

# ~ Whitewater Rendezvous ~

by Kim Baldwin

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*Dedicated as always to the Queen of the Double Standard.*

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Kate Bradley leaned her nearly six foot tall frame against the blue Orion Outfitters van and studied the plane as it approached the single short runway cut into the Canadian wilderness. There was no terminal, no control tower, just a pair of well-weathered windsocks to help guide the pilot of the 9-seater twin propeller Beechcraft. The weather was fine this late August day, with temperatures in the 70s. The windsocks barely moved and the sky was clear and blue. The plane touched down and taxied toward her.

*Coop should be doing this*, Kate groaned as she waited to welcome their clients. *She's just so much better at this part than I am*. She pulled a rubber band out of the pocket of her jeans and put her long brunette hair into a ponytail to keep it out of her face. Kate was an experienced kayaker and outdoorswoman. She'd worked summers for Orion for the last seven years, and had taken a number of trips on her own before that. But although she had tremendous savvy about wilderness skills and watercraft, she was extremely shy. Her partner guide was naturally gregarious and enjoyed being the center of attention.

They'd worked together on dozens of trips and a certain routine had developed. Nancy Cooper would pick up the clients and lead the briefing that preceded every excursion, while Kate assembled the group gear and packed the meals. But Kate had to take over all those tasks alone and also handle the individual training sessions this afternoon. Coop was attending her daughter's graduation and would not arrive until the next morning, just before they were to set off downriver.

Kate had poured over the client forms again that morning over coffee, trying to discern what she could about each of the women she would be responsible for over the next ten days. They had never had any serious problems occur, but the trips they led could be dangerous and physically demanding, so all clients had to fill out a questionnaire about their fitness and experience, and sign a waiver of liability.

The forms told her that three of the six women on this trip rated themselves as 'intermediate' level kayakers, one termed herself a 'beginner' and two had never been in a kayak before. One of the two did have canoeing experience, however, so Kate was confident she could adapt quickly. It was the other novice she was worried about.

Annie MacDonough had written that she'd spent hardly any time at all around water, but she had been camping a few times and considered herself athletic and a quick study. Kate hoped the self-assessment was accurate. The river they would navigate, the Odakonya, was generally

considered of easy to moderate difficulty, but there were stretches that could be tricky even for a veteran if the conditions were right.

The plane rolled to a stop at the end of the runway, 50 feet from the van, and Kate headed toward it as the pilot deployed the short set of steps and began helping the passengers disembark.

As they waited for him to retrieve their bags, 5 of the women began chatting among themselves as they took in the pristine wilderness that surrounded the remote airstrip. The sixth, a petite redhead, stood slightly off to one side with a scowl on her face, preoccupied with the cell phone in her hand. She repeatedly punched numbers into it and then held it to her ear, to no avail.

Kate pegged the woman as one of the novices by her clothes. She was dressed head to foot in brand new gear, from her North Face jacket and LL bean shirt to the tip of her still pristine Vasque boots. Kate groaned inwardly but pasted on her best professional smile.

"Welcome to Wolf Point, Ladies," she said with forced cheeriness as she neared the group. "I'm Kate Bradley, one of your guides. If you'll all just follow me..." she began, but the redhead interrupted.

"Where's the nearest phone? Or at least somewhere where my cell can pick up a signal?" she whined.

*You owe me big for this, Coop.* "There's a phone at the lodge, we'll be there in 20 minutes," Kate responded, gesturing toward the van. The redhead took off toward it without waiting for Kate to continue, but the other woman paused to greet the guide and introduce themselves.

"Hi Kate, I'm Marsha Walfun," a shapely 20-something brunette with curly hair and a ready smile said as she offered her hand. "I spoke with Coop on the phone?"

"Good to meet you Marsha," Kate answered. "You're the one's who's done Glacier Bay, right?"

"That's me," Marsha replied. "I can't wait to get started. This is some mighty pretty country too."

"I'm Amy Doorn," a tall woman with copper-colored hair said, nodding to Kate as she picked up her duffel.

"Linda Carol," a petite and perky brunette chimed in as she offered her hand to the guide. "The rude one, by the way, is Annie MacDonough," she apologized. She nodded toward the sullen redhead, who had tossed her bag into the van and settled into a seat. "And she's not really as bad as she seems. She just hasn't yet realized she's on vacation. It'll sink in."

"Good to hear that," Kate allowed, smiling back at the brunette. She liked this one already.

"Yancey Edwards," the only blonde in the group said she stepped forward to greet the guide. Yancey was built like a pinup girl, with trim hips, a narrow waist, and surgically enhanced breasts that strained against the confines of her red-and-black checked flannel shirt.

"Pleased to meet you Yancey," Kate said, trying to keep her eyes from straying to the blonde's ample assets. All of Yancey's outdoor gear, Kate noticed, from her duffel bag to her clothing--most of it Patagonia---was well-used but well-tended. This woman had obviously spent a lot of time in the out of doors.

And so had Pat Perry, who was the oldest, Kat guessed-- probably in her early forties. A compactly built woman with honey-colored eyes and sandy hair, Pat carried herself with an athletic grace, and her muscular shoulders and forearms evidenced her many hours in a kayak. She wore a faded baseball cap with the words Ocoee River embroidered on it, and bungeed to her duffel was a top of the line, take-apart crankshaft carbon fiber paddle, expensive but extremely light and ergonomic. Kate had one just like it.

The women piled into the van as Kate loaded their bags into the rear storage area. Annie MacDonough's duffel, she noted, was just like the woman's clothes--right off a store shelf. And it was easily twice as big as any of the others. Annie had obviously well exceeded the 'what to pack' list that Orion had sent to all the clients. It would be a challenge to get all the gear on the supply raft.

Soon they were underway, and the women began peppering Kate with questions.

"So how is the river running?" Pat inquired from the front passenger seat.

"High and fast," Kate replied. "There's been several inches of rain here the last few days, but it shouldn't cause us any problems. There's none forecast for the next week, at least."

"There are a couple of stretches of Class 4 rapids on the section we're taking, right?" Yancey asked, from the second row of seats.

Kate glanced in the rear-view mirror, which happened to be pointed at Yancey's considerable cleavage. She re-adjusted it to point at the blonde's face. "Yes, near the end of the trip, and there are some class 3 throughout."

"I need to make some calls when we get to the lodge," Annie interjected from the back row. "I hope we're going to get some time to ourselves before we have to be somewhere."

"You'll get a half hour to check in and get settled in your rooms," Kate explained, trying to keep in check her growing irritation with the redhead. "We'll meet in the dining room. During lunch, I'll brief you on the trip and answer any questions you have. This afternoon you'll be assigned your gear, and I'll conduct training sessions for everyone in the creek behind the lodge. I expect that some of you won't need any instruction from me, in which case you can use the time to get the feel of your boat."

"You probably don't need to spend a lot of time with Pat, Yancey or me," Linda volunteered. "We've been kayaking together a lot in Georgia, on some pretty challenging stretches."

"So you three are friends?" Kate asked.

"We all are," Marsha answered. "We work at different TV stations in Atlanta. A few years ago, we started up a group called 'Broads in Broadcasting'. We get together once a week in a pub to kick back and dish the dirt."

"And every year, a few of use take a trip together. Last year, 10 of us went to London," Amy supplied. "We stayed at the Hilton."

"Well this will certainly be a change of pace," Kate smirked.

The women-all but Annie, who was staring out the window---chuckled at the understatement.

"About half the group are your typical I-can't-be-without-my-hairdryer and makeup" gals," Pat supplied. "They tend to sit out trips like this one."

"But a lot of us are more adventurous," Yancey added. "We want to get away from the city when we get some time off."

"So we've compromised," Marsha said. "A posh trip one year, an outdoor adventure the next."

"How do you decide the destination?" Kate inquired. Quite an interesting concept, she thought. She wondered which type Annie was. She certain looked out of her element.

"When we started the group, every member wrote down a destination or type of trip and we put them all in a jar," Linda explained. "We draw one every year. If we select a ritzy location on a year we're supposed to do an adventure trip, we just put the slip back in the jar and keep drawing until we get it right."

"How many women are in your group?" Kate asked.

"More than 20," Marsha said. "Although probably only about half that will ever do the trips. A lot of the 'broads' are married with kids and can't get away."

"None of you are married?" Kate inquired. She noticed that several of the women exchanged looks with each other that suggested a shared secret. She could guess what it was.

"I've got a hubby at home," Yancey answered. "And two boys who just love getting a week or two alone with Daddy each year. They get to eat McDonalds and Pizza Hut every day and stay up late." She laughed, and several of the others joined in.

"Are you married, Kate?" Linda asked.

