Now was the time she knew she had to make a decision.

"Ten... nine... eight..."

"Count all you like, I'm not moving."

The shot rang out and Reggie flinched, moving slightly to the left. She felt the pain cross her upper arm and her left hand rose instinctively to lie across the top of the wound. She looked up at the woman who shot her.

"What? You didn't think I'd do it?" She looked at Reggie for a moment then laughed. "You don't know me too well, do you?"

"I don't know you at all." Reggie hissed through clenched teeth.

"Well, don't go expecting my life story. We won't be together that long."

So, what did she mean? Reggie didn't know whether Cara would be leaving or Reggie would be leaving... feet first. "That still doesn't get you the key."

"Strip!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said... strip!"

"You have GOT to be joking!" In Reggie's eyes the situation was bordering on the ridiculous.

"The next shot will be at your kneecap."

Reggie stopped. Her arm was one thing but a shot to her kneecap would probably mean a permanent limp. Life was bad enough without her dearest Allie but to add a physical disability on top of everything was just too much to even think about let alone bare.

Her good hand rose and she pulled down the zipper on the front of her ski suit. The cold crisp morning air hit her warm body hard and she could nearly see stars with the shock of it. So was Cara going to let her freeze to death? It would be a cold day in hell before she would give the woman the key. It was a violation of her home and in particular a violation of Allie's memory.

The suit pooled around her ankles as she stood there in a tank top and shorts. Wearing anything more under the suit, especially with the walking she had done, and she would have sweated profusely. Now she was going to pay for it.

"Now the boots," Cara waved her gun as she talked.

Reggie sat on the ground and instantly regretted it. She tugged at the slip-on boots, finally standing once they had been discarded. The cold seeped through her socks and was already working on her toes.

"Okay, now throw me the suit and the boots."

Reggie finally realized that it wasn't so much to strip her down to freeze but for Cara to dress in something warm. Her trapped body heat in the suit would be warming up a vicious killer and she didn't think she liked that idea. Her arm hurt. It ran the gamut of pain, from stinging to burning to a deep throbbing. She really didn't want to look at it but she couldn't help herself. It could have been worse. There was a deep furrow where the bullet had creased her skin. No wonder it hurt like the devil. It was a superficial wound but it had opened up all her nerve endings and they didn't like the cold either. With some luck the cold would shut down her capillaries and stop the blood oozing from the wound.

"So now what?" Reggie preferred to know than to second-guess her opponent.

"Now...," Cara had one shoe off and was feeding her leg into the warm ski suit. "...we wait."

"For anything in particular?"

"Well, either you find that key or you freeze to death. Your choice."

"I'm not keen on either those choices. You got another one?" She was being flippant and that was a dangerous thing to do to a woman with a short fuse and a loaded gun.

"I can still put that hole in your knee if you want to continue to be a smart-mouth."

Reggie sized up her chances of getting to Cara before she could shoot, especially as the woman struggled into the ski suit. There was a moment or two of inattention that could have given her the opportunity but just as she was about to move Cara would stare at her. There just wasn't enough time.

Time was whittling away and so was Reggie's warmth. The cold from the ground had passed her

feet and was slowly working its way up her legs. If she didn't do something soon her feet could be permanently damaged with severe frostbite. She was ten feet away from the warmth of a fire and she was stubbornly refusing to give in.

Cara, on the other hand, used the time to go through Reggie's backpack. She had found the cell and made a call, before sitting patiently on the steps at the front door waiting for Reggie to cave in. Or she had been. Her patience had just about run out. She stood and made her way to Reggie, who was stamping her feet in an effort to get some feeling back into them. Roughly she pulled Reggie out into the open air and shoved her into the snow. "Stay there!"

"What was that for?"

"To hurry up the process." Cara replied.

"What? Missing your morning cup of coffee?" At that point Reggie was beyond caution. With those few words Reggie found the end of the pistol pushed against her forehead.

"Listen, smart-ass, if you want to live beyond the next minute I'd shut your mouth and seriously think about opening the cabin."

"What makes you think I care?" But did Reggie seriously believe that? A few days ago she probably wouldn't have cared. She had been living half a life. They were all right. She needed to move on. So what did she think now?

"Fine, I'll finish it now."

The muzzle pressed deep into her skin to the point of pain. Reggie closed her eyes and prayed that Allie would be there to welcome her. She heard the click. *I'm coming, darlin'.*

But nothing happened. A second went by... then another... and another. Reggie opened her eyes and looked directly at Cara. She could see the anger in those eyes and prudently thought better of some smart ass comment.

"Fuck you," Cara muttered.

"Not until hell freezes over." Priority only hoped that Cara didn't mean what she said. She looked up at the woman who held her life in her hands. So what would happen now? Cara wanted to get inside and Reggie wouldn't let her. It was a stalemate.

As if her thoughts had been answered, Cara's head jerked and her eyes rolled up into her head. She slid bonelessly to the ground out cold. It took Reggie a moment to register what had happened, and her eyes rose from the supine body to find Brennan standing there.

"You look awful." Reggie couldn't help but state the obvious.

"Good to see you too." Brennan reached down to gather up the gun and nearly lost her balance.

"Let's get you inside." Reggie made a move towards the carport for the key.

"We better tie her up first. Got any rope?"

"It's inside. We keep some emergency climbing rope."

"We? Where's the boyfriend?"

"Errr," Reggie looked at her sheepishly, "there was no boyfriend."

"You lied?" But Brennan was attempting a smile.