"Nope," the guide supplied, noticing in the rear-view the renewed round of knowing looks that the comment seemed to elicit. *Thought so. I betcha Pat, Marsha and Linda are gay. Amy too, probably* she thought, but her gaydar was less certain on that one. And who knew what Annie's deal was-the redhead was still staring out the window, and seemed totally removed from the rest

of them.

"Nancy Cooper, your other guide, will be joining us tomorrow," Kate said. "She's attending her daughter's high school graduation today."

"Coop and I became phone pals setting up this trip," Marsha commented. "She has a right wicked sense of humor, doesn't she?"

"That she has," Kate agreed. "And a practical joker, too. I advise all of you to check your sleeping bags the first night out for rubber snakes and spiders."

"Oh, great," Annie mumbled from the back. "I'm back in summer camp." It was the first acknowledgement that she'd been paying attention to the conversation.

"Lighten up, Your Majesty," Marsha chided, snickering.

"Your Majesty?" Kate repeated.

"Our auspicious friend back there has quite a reputation among her underlings...some of whom refer to her as 'the Royal Ice Bitch,'" Linda supplied, grinning.

"Oh, come on guys," Annie grumbled, but the explanation surprisingly brought the first smile to the redhead's face, and seemed to crack her cool exterior. Kate tried not to stare in the rearview. She's an altogether different woman when she smiles.

"We can kid her about it, you see, because we all know what a soft-hearted ol' gal she really is," Yancey added.

"Will you stop talking about me as if I'm not here?" Annie complained good-naturedly.

"Although she CAN be pretty intimidating when she has on her 'I'm a Vice President!' mask," Yancey went on.

"Before I knew you, I thought you had NO sense of humor," Linda admitted. "I would never have suspected you were just shy!"

"That's ENOUGH!" Annie rebuked, but she was still smiling. Kate noticed a slight flush to the woman's cheeks. *She is shy*, Kate realized, seeing the woman's aloofness in a new light.

They pulled up in front of a quaint log and stone building whose sign out front proclaimed it the 'Stony Creek Lodge'.

"We're here," Kate announced. She shut off the key and turned in her seat to address her clients. "Sue and Paul Bartlett own the place. They'll meet you inside and show you to your rooms. We'll gather in the dining room at..." She glanced at her watch. "...noon, O.K.? That gives you 45 minutes?" She said the last directly to Annie, who nodded and reached for the door handle.

"There are no phones in the rooms," Kate added. "But there are pay phones in the lobby,"

"Thanks," Annie mumbled before getting out and hurrying inside. She was so intent on her call that she left her bag in the van.

Kate retrieved it, surprised by its heft, and followed the other women inside. She spotted Annie on a phone in the corner of the lobby, her back to Kate. She headed toward her to drop off the bag.

Kate paused just before she reached the woman when she overheard part of the conversation. It was impossible not to. An obviously exasperated Annie was nearly shouting into the phone. Kate didn't want to interrupt.

"Bob, you can't keep doing this," Annie was saying. "You have to make the call yourself. Just use your best judgment." She listened for a moment. "BOB!" she interjected, raising her voice. "Deal with it! I'm on vacation and I'm turning my beeper OFF!" She slammed the phone down, took a deep breath. Then another. She turned to find Kate staring at her from six feet away.

"Eavesdropping?" Annie inquired without humor.

"Sorry," Kate stammered, embarrassed. She dropped the duffel and headed to her room. *Why did you let her get to you like that? You weren't eavesdropping.* Still, it wasn't getting off on the right foot with the client she would likely be spending the most time with.

As senior guide, Kate would take the lead kayak, scouting the river and assisting the clients through the tough spots. Coop would bring up the rear, rowing their gear and supplies on a large raft.

Kate was still trying to figure out a way to improve her rapport with Annie as she gathered up her papers for the briefing and departed her room a short while later.

*Maybe an opportunity will present itself,* she sighed, finding all the clients already seated around a long table when she arrived at the dining room five minutes before noon.

They dined on freshly caught rainbow trout, with asparagus and roasted garlic mashed potatoes, as Kate laid out the trip ahead. After a quick breakfast, they would set off the following morning on the first leg of their 100-mile trip downriver. The first two stretches were a cinch, perfect for the lesser experienced clients to practice their paddle strokes and get used to the boats.

On the third day, they would hit their first challenge in a couple of short stretches of Class Three rapids.

"Even though Coop and I are very well acquainted with this river," Kate said, "there's been a lot of rain in the area in the last couple of weeks, and that can dramatically change the landscape of the river and the speed of the current. So on occasion I'll be scouting ahead to look for new obstacles or check the line."

"The line?" Marsha asked.

"The best route to take," Kate elaborated. "I'll evaluate how you're doing as we go along, and at each of the more challenging stretches, I'll decide who paddles and who portages."

"Portages? What's that?" Amy interrupted.

"You get out and carry your kayak. The entire length of this river can be portaged, which is one reason we like it," Kate answered. "You and Annie will portage the class 4 rapids and probably some of the 3 as well. We'll see."

"I put down that I was a beginner," Marsha said, "Because I've only been sea kayaking before on pretty calm water. I've never done whitewater."

"You should do fine. And I bet you'll love the maneuverability of these boats if you've only been in a sea kayak. They're about half as long." Kate said.

Over dessert, Kate touched on the chores that would have to be done at each campsite.

"Coop and I will take care of the cooking and cleanup," Kate explained. "Though we won't object if anyone feels inclined to pitch in any time," she added with a smile.

"You'll be asked to put up your own tents, and take care of your boat and gear. And everyone needs to help collect wood for the fire." Kate glanced at Annie. The woman was hard to read. The redhead was staring out the window, and seemed not to be paying attention. But Kate had thought the same thing in the van.

"We're in bear country, which means we have to take precautions. Tie up the food and trash away from camp every night. There must be nothing in the tents that might attract them. No candy, flavored drinks, strong cosmetics. We shouldn't have any problems if we remember that. And we'll be building a campfire every night too. It's also a good idea in bear country to make noise when you're walking about, and please don't wander off by yourself without letting someone know what you're up to," Kate concluded.

"Have you ever had any run-ins with bears?" Marsha asked.

"No," Kate said. "We've seen a few on the trips we've taken when the steelhead salmon spawn. That's when the bears really congregate along the river, but that's not for a few weeks yet. I doubt we'll run across any."

"Too bad," Marsha said. "I'd love to see a bear in the wild."

"Speak for yourself," Linda chimed in. "I'd rather not get acquainted with any bears, thank you very much."

"I'm with you," Yancey said.

"Well ladies, if we're all done eating," Kate said, surveying their plates, "let's adjourn outside and I'll pass out your gear."

The clients were each fitted for a wetsuit, PFD, helmet, spray skirt, and neoprene gloves and boots. They picked out paddles and dry bags, and Kate paired them up with the boats that would take them downriver. Orion Outfitters had a fleet of Dagger whitewater kayaks, of several different types so each boat could be tailored to the client's size and skill level. They were also an assortment of colors, which the guides used to their advantage. Having each client in a different color boat made it much easier to focus in on the less-experienced ones when they were running through the difficult areas.

Because Pat, Linda and Yancey all were experienced kayakers, Kate also assigned them each a rescue throw rope, coiled into a small floatation bag that would be clipped to the bungee lines on their foredecks.

The women took their boats to the slow moving creek that ran behind the lodge. On shore, Kate went over basic paddling strokes and found that Annie was the only one who didn't already know them all. She seemed to catch on rather quickly though, Kate thought.

"All right, let's move on," Kate said. "Who knows how to Eskimo roll?"

Pat, Linda and Yancey raised their hands.

Marsha tentatively held hers up. "Well, I learned how in a pool," she said. "More than a year ago. So I doubt I could do it if I dumped in the river."

"O. K., I'll spend some time with you reviewing it. First though, why don't you all get in your boats and get used to them. Paddle around a bit. I'd like to see the three of you..." Kate added, indicating the three experienced clients, "please do a roll for me at some point. You can wait until just before you come in if you like, the water's a bit chilly. After you all get a few minutes to warm up, I'll work with you, Marsha, until you feel comfortable with rolling. Then Amy, and finally Annie. Annie, that will give you the most time to paddle around and get comfortable with the kayak first. Just don't wear yourself out before we get started."

Annie looked at little annoyed at the implication, but nodded and said nothing.

It was obvious from the start that Kate would have no worries with Pat, Yancey and Linda. And Marsha was better than she gave herself credit for, the guide thought. She had a respectable roll down after only ten minutes.

Amy was another matter. She seemed to take to the kayak well-demonstrating good paddling abilities from the get-go. But she just could not get the roll down. They practiced in shallow water, with just enough headroom clearance beneath the boat. Kate stood at the front end. Amy tried and tried but Kate had to repeatedly help Amy get right side up again. The woman was thin



and delicate, and Kate could tell after the fifth attempt that the tall redhead was tiring.

"Amy, why don't you go ashore and rest a bit," Kate suggested. "Don't get discouraged. You'll get it. Let me work with Annie a while and then we'll try again."

It wasn't critical that they all learn to roll for the trip. But Kate always felt better if clients at least tried it, and practiced making a wet exit.

Kate was beginning to feel the cold through her wetsuit as she motioned Annie over for her rolling lesson. Standing next to the boat, Kate explained the fundamentals to the redhead: how to hold the paddle, how to distribute her weight. Next she taught her the hip snap that was an integral part of the maneuver and had Annie practice it while she stabilized her with the paddle.

They were close together, concentrating intently on each other, all businesslike but breaths apart, when Kate felt the sparks begin to fly.

It was entirely unexpected. One minute, she was assessing with cool detachment her client's readiness to try the roll for the first time. *Good grip, good hip snap, hands the right distance apart. She seems a little nervous, but that's normal.*

Then, without warning, Kate was suddenly fixated on how soft Annie's hair looked. And how could she not have noticed before that the redhead's eyes were an uncommon shade of green. *Almost emerald. And she has the most incredibly long blonde eyelashes.*

Kate realized she was staring. And Annie was staring back, a smirk creeping outward from the corner of her mouth. *Oh Shit. Kate groaned. Busted.*

She averted her eyes and cleared her throat, trying not to blush. "Ready?" she asked, letting go of the paddle and putting some distance between them, taking up position at the front of the kayak. She glanced at Annie. The smirk was gone, replaced by a look of grim determination.

Annie nodded, took a deep breath, leaned left, and flipped over.

Kate's heart began to beat faster as the seconds ticked by. She kept a firm grip on the boat, ready to turn it back over, waiting anxiously for the sign of distress she had taught them all: tapping on the boat. *Too long*, she thought, a millisecond before the kayak righted itself and Annie reappeared, gasping for air and shivering from the cold shock of the water. Her eyes found Kate's.

"Did I make it?" the redhead squealed in delight. "Did you help me?"

Kate smiled. "All by yourself, on your first try. Congratulations."

"WOW!" Annie whooped. She raised her paddle aloft in victory.

"Can you do it again?" Kate challenged.

"I think so," Annie responded, steadying herself and squaring her shoulders for another try.

Kate nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

Annie went over again without hesitation, and came back up a few seconds faster this time. Her technique wasn't poetry-- in fact, it was awkward and ungainly looking, but Kate was still mightily impressed at how quickly she had caught on. Annie had good upper body strength, too, especially for her size, Kate noticed. There was certainly more to the woman than met the eye.

She tried it a third time, and came up again without difficulty.

"Very nice, Annie. I'm impressed." Kate admitted. "You're a natural at this. Any questions?"

"Not at the moment," Annie responded, catching her breath. Her success at the difficult endeavor seemed to bring the redhead to life. Her face was flushed. Her eyes sparkled. She was finally relaxed and at ease. And Kate was finding it harder and harder to take her eyes off the woman, a development she found disturbing.

"Well, you can head in if you're cold, or stay out here a bit and paddle around some more, whatever you like. You've done very well," Kate said. "I should work some more with Amy."

"Fine with me," Annie declared, backstroking to get out in the creek among her friends.

Amy never did get the hang of rolling, though she and Kate worked on it until both were nearly exhausted. Kate flipped Amy's kayak back over during the first several attempts. But when it became obvious to them both that Amy would probably not be able to master it, Kate had her practice making a wet exit instead so she would know what to do if she overturned on the river.

While they worked, the other clients took turns racing each other up and down the little creek behind the lodge. Watching them, Kate felt relatively confident about the days ahead.

Over dinner that night, that assessment was reinforced when she learned more about each woman. Pat had been kayaking for more than a dozen years, and had lots of previous experience in class 4 whitewater. Linda and Yancey had taken up the sport only about a year earlier but were avid enthusiasts, joining Pat at least one weekend a month for excursions on the fast-flowing rivers of the north Georgia mountains. All three had their own boats.

Marsha had taken two sea-kayaking trips, one to Alaska and one to the Yucatan Peninsula, both with outfitters like Orion. And Amy told Kate that she had canoed a lot with her brothers and sisters while growing up in Minnesota, but hadn't gone at all in the two decades since.

Annie was still an enigma to Kate. She seemed in better spirits since her successful rolling efforts, but she spoke little during the meal and only then to Coop or one of her friends. She volunteered nothing about herself.

Kate found herself growing increasingly curious about the woman, though she was still mystified about her attraction to the reticent redhead.

After dessert, the clients retired to their rooms to pack their gear into the dry bags they'd been given while Kate set about assembling their meals. She spread out their supplies on the long tables in the dining room, allocating perishables for the first days out and freeze dried meals for the latter stops. She was packing the ingredients for each meal into a large zip lock bag whenever possible, labeling them 'Thursday lunch' or 'Sunday breakfast' or whatever was appropriate. She also packed individual zip locks for each of the clients that contained drink powders, candy and energy bars.

She was finishing up when Annie appeared in the doorway of the dining room.

"I need a couple more dry bags," she said without preamble. "I can't fit all my stuff into the two you gave us."

"We have a limit on what we can take with us on the raft," Kate explained. "We generally only allow each client two bags for clothes and personal items-that's why we sent out packing lists of what to bring. Can you leave some things back here at the lodge?"

Annie glared at her for a moment before she replied. "Well, I really don't want to do that unless I absolutely have to."

In the interest of avoiding further discord, Kate suggested a compromise. "I'll give you one more bag," she said, reaching for one of the smaller ones she had left over on the table. "But you'll have to limit yourself to that, all right?"

"Just this?" Annie complained, taking it from the guide. "Can't I at least have a bigger one if I'm only getting one more?"

"I'm sorry," Kate answered. "You'll have to make do, I'm afraid. You can leave anything else with Sue and Paul, and they'll make sure it's safe until we get back."

Annie didn't try to hide that she wasn't happy with the arrangement. Her expression said it all. She looked like a pouting child. "Whatever," she harrumphed, pivoting on her heel and heading back to her room.

*Just peachy,* Kate sighed as the woman departed. *Royal Ice Bitch indeed. I'm attracted to the Queen of Rude.*

The next morning Kate was up before dawn so she could grab a quick breakfast before she went to the airstrip to pick up Coop.

She was surprised to find Annie already up, sipping coffee and watching the sunrise from one of the big comfy chairs in the lobby.

"Good morning," Kate greeted her, determined to maintain her professionalism. "You're up early."

"Force of habit," Annie replied, glancing over at Kate as she said it, but making no further attempt to engage her in conversation.

Kate took the hint and continued on into the dining room, where she bolted down a couple of cups of coffee and an order of eggs benedict.

Annie was still in the lobby when Kate passed through it on the way to the parking lot, but Marsha had joined her and the two were talking in subdued voices. Marsha hailed the guide with a good morning when she saw Kate, and Kate responded in kind but didn't stop.

"So what's the story on this bunch?" Coop inquired a half-hour later as she and Kate drove to the lodge from the airstrip. "Anybody need special handling?"

"Nah, it's a good group, I think," Kate volunteered. "All the woman are friends from Atlanta. Four have good experience, and the other two should be fine with a little time on the water.

"You just absolutely hated having to fill in for me yesterday, didn't you?" Coop inquired with a chuckle.

Kate had to smile. "Sheer torture."

"Well you seemed to have survived the dreaded meet-and-greet," Coop observed. "And you say we have good clients. So what's got you in such a foul mood, then, my friend?"

"I'm not in a bad mood," Kate grouched, glancing at her partner guide. But Coop could read her like a book. "I'm just a little peeved at one of the clients, that's all. But I won't sour your judgment. You can make up your own mind when you meet them."

"Oh, give it up," Coop demanded. "You never hesitate to express your opinion about some high-maintenance bimchette. Is that it? Do we have another Barbie doll on board?"

Their last trip had included a buxom hair stylist who came along because she didn't trust her banker boyfriend with two female guides. The trip had been a nightmare from beginning to end--with the woman complaining constantly and loudly about the bugs, sleeping on the hard ground, and everything else in sight.

"No, no, it's not that," Kate said. "One of them is just...irritating."

"Irritating how?" Coop asked.

"Well, just...abrupt. You know--hard to warm up to. Not a lot of social skills."

"Sounds like someone I know," Coop remarked, smirking.

"Who, me? I'm not like that," Kate argued

"Well, not much any more," Coop agreed. "You're getting better, especially when you have to play madam tour guide. But you do tend to withdraw into yourself sometimes around strangers, you know you do."

"Oh, I'm not that bad," Kate argued.

"No? And when was the last time you went out on a date, hmmm?" Coop pressed.

"That has nothing to do with anything. And how did we get talking about me, anyway?" Kate asked.

"Doesn't matter. Now that we are, fill me in. Your love life improved any since last we spoke?"

"Coop, you know I'm very happy with the status quo," Kate said.

"I know what that means," Coop answered.

"It means I'm not necessarily lonely just because I'm alone," Kate said.

"Oh, that's crap, pardon the expression. You're just scared of getting involved and you know it."

"How did we ever get off on this subject? We were talking about the clients," Kate remarked.

"Speaking of which," Coop said, "I know that a lot of cute women have hit on you on past trips, why haven't you ever taken any of them up on it?"

"You know it would be unprofessional to get involved with a client."

"Maybe during the trip, you could argue that. But there's nothing wrong with taking somebody's phone number and getting to know them better after the trip," Coop suggested.

"Well, if I ever get hit on by somebody I have real chemistry with, I promise I'll think about it, O.K.? Oh Look, we're here," Kate announced as they pulled into the lodge parking lot.

"You're not off the hook, you know. We're going to talk about this some more. I'm going to pull you out of that shell, you see if I don't," Coop promised.

"Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. I know you mean well. But we have lots of other things to think about right now," Kate said.

"You can handle two things at once, Kate. You should always keep an open mind in matters of the heart. You never know when an opportunity might present itself."

"Spoken like the true married-for-life die-hard romantic that you are, Coop. Tom is a lucky man." Kate said.

"You're a good catch too," Coop said. "Smart, funny, big-hearted, and easy on the eyes."

"Aw, Gosh," Kate sighed dramatically. "It's such a shame you're not gay."

"So, did your 'gaydar' detect any potentials among the current group?" Coop asked.

Kate couldn't stop the flush that infused her cheeks.

Coop's eyes got wide. "Oh? And what's this? Hey wait, a minute. This client that's so...irritating. Do you mean irritating as in 'getting under your skin?'" she guessed.

"Jeez, Coop. Lay off already, would ya?" Kate pleaded as they got out of the van. She turned even brighter red with Coop's guess.

"Oh I just can't WAIT to meet our clients now," Coop chuckled as she trotted up the steps behind her friend.

Of course Annie would be the only client in the lobby. She was still ensconced in the same chair she'd been in earlier, but this time she was occupied with a book.

Kate dearly hoped that she wouldn't blush even harder when she went to introduce the two. And even more than that, she prayed that Annie wouldn't notice her embarrassment.

"Coop, here is one of our clients-Annie MacDonough. She's the least experienced of the group, but she pulled a killer roll on her first try yesterday, and then two more just like it without blinking."

Annie rose from her chair. She smiled and extended a hand toward Coop.

"Annie, this is Nancy Cooper-Coop to her friends."

"Pleased to meet you, Coop," Annie said as the two shook hands. "Can't wait to get started. This is just beautiful up here and the boats are a blast." She was smiling and positively effervescent compared to how she had been less than an hour earlier.

Kate tried not to be just a little jealous that Annie had already said more to Coop-and in a much sweeter tone-than she had said to Kate in the entire last day.

"Nice to meet you too, Annie. I look forward to getting to know you and the rest of the gals." Coop said. "I'm going to get my gear packed and then we can get started. We'll all meet here in a half-hour, O.K.?"

"That's great, I'm all packed and ready to go," Annie announced, as she settled back into the

chair.

"Kate, do you mind telling the others?" Coop asked as the two guides headed toward their neighboring rooms.

"Nope, no problem," Kate answered. "Stop by my room first, I have your dry bags and snacks."

As Kate fished for her key, Coop asked from behind, "So which one is the rude one that's got you all hot and bothered, you going to tell me?"

"Knock it off already," Kate said, stepping into the room. "Just drop it, will you?"

"Fraid not, chum. This is the first time I've ever seen you even mildly interested in someone. Especially intriguing that you seemed to be repulsed by her even as you are attracted to her."

"I wouldn't say repulsed," Kate blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Ah HA! I knew it!"

"Oh, shit."

Coop was laughing now. "You DO have it bad, don't you? Okay, who is it, Kate? Spill."

"I have work to do." Kate lied. "Now take these and get packing!" She thrust the bags at her partner and shooed her out.

"O.K. for now," Coop relented. "But we're not finished!" she added as Kate shut the door between them.

Now what was that all about? Kate wondered once she was alone. Annie had seemed like an entirely different woman meeting Coop. What could possibly have happened to precipitate the change, Kate wondered.

The group assembled in the lobby and trooped down to the creek together to set off on their adventure. Stoney Creek was a tributary of the Odakonya, and joined the river only about a mile downstream.

The weather could not have been more perfect, and everyone was in high spirits.

The river here was slow and deep and surrounded by dense forest, so after a while the women were mostly silent as they paddled along, reluctant to disturb the peace and quiet around them.

Kate, in the lead, spotted a pair of deer just ahead—a doe and her fawn drinking at the water's edge. She slowed and motioned to the women behind her—who grouped up as quietly as they could to watch the pair as they drifted closer. They were only about 20 yards away before the doe bolted into the woods, her white tail flashing and her fawn close behind.

"That was incredible," Amy whispered as they pushed off from each other to resume paddling.

"If you keep your eyes open, you never know what you'll find along here," Kate said. "We've seen all sorts of wildlife and different kinds of birds, especially this time of year."

They stopped for a quick lunch of sandwiches and chips at a bend in the river where a natural sand bar offered a perfect parking spot for the kayaks. A raccoon watched them from a nearby tree as they ate, scolding them with a high-pitched chittering for disturbing his nap.

By the time they reached their first campsite, they had seen 2 more deer, several muskrats, a beaver, a pair of eagles and too many other birds to count.

It really wasn't until after they had set up their tents and started dinner that Kate was convinced that Annie had something against her personally.

She had tried, as they set off that morning, to tell herself she was just imagining it.

But she wasn't imagining anything, she knew that now. Around everyone else, Coop included, Annie was happy and relaxed, chatty and charming.

Around Kate, she seemed decidedly chilly.

She tried to tell herself it didn't matter. Annie was still being civil to her.

But it did matter. She wasn't sure why. But the fact that it did infuriated the hell out of her at times. Despite Annie's cool treatment of her, she was still drawn to the woman.

So Kate was determined to figure out why Annie was treating her so differently from everyone else. It can't have been that eavesdropping thing this morning, the guide decided. *That wasn't that big a deal. But what the hell else could it be?*

Then it hit her. *She caught you staring at her. I bet that's it. She's pissed off I was leering at her. Probably straight as an arrow and narrow minded to boot.* She shook her head. *You sure have a lot to learn about who to find yourself attracted to.*

Yet that didn't make sense, because Annie was close to the rest of the clients--and Kate was sure some of them were gay. *Maybe she just doesn't like getting hit on. That has to be it.*

Kate sighed. *Not much I can do about that. If I apologize it just draws more attention to it. I just have to keep acting professionally and get through this trip,* she told herself. So why did the thought of a businesslike relationship with Annie make her feel like she was missing out on something?

She took solace in the fact that she was establishing a good rapport with the rest of the clients. She genuinely liked them all-- they were an entertaining lot with an apparently endless supply of



funny and poignant stories of life in TV news.

She had little one-on-one contact with Annie during the first two days of the trip. The redhead needed no special help or advice during the easy initial stretches of the Odakonya. She had developed a good technique, and hadn't seemed to have trouble of any kind.

And when they weren't on the water, Annie generally kept her distance. She chatted with her friends, or sat off by herself, reading or just enjoying the surroundings

On the second evening out, after the clients had gone into their tents, Kate sat alone on a fallen log staring at the campfire. She thought Coop had turned in, too. So she was indulging herself in a little fantasizing about the infuriating redhead.

"It's Annie, isn't it?" her partner guide said from behind her.

Kate had been so intent in her own thoughts she hadn't heard Coop approach.

"Hi Coop," she said as if she hadn't heard the question. "Thought you'd gone to bed."

"Why is she giving you the cold shoulder?" Coop asked, refusing to be deterred.

Kate sighed. "Not sure," she admitted. "She may have caught me looking at her a little too closely, and often."

Coop sat down next to Kate, and put her arm over her friend's shoulder. "Anything I can do? Extol your virtues? In a very subtle way, of course."

Kate laughed. "Subtle? You? Please, Coop, promise me you won't say anything."

Coop withdrew her arm and playfully punched Kate in the shoulder. "That's not fair. I can too be subtle."

Kate laughed harder. "If you say so. But I still want you to promise me you won't try."

"All right," Coop agreed. "But if you change your mind, just say the word."

"I know your heart's in the right place," Kate said. "Bless you for that. But don't meddle in this. She's just a client, and she's leaving in 8 days."

"If you say so." Coop got to her feet. "I'm going to turn in. You coming?"

"Soon," Kate answered. "Night, Coop. Sleep well."

"You too. 'Night."

Kate didn't know how much time had passed. She had almost dozed, staring into the embers of

the dying fire. Imagining, despite her better judgment, of what it would be like to be close to Annie. Kissing her. She closed her eyes.

A scream pierced the silence.

Then an unmistakable sound. A loud grunting noise.

Bear. Kate scrambled to her feet and grabbed a sturdy burning branch out of the fire. She hurried toward the sounds, fumbling at her belt as another scream rang out.

She had the pepper spray in her palm when she rounded the corner of one of the tents and spotted the grizzly, ten feet away.

He had his head inside Annie and Amy's tent.

She waved the torch at him and shouted "GO BEAR! GO! OUT!"

He backed out of the tent and retreated, but only a couple of feet, sniffing the air.

Kate shouted some more. "GO! BEAR! GO AWAY!!!" She aimed the pepper spray at his face, and fired, averting her face as she depressed the trigger.

The bear reared up on his hind legs and roared in pain, but turned tail and ran into the woods.

The wind was not in Annie's favor, and she sucked into a lung full of the pepper spray.

She coughed and coughed and coughed. Violent spasms. Every gasping breath took in more of the noxious fallout. Her eyes stung, and her throat too. She stumbled away, back toward the fire trying to escape the spray, but she couldn't see.

It had all happened in seconds.

Suddenly a shaken Coop was at her side, and the rest of the group was not far behind.

"My God, Kate, what the hell happened?" Coop asked, coughing herself from the remnants of the spray that lingered about the camp. Some of the other women were coughing, too.

Kate couldn't speak, her throat was raw. She gasped for air.

"Someone get some water, will you?" Coop asked as she led Kate to the log and got her seated.

Marsha handed her a water bottle. "Lean your head back, Kate, and let me rinse out your eyes," Coop said.

When she had flushed out her eyes, Coop got Kate to sip some water. It relieved the discomfort in Kate's throat somewhat, but she still couldn't see.

"What happened?" Coop repeated.

"A bear came into our tent," Amy panted. In all the excitement, no one had noticed that Amy and Annie stood off to one side, both of them trembling and ashen.

"A bear?" Linda asked. Her eyes got wide and she glanced around as if expecting the beast to return at any moment.

"You both all right?" Coop asked.

"Yeah, just scared the shit out of me," Amy said. "I was asleep. Annie's scream woke me." Some color began to return to her face. She looked at her tent mate and put her hand on the redhead's back. "Annie? You okay?"

Annie nodded, but didn't say anything. She was breathing hard, almost hyperventilating.

Coop motioned to the two of them. "You both look like you need to sit down. Come over here by the fire."

Amy led Annie to the log, and sat her beside Kate, before taking a seat herself next to Coop.

"How you doing, Kate?" Linda asked.

The spray had dissipated and Kate had stopped coughing, but she could hardly stand to open her eyes, even to squint. "Better. Man, that stuff is awful. Someone have a Kleenex?" Pat handed her one and Kate dabbed gently at her eyes.

"My fault," Annie croaked. She was still shaking.

"What?" Kate turned to face the redhead. Her eyes were tiny slits. Tears ran down her cheeks. "What did you say?"

"My fault," Annie repeated. "I left my kit in my bag. He went right for it."

"What was in it?" Coop asked.

"Toothpaste, deodorant." Annie shook her head. "Hand cream. Lip balm. All sorts of stuff. I'm so sorry. I just completely forgot."

"Where were you when we were tying everything up after dinner?" Coop asked.

"I took a little walk downriver," Annie said.

"Alone?" Kate asked.

"Yes, alone," Annie snapped, looking at the ground. "I know I wasn't supposed to be off by myself, either. Look, I just forgot. I'm sorry."

"Don't beat yourself up," Kate said. "It happens. Everyone's O.K. That's all that matters."

Annie looked at Kate then, and her expression softened. "I'm really sorry, Kate."

"Don't worry about it, I'll be fine." Kate dabbed some more at her eyes.

"I doubt he'll be back, but we should get your stuff and put it with the rest just to be safe," Coop said to Annie.

The redhead nodded and headed to the tent. She came back carrying the remains of her toiletries, a messy collection of chewed tubes and plastic jars. The nylon ditty bag that had contained them was shredded. Her minty toothpaste and oatmeal face scrub had been crushed by the bear's powerful jaws and sharp teeth, along with everything else that had been in the kit.

The women gathered around Annie, staring in horrified fascination at the bear's leavings.

"Holy shit," Linda whispered.

"No lie," Marsha seconded, her eyes wide as saucers.

"Don't worry, ladies. He won't be back. Why don't you all try to get some rest. Here, Annie," Coop said, offering Annie a plastic bag in which to dump the gooey toiletries. Coop tied it up with the rest of their food and gear as the women returned to their tents, talking in low voices.

All but Annie, who stood beside the log Kate was sitting on, staring at the fire.

"How are your eyes?" Coop asked, returning to the fire bowl.

"I'm fine, quit worrying," Kate said. But she was still rubbing at her eyes.

"Okay then. How about you, Annie? You all right?" Coop asked.

Annie nodded. She had stopped trembling, and her color was back to normal. But her gaze remained fixed on the dying embers of the fire.

"Well, I'm going to turn in then," Coop said, yawning. "I'd advise you both to do the same."

Low murmurs of conversations could be heard from the tents, but an uncomfortable silence descended on the pair at the fire.

Finally Annie sat down beside Kate, just about the time Kate's eyes recovered enough for her to see without squinting.

Kate looked at Annie, who was chewing on her lower lip.

This close to her, in the flattering glow of the firelight, Kate forgot about the bear and even her own discomfort. She was struck by Annie's soft, full lips and silky hair, her delicate pale eyelashes and the blush of color in her lightly freckled cheeks.

Annie felt Kate's eyes on her and turned to meet them with her own.

"I've been kind of a jerk since I got here," Annie said sheepishly. She looked away from Kate's appraising stare. "I just wanted to say again, I really am sorry. And I hope you're okay."

"I'll be fine," Kate answered, unable to tear her eyes from Annie's face. "Truly. Don't think any more about it."

Annie moistened her lips. "Thanks, Kate," she said in a low voice. "I really mean that. I don't know what he would have done if you hadn't reacted so fast to stop him."

Kate could think of nothing then, but how much she wanted to kiss the redhead. What's happening to me? "No problem. I'm just glad you're all right," she answered, forcing her attention back to the fire. "You should turn in. Lots of paddling tomorrow."

Annie nodded and got up from her seat. "All right. Good night." She briefly laid a hand on Kate's shoulder before retiring to her tent.

The touch lingered long after Annie had gone. You got it bad, girl, Kate admitted to herself as she hauled herself to her feet and extinguished the fire. How will I get through the next week?

Kate was fully recovered by the next morning, but the rest of the women were still talking about the bear over breakfast.

Annie was subdued, but not quite as chilly toward Kate as she had been. She met her eyes more than she had, and addressed Kate directly now and then as they broke camp and resumed their journey downriver.

Shortly before they were to stop for lunch, Kate motioned the clients to group up on the side of the river. "Our first Class 3 rapids are just around the next bend," she announced. "These are pretty mild, and I don't think any of you will have any problems if you follow my line through. Everybody feeling good?"

The clients all nodded.

"Okay then," Kate said. "We'll go through one at a time. Space yourselves out. Annie behind me, then Amy, then Marsha, then you three." She nodded toward Pat, Yancey and Linda.

All the women made it through without difficulty, Coop bringing up the rear in the raft.

After a quick stop for sandwiches, they came to another section of Class 3 rapids, these a little trickier than the last. Once again, Kate pulled them over and asked how everyone was doing and whether anyone wanted to portage. No one did.

Just around the third curve of the rapids, Kate discovered that a tree had recently come down, blocking most of the river. There was a narrow space to negotiate through the impasse, but the water was wicked fast and the women would have to duck their heads to get under a tangle of branches.

"Careful here," Kate hollered back as she lined up and floated through.

Annie was next.

Her approach was nearly perfect, but the swift current swept Annie's kayak sideways as she neared the gap. She made the mistake of trying to grab onto one of the thick limbs to turn herself. Instead, it threw her off balance and she went over.

The branches caught her paddle and ripped it from her hands as she went. Without it, she couldn't have rolled back upright even if she'd had the presence of mind to try.

Kate was not far downriver. She paddled furiously upstream as the worried chorus of the others reached her ears.

"Annie's gone over!"

"Watch out!"

"Don't bunch up!"

"Backpaddle!"

"Oh shit!"

Kate's breathing seemed to accelerate with every second that passed without Annie reappearing. She kept her attention on the overturned kayak as she stroked powerfully toward it, but risked glances around her hoping to spot Annie in the water.

Somehow Pat was suddenly with her. They reached the kayak at the same time from two sides and managed to get it turned partially over--enough to see that Annie was out of the cockpit.

"Hang onto it," Kate hollered to Pat as her eyes scanned the water for the redhead.

"There she is!" Yancey cried, pointing toward a car-sized rock in the middle of the river further downstream.

Annie was hanging on precariously with one hand, her head barely above water. Her face was

contorted in pain. She had her PFD on, but there was a hole downstream of the rock, and its sucking whirlpool was pulling her down.

"Hang on, Annie!" Kate screamed, her heart thudding in her chest as she raced toward the woman.

Just before Kate reached her, Annie's hand slipped from the rock and her head disappeared beneath the surface as she was sucked into the hole.

Kate lunged at the spot, almost overturning, but her groping hand found nothing but water.

Annie bobbed to the surface several yards downstream, coughing.

Coop tossed a rescue rope, but it landed several yards to the left of Annie and the current took it downstream and away.

Kate sped toward the redhead, as Yancey tried her rescue line with no better luck.

Annie glanced off another large rock. There was a sharp CRACK! as her helmet impacted the hard surface.

Kate reached Annie and clamped onto the collar of her PFD with one hand.

Annie shrieked in pain and lost consciousness.

"COOP!" Kate hollered, desperately trying to keep the redhead's face above water as the current propelled them toward a sharp overhang of rock 30 feet downriver.

The other guide was right behind her, already maneuvering into position. Coop scooted the raft next to Kate's kayak, and Kate grabbed hold of the sturdy rope that ringed the inflatable. As Coop towed them away from the outcropping with long pulls at the oars, it was all Kate could do to maintain hold of Annie and keep the kayak upright.

Coop got them to shore, and the other women converged on the spot.

"She's hurt," Kate hollered as Coop beached the raft and jumped out to help her with Annie.

The redhead came to as they laid her on the soft grass at the river's edge.

Annie coughed and vomited water, then coughed some more. When the worst had passed, she looked up at Kate and Coop, kneeling on either side of her.

"Shoulder," she managed, grimacing against the pain.

"Do you have any pain at all in your head or neck?" Kate asked.

"No," Annie answered. "Just shoulder."

"Let's get this off, then," Kate said. She unclipped Annie's chinstrap and gently removed her helmet.

Annie groaned.

"We need to get your PFD off," Kate said.

Annie's eyes got wide. "Can't," she croaked. She coughed again.

"We have to," Kate said. "You may have dislocated your shoulder."

"Please," Annie said. Her eyes beseeched Kate to spare her the pain of removing the vest.

"We can't cut it off you, Annie," Kate said gently. "You'll need it. We don't have a spare."

Annie closed her eyes. "Can we wait a while? I mean, I don't want to be a baby about this. But I just want to lie still for a minute. It's only just stopped killing me."

"We have to do this soon," Kate said. "If you've dislocated it, the sooner we get it back in place the better. We want to do it before you start having muscle spasms."

Annie took a deep breath. Let it out. "All right," she said, just above a whisper.

"I'll be as gentle as I can," Kate said. She leaned over Annie and unhooked the vest. She looked the redhead in the eyes. Kate could see how much Annie was already hurting, and how afraid she was of what they were about to do. She hated causing the woman more pain. But she knew she would probably have to.

"Okay," Kate said. "Try to relax."

Annie nodded, her eyes locked with Kate's.

"See if you can pull your other arm into the vest," Kate said. "Then I'll slip it off you."

Annie accomplished that part with another loud groan.

Kate unzipped the redhead's Dry suit top and pulled it back. Annie was wearing a black two-piece swimsuit beneath. The top created a mesmerizing display of cleavage that Kate had trouble tearing her eyes from.

It was the first time Kate had seen the suit. The days had been cool enough that Annie had always worn something over it. Kate tore her eyes from Annie's breasts and glanced upward to the redhead's face.



Annie was staring at her. No, smirking at her. Caught again.

Kate blushed and turned her attention to Annie's shoulder. She ran her fingers over the joint, probing gently. *Such soft skin*, she thought.

"Dislocated, I'm afraid," Kate announced. She didn't dare look at Annie just yet. "Actually a pretty common thing with kayakers. Usually happens with a high brace, or roll." Finally she met Annie's eyes.

The smirk had faded. "You going to try to put it back?"

Kate nodded. "It's best. I've done it before."

"Will it hurt?"

Kate nodded again. "Some. It can take a little time. I'll give you some Ibuprofen from the First Aid Kit. I'm afraid it's all I have."

"I've got some Darvon," Yancey said. "I had some left over from something and threw them in my kit."

"Great," Kate said. "How many do you have?"

"Oh, a half-dozen or so at least, I think."

"Get one, would you?" Kate asked. She looked back to Annie. "We'll wait a little while after you take the pill so it can kick in a little, but we don't want to wait too long." She turned to her partner guide. "Coop, can you get a T-shirt out of my bag?"

"Sure."

Kate folded the T-shirt and wrapped it around Annie's right side, tucking most of it beneath her. "Coop is going to lie on your left side and pull on this shirt, while I pull and rotate your arm until it goes back into place. We're going to do a gentle but sustained traction. It may take a few minutes-- it's not something we want to rush."

Annie nodded. Closed her eyes. A minute passed. Then another. No one in the group said a word. The river rushed past them, a dim roar.

Annie opened her eyes. "Kate?"

"Yes?"

"You said this is going to hurt some?"

Kate nodded.

"Define 'some'."

Kate met her eyes. "A lot," she admitted.

"Afraid of that." Annie closed her eyes again.

"The worst will be over when we get it in place, but you won't feel like using that arm for a while," Kate explained. "Are you right-handed?"

"Afraid so. I'm terrible with my left." Annie looked around at her friends. "Sorry, guys. I'm afraid I've screwed this up for everyone, haven't I?"

"Oh stop that," Marsha said.

"Yeah," Linda said. "We just feel terrible you're hurt."

"Someone will help you do whatever you need to do," Yancey added.

"We'll figure everything out," Kate said. "Don't anybody worry about that right now."

"You ready?" Kate asked after another couple of minutes had passed.

"I guess so."

Coop lay on the ground on Annie's left and took hold of the two ends of the T-shirt.

Kate kneeled on her right side and took hold of her arm. "Holler if you need to."

"Yeah, just pretend you're back in the newsroom dealing with Lou," Linda said.

The rest of them laughed. Even Annie had to smile. "My most pompous anchor," she explained to Kate and Coop.

"Ah," Kate replied. "Why don't you close your eyes and pretend it's him doing this to you, then, so you can forgive me when this is over?"

"Deal," Annie said, closing her eyes.

Kate nodded to Coop. They braced themselves and started to pull.

Annie bit her lip, grunting against the pain. Sweat broke out on her forehead.

Kate took her time, gradually increasing the traction. Minutes passed.

"A couple of you, would you get her tent up? Lay her sleeping bag out. And Amy--get some dry

clothes from her bag, will you?" Kate's voice was strained from her exertions. She could see the redhead was in agony, but Annie was struggling not to cry out.

Finally the redhead could stand it no longer. She screamed: a piercing wail of pain.

It tore at Kate's heart.

It took another minute, but Kate finally felt the arm slip back into place and she immediately released the tension. She laid Annie's arm across the front of her body.

Annie was panting. Tears streamed down from both eyes.

"Rest now for a moment. Don't move," Kate said.

Kate retrieved the First Aid kit from the raft and fashioned a sling for Annie's arm. Then she wrapped her arm tight against her body with Ace Bandages. The pain pill had kicked in, and Annie was much more comfortable by the time she had finished.

Kate and Coop got her into the tent and settled into her down sleeping bag.

"I'll be back in a couple of minutes, Annie," Amy said. "I'm going to go hang your wet things outside to dry." Coop and the rest of the women withdrew to set up camp.

Kate kneeled beside Annie. The redhead looked suddenly small and vulnerable cocooned in the sleeping bag. Kate resisted the urge to smooth an errant strand of coppery hair that had dried all akimbo. "Feeling better?"

"Much," Annie said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I meant for more than the splint, you know. That's twice you've saved me." Annie said.

"Not a problem. Glad you're O.K.," Kate said, smiling down at her.

"I can't believe I tried to grab that tree. Pretty stupid."

"Well, I'll share the blame," Kate said. "We were here just a couple of weeks ago, but I still should have scouted that curve."

"Have I screwed up the rest of the trip for everyone?"

"Not necessarily. Coop and I will talk about it, and we'll see what the rest of the girls want to do. Don't worry about all that now. You rest until dinner."

Annie yawned. "If there's any way for them to finish the trip, I hope they can."

Kate turned to leave, but Annie's voice stopped her.

"I'd promise not to get into any more trouble, but apparently I left my smarts back at the office," she said, forcing a rueful smile.

Kate laughed. "Well I know our brochure did call this an adventure trip, but frankly, I'd like a little less adventure from now on, if you please." Kate said.

"I'll do my best." Annie smiled for real this time. It reached her eyes and lit them from within.

Kate's heart did a little flip-flop. She had to get out of there. The tent was suddenly too warm.

She found Coop setting up their dome tent 30 feet away.

"How's she doing?" Coop asked as Kate joined her in setting the stakes.

"All right, I think. She doesn't want the others to have to quit the trip."

"She's in no shape to go all the way downriver," Coop said.

"No, but I have an idea," Kate said. They tossed their gear into the tent and went inside to roll out their Thermarest pads and sleeping bags.

"We take her in the raft down to Rosebush bend," Kate said. "She and I will hike up the old logging road to Larry's. If he's not there, we can use his radio to get the floatplane from the lodge to pick us up. Meanwhile, you go on downriver, with Pat leading. She's up to it-- that's a pretty mild stretch. I'll get dropped off at Deer Run Bridge and meet up with you there the next day."

"That sounds like a workable plan," Coop agreed. "Pat's certainly capable."

"One of you should scout that bend with all the birch trees. I think that's the only place you might have problems."

Coop nodded. "Well, let's get dinner started and we can see what the clients want to do."

Over a supper of fried potatoes and ham, the women voted to follow Kate's plan. Amy and Marsha both volunteered to drop out of the trip to take care of Annie, but Annie refused to hear of it.

"I can manage," Annie insisted. "I'm not letting you guys quit. I feel bad enough Kate has to come along to get me out."

"Are you sure?" Marsha asked.

"Yes! Now you all go on, and take lots of pictures so I'll see what I missed." Annie yawned.

"You've had a long day," Kate said, watching Annie from her place on the other side of the fire. "And you'll have a long one tomorrow. You should get some rest."

Annie met Kate's eyes and nodded, then turned to Yancey. "You mind leaving me a couple more Darvon?"

"All yours," Yancey said, tossing her the bottle. "Sorry I don't have more, but that should see you through until you get to a doctor."

"Take one as soon as you get up," Kate advised. "You'll need it for the raft ride tomorrow."

"Okay. 'Night, ladies." Annie went to her tent. Amy tagged along to help get her settled.

The other clients turned in soon after, leaving Coop and Kate alone by the fire.

"Well this has certainly been a trip for the books," Coop commented.

"That's for sure," Kate agreed, chuckling. "I hope the second half is smoother than the first."

"Although..." Coop said, looking at her friend. "You and Annie do seem to be getting along better, hmm?"

Kate's cheeks colored under her friend's appraising stare. "Don't go there."

"Why? I know you like her. And I've caught her looking at you. I think she likes you, too," Coop offered.

Kate's head whipped around. "What?"

"You heard me," Coop said. "You're going to have some time alone with her tomorrow, Kate. You should make the most of it."

"Coop! That's enough!" Kate's blush deepened.

"Just think about it. I don't think you want this one to get away," Coop said, rising from the log and patting Kate on the shoulder as she retired to their tent.

Kate poked the dying embers of the fire, considering what Coop had said. *Can it be true?* she wondered. *Does she like me too?*

The next morning the group was up and packed in record time. Annie's accident had put them off their schedule, so they would have to spend an extra two hours on the river today to make up for lost time and reach their intended campsite.

They strapped Annie's kayak to the stern of the raft, and made a place for her in the bow amid

their gear. There was not much room. Kate knew that no matter how careful Coop was, Annie was going to get thrown around a lot, and the painkiller could only help so much. She guessed they had about four hours of paddling ahead of them before they reached the logging road.

Kate pulled her kayak beside the raft and got in, glancing over at Annie as she leaned forward to stretch her spray skirt around the cockpit. "All set?"

Annie nodded. She had a grim expression. "Not looking forward to this, " she admitted. I didn't sleep much last night, it hurt so much when I'd try to move."

"If it gets to be too much, and you need to stop for a while, just tell Coop," Kate said.

"But if we stop, that'll just put the group further behind schedule."

"Don't worry about that," Kate insisted. "How you're feeling is the most important thing right now."

Annie managed a weak smile. "Well I feel like crap, to be honest. Thanks for asking."

Kate chuckled. "Sorry, I know it's not funny. But you've kept up a good attitude through this."

"Not much choice," Annie sighed.

"Oh yeah, you'd be surprised," Kate said. "I've had clients create major dramas over broken fingernails."

"Not really?"

"Oh yes, really. Look Annie, you don't need to be a hero. You've a serious injury, and I know getting bounced around in the raft will be tough. If you're really hurting, say so." Kate said gently.

Annie looked a long time at Kate, seeming to consider what she had said. Finally she nodded. "Okay."

With all the rest of the clients in between her and the raft, Kate could not see how Annie was faring as the group made its way downriver. But Coop never called a rest stop, so Kate presumed the redhead was coping all right.

It was nearly noon when she beached the kayak on a gentle curve of the river where wild rosebushes grew in abundance, and motioned the others to join her. She looked upriver, her eyes following the raft as it approached. Annie was slouched down in the bow, her back to Kate.

Kate waded in a few steps to help beach the raft. Annie's face was ashen. Her eyes were clenched shut, her expression a grimace of pain.

"She wouldn't let me stop," Coop told Kate. "I think you'd better let her rest a few minutes before you set out walking."

"I'll manage. I just need some help getting out," Annie said through gritted teeth.

Kate leaned over and put Annie's good arm over her shoulder to help her stand. Annie's skin was warm from the sun, and the redhead smelled faintly of lavender. Kate's head swam over their close proximity. She helped Annie to a nearby log and got her seated on it.

The other women gathered around.

"You look pale," Marsha commented, frowning. "You all right?"

"Fine, just fine," Annie joked. "Stop worrying about me, you guys."

"We should push off soon if we're going to make it by dark," Coop told the other clients. "Grab a quick bite, and make a pit stop if you need to. We'll take off again in just a few minutes."

While everyone else ate a hurried lunch, Kate stuffed her pack with provisions and emergency gear.

Annie watched from a nearby rock as Kate strapped her sleeping bag and the guides' tent to the pack with bungee cords. "Why are you taking a tent?" she asked between mouthfuls of peanut butter & jelly sandwich. "I thought we were going to some guy's cabin?"

"We are," Kate said. "But I'm taking the tent along just in case we run into a problem. This trip has been a little too unpredictable for me thus far."

"Have you started calling me Jonah behind my back yet?" Annie said with a smirk.

Kate laughed. "No, but Calamity Jane crossed my mind."

Annie laughed too--- she laughed so hard, in fact, that she snorted--a loud, piggy snort that made her blush crimson in embarrassment, much to Kate's delight.

Just then, the other women gathered around to say goodbye to Annie and wish her a speedy recovery.

Coop came up behind Kate. "Remember what I said. Don't waste this opportunity," she said, just above a whisper so the others couldn't overhear.

Kate replied in an equally low voice. "Stop trying to play matchmaker."

"Can't help it. I haven't seen you smiling this much in a long while."

Kate reached out to give her a playful swat, but Coop ducked away, laughing. "See you at the

bridge tomorrow, chum."

The clients and Coop set off down river, and soon after, Kate and Annie stepped off to the north on the old logging road. Kate had her own pack strapped to her back, and she carried Annie's smallest dry bag, packed with a change of clothes and a few essentials. The rest of her gear would travel with the group.

The narrow lane they were on hadn't been used in many years, and was blocked by fallen trees in many places. But it was a clear route out and mostly easy going except for a couple of good sized hills they would have to climb.

"How far is it?" Annie asked as they got underway.

"About a three to four hour hike, I think. Maybe a bit longer."

"And whose cabin is it?"

"A bush pilot named Larry Williams," Kate said. "I've met him a few times at the lodge. His place is on one of the little chain of lakes north of here. He ferries fisherman and hunters into the area in a float plane he owns."

"Ah. So he'll fly us out?" Annie asked.

"Unless he's away on a trip. Which is possible. But if he is, we can use his shortwave and call the lodge. There's kind of an unwritten law up here in the wilderness. You always keep some food and wood on hand, and you don't lock your door. It may save some lost soul."

"Wow, I can't imagine that. I lock my house if I'm just running to the store on the corner," Annie said. "Do you think we'll fly out tonight?"

"It's possible," Kate said. "But we'll likely get there too late in the day. The bush pilots around here don't fly after dark."

They reached a high ridge where the view was spectacular in every direction -- a 360 degree panorama of untouched virgin forest, spread across rolling hills and dotted with small lakes.

"Wow, what a view," Annie said, pausing to catch her breath.

"Indeed it is," Kate agreed, setting down her pack and Annie's bag. "Let's rest a bit, and have some water."

"I'm fine, Kate. I don't need to rest."

"Indulge me," Kate insisted. "Maybe I want to look at the scenery a while." Despite Annie's protestations, Kate knew that redhead was winded from their trek up to the ridge. And she'd been hugging her splinted shoulder with her good arm, as if doing all she could to minimize the jarring



impact of walking on the uneven path.

The wind began to pick up as they sat on the ridge, and off to the northwest, Kate spotted a line of dark clouds near the horizon, headed their way. Rain had not been forecast for the area when they set off, but the guide knew that things could change quickly here in the North Country. "We'd better get started. I don't like the look of that front blowing in."

They set off again, and the wind continued to increase, until it was whipping noisily through the treetops around them. The temperature began to fall. They could hear thunder off in the distance.

They had hiked only another fifteen minutes before the storm front reached them and it began to rain; a few huge bloated drops at first, here and there, just a hint of what was to come. The sky was dark now all around them, and foreboding. The thunder was getting closer.

"I'm thinking we should stop and pitch the tent," Kate said. "And hope this blows through quickly. We've still quite a long ways to go, and we'll be pretty miserable in this wind if we get soaked."

"Whatever you say," Annie agreed.

Kate got the tent up before the worst hit them, and they retreated inside still mostly dry. She unzipped her sleeping bag and she and Annie sat on it side by side.

"Why don't you lie down and try to rest?" Kate suggested, though she knew it was probably futile with the storm building around them. She was suddenly nervous about her close proximity to Annie. There was that lavender scent again. And when the lightning flashed around them, illuminating her face, Annie looked flushed with excitement, her hair a little wild, her eyes shining. Kate's heart picked up in her chest.

"Fat chance, me sleeping through this," Annie said, as she lay back on the soft layer of down.

Kate joined her. The tent's low ceiling made Kate feel a little claustrophobic sitting up.

The rain picked up until it drummed against the taut surface of the tent in a noisy cadence, accented more and more frequently by a sharp crack of thunder. The sky grew so dark it felt like twilight, while the wind whipped the tent in and out, like the inhalations and exhalations of a giant's breath.

"I love thunderstorms," Annie said, turning her head toward Kate to be heard over the roar of the wind.

Kate turned her head toward the redhead. Their faces were inches apart.

Annie's expression displayed every bit of her exhilaration at that moment. Her pupils were huge, her breath coming in short, rapid gasps.

Kate was breathing hard, too. But it was Annie that was her undoing. Kate stared at Annie's lips, fighting her body's insistent and overwhelming urge to erase those few inches between them.

A burst of lightning, so bright it was blinding, was followed almost instantly by a deafening boom of thunder from very close by.

Both women jumped.

"Wow, that was a close one," Kate said, staring at the ceiling, struggling to regain her composure.

"Very close," Annie agreed. Her voice had an unexpected huskiness that sent a wave of heat through Kate's body, settling between her legs.

Annie trembled.

Kate felt it, sensed it. She looked over at the redhead, whose eyes were glued to the ceiling. "Cold?" she whispered.

"Maybe a little," Annie replied without looking at her.

Kat pulled a thin, shiny survival blanket from her pack and laid it over them both. Another boom of thunder rocked the tent. A minute later, a sharp crack, a loud groan, and then the shudder of impact as a downed tree hit the earth not thirty feet from where they lie.

Somehow they were suddenly shoulder-to-shoulder on the sleeping bag, each unconsciously seeking the reassuring presence of the other as the storm increased in ferocity.

Every nerve in Kate's body was on fire. It was exciting beyond belief, but scary too. She didn't know how long she could remain as they were, so close. She longed to put her arms around Annie, to stop her trembling. This close to her, she could feel every small shudder of the redhead's body.

"Still cold?" Kate managed, not fully trusting her voice. She couldn't look at Annie or it would betray her.

"I'm fine," Annie answered, just above a whisper.

Kate barely heard it above the roar of the tent flapping in the wind.

They remained like that, lying pressed up together, as nature unleashed its fury. The electricity in the air seemed to crackle around them. Kate wondered whether it was the storm, or a building chemistry between their bodies.

"Kate?" Annie said during a lull in the deluge a short while later.

"Mmmhmmm?"

"I'm sorry for the way I've acted toward you."

Kate turned her head to look at the redhead. "I hope I didn't offend you," she whispered, remembering having been caught ogling Annie.

Annie looked at Kate. Her brow furrowed. She shook her head. "You didn't do anything," she sighed. "You've been nothing but polite, courteous, helpful..." Her voice trailed off.

"Then why?" Kate prodded gently.

Annie shrugged, and stared at the ceiling again. It was a long moment before she answered. "I could try to pretend it was the stress of my job," she began. "And that would be true, at least in the beginning. I've been such a workaholic for so long I think I'd kind of forgotten how to relax. The Royal Ice Bitch label hasn't been entirely undeserved."

Kate didn't interrupt, knowing there was more. But it was so long before Annie spoke again that Kate wondered whether the redhead had fallen asleep.

"You remind me of someone," Annie volunteered finally.

Kate looked at her. "I do?" she said.

Annie nodded without meeting her eyes.

"You don't think much of this person, I take it?" Kate asked gently.

A fat tear escaped from Annie's eye and slid down her cheek.

Kate watched it hit the sleeping bag and leave a dark, perfect circle.

"I did once." Annie continued. "Thought a lot of her, I mean." She cleared her throat. "We were together for five years." Another tear slid down her cheek and joined the first, expanding the circle on the sleeping bag.

Kate could feel the drumming of her heart in her ears. "She hurt you badly, didn't she?"

Annie nodded again. "I thought it was the real deal," she said simply. "I was wrong."

"I'm sorry," Kate whispered.

Another tear escaped.

Kate couldn't stop herself. She reached out and wiped away the tear as it trailed down Annie's cheek.

Annie did not shrink away from her touch. In fact, she closed her eyes and seemed to relax. "You're not her," Annie whispered, as Kate's fingertips lingered to caress her cheek for just an instant before withdrawing.

A soft moan escaped from Annie's lips. Or did I just imagine it? Kate felt another surge of heat smoldering in her lower abdomen.

"Seems like the worst is over," Annie sighed.

Kate realized with a start she was right. It was light out again, the thunder had moved away, and wind had diminished. And it had stopped raining; the sporadic hits on the tent were probably now just from the trees overhead.

"We should get started then," the guide said, trying to keep her voice steady. Coop's words rang in her ears. Would she always regret it if she didn't seize this opportunity? *Probably yes*, she admitted, but still she could not bring herself to voice her attraction to Annie. She sat up and folded away the survival blanket, berating herself for her cowardice.

Annie remained silent. Kate could feel her eyes on her as she rolled up the sleeping bag and secured it to her pack, but she could not meet Annie's gaze. She feared her own expression would convey how much she wanted the redhead. Her emotions felt too close to the surface.

Soon they were back on the trail, the air around them heavy with the scent of rain. The clouds had dissipated and the sun peeked through, warming them. Every step they took brought them closer to the moment they would separate. Kate's legs felt leaden, unwilling to proceed.

They walked a few paces apart in silence, Kate stealing a glance over at Annie now and then, always to find the redhead staring straight ahead, unsmiling. Her palms began to sweat. She tried to find her voice, every instinct in her screaming not to let Annie slip through her fingers. But fear and inexperience paralyzed her, and before she was ready, the cabin came into view.

It was Annie who spotted it first. "There it is then," she stated without emotion, pausing as they crested a small hill that overlooked the tiny log structure. Spread before it was the lake, and moored just a few feet offshore was a twin-engine floatplane, shining brightly in the sun.

Kate took in the plane, the trail of smoke coming from the chimney of the cabin, and the sun's placement in the sky. Her heart sank at the realization there might indeed be time to get Annie flown out yet tonight, despite their delay from the storm. These may be their last moments together.

"What are your plans?" Kate blurted out as they resumed the short distance to the cabin.

Annie paused to look at her.

"I...I mean," Kate stammered, "that shoulder will probably be fine with some rest, and you could

do that at the lodge, you know, and wait for your friends..." *You're rambling.* "But it wouldn't hurt to see a doctor," she added.

Annie nodded, and waited a moment as if expecting Kate to say more. When she didn't, the redhead said, "I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet." She set off again toward the cabin, and Kate followed along.

"Hello there!" Larry's voice carried up to them, and Kate spied the pilot hailing them from a large stack of split firewood beside the cabin.

"Hi Larry!" Kate called back, waving her arm, forcing a smile.

He headed toward them.

"Thanks again for everything, Kate," Annie said in a low voice just before they reached the man.

The statement had a finality to it that tore at Kate. She found it hard to breathe. Even harder to behave as if everything was normal. "You're welcome, Annie," she answered, her voice breaking.

Annie stopped in her tracks and turned to Kate, touching her arm to get the guide to meet her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but the pilot's voice interrupted.

"Well, Kate! This is an unexpected surprise! You had some trouble, I see?" he gestured toward Annie's sling. The bush pilot reminded