"Yeah, I did. I thought you were her."

"Geez, thanks. But that explains a lot."

"Will you stop talking! We need to get you some medical help."

"I'll make the call." But Reggie helped by picking up the phone and handing it to Brennan. "Now quit yakking and get the rope before she wakes up."

Reggie found the rope and gave a passing thought to putting some warm clothes on. But taking the time could make the difference between tying up an unconscious killer and wrestling a wide-awake one. The hardest thing she ever had to do was to leave the warmth of the cabin in her underwear to stand in the freezing cold. If the situation wasn't so dire she would have told them all to go to hell.

Between them they managed to secure Cara to one of the poles holding up the carport. It was not the most professional job but if it held their prisoner they were happy. Finally, the adrenaline started to wear off and their injuries made themselves known, forcing them to sit down before they fell down.

"Did you call an ambulance?" Was Reggie as tired as she sounded?

"Yeah. On their way." Brennan muttered. Her hand rose to the lump on the back of her head. "Owww."

"Yeah, know how you feel."

"You really should get some clothes on."

"I know," Reggie mumbled. "I'm just trying to work up the energy to stand." Before she had a chance to make the effort Brennan stood up and extended a hand to help her up. "Will you please sit down! You have a head wound and another on your back."

"Is that what it is? Do I want to know what it looks like?"

"Probably not." Reggie studied the woman standing in front of her. "You know, you are an enigma."

"Me? An enema?" But Brennan smiled to let her know she understood the difference.

"Yeah, whatever. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Brennan Davis. Why?"

"I don't know. You should be screaming for the hills or something after what had happened to you. But look at you, you're as cool as a cucumber."

"Well, I could say the same about you."

"True. Was it a coincidence that you turned up on my doorstep when you did?" The sound of sirens cut through the icy cold air. "That was quick!"

"Well..... I can't get anything by you Regina..."

"Regina Carroll."

"Regina Carroll, hello. You have very good instincts, Regina. I'm Detective Brennan Davis."

"Ahhh."

"Just ahhh? Nothing more?"

"It explains a lot. So you were on the lookout for Cara, huh?"

"Yeah, we've been scouring the area. That's why the police are responding so quickly. They were nearby."

"So, was I a suspect?"

"Nah, I knew what Cara looked like."

"And I didn't. Sorry about the frosty reception."

"But it was more than just Cara, wasn't it?" But Reggie's look of withdrawal stopped the conversation. "Sorry, none of my business..."

"I..." Reggie's head hung and she swiped her good hand through her hair. "My partner died a while ago and every Halloween I come up here to..."

"Mourn?"

Reggie looked up and saw sympathy in Brennan's eyes. "Something like that."

"How long?"

"Three years. She was my life."

The first of the police responders pulled up out front of the cabin.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Reggie."

"Thanks Brennan." A blanket miraculously appeared around her shoulders, bringing a warmth that would take a while to reach her. Reggie watched as Brennan walked away, her demeanor changing from concerned co-survivor to cop. How did she do that? She herself had a bullet graze and she felt like shit. Brennan had two wounds, one of which was to the head, and she was moving around like it was a scrape or two.

Finally Reggie found the strength to stand and make her way into the cabin to find something more sensible to wear than her underwear. She discarded the damp clothes and donned her jeans and sweater, sighing as her feet slipped into dry socks and boots. Her feet ached from the cold and only time would tell whether they would return to normal. God, she hoped so.

Brennan sought her out as she sat on the sofa sipping a hot coffee.

"It seemed Cara made a call. In case there's a rendezvous here we'll stake out the area. Cara's on her way back to prison, thanks to you."

"I didn't do..."

"Oh, but you did. Don't sell yourself short, Reggie. It was a very brave thing you did."

And yet Reggie didn't think it was very brave at all. In fact, it was probably more suicidal than brave. She just hadn't given a damn about her life. She noticed the policewoman watching her and smiled. "What?"

Another siren pierced the stillness of the forest. "Looks like the paramedics are here." Brennan stood up ready to move towards the door. Reggie put her hand on Brennan's arm and stopped her progress.

"What did you want to say?"

"Nothing."

"No, tell me."

"It's not the right time."

"It may never be the right time. Ask me."

Brennan looked out the door and saw the paramedics unpacking their vehicle. It was now or never. "I was wondering...", She faltered and took a deep breath. "I was wondering if you would mind if I called you some time." She could feel her heartbeat in her throat. Reggie was still raw inside and it was likely that she would get the brush off, but she had to ask.

Was Reggie ready for this? Why did it feel like she was betraying Allie? Can you give me a sign Allie? What should I do? The fire flared and sputtered then died down to a low flame. Maybe it was time. "Yeah... no! I mean... awww hell. I don't mind, no."

The paramedics entered the cabin and the two women no longer had their privacy.

"Don't you want my number?"

"Hey, I'm a cop. That's what I do." Brennan winked and then allowed the EMT to attend to her.

Reggie's mind mulled over the events of the past day as she was patched up and prepared for transportation. Was she making the right decision? Who knew but she had finally made a decision.

In the front seat of the ambulance Reggie looked out the window at the group of people congregated out the front of her cabin. Her gaze found Brennan who made the motion of putting a cell to her ear. She mouthed "I will call."

Reggie had reached the crossroads in her life in the past 24 hours and she had made a decision. She had made a right turn on that road called life and was now on a new course, and even if Brennan turned out to be not the one for her Reggie now knew that she had taken a step in the right direction.

THE END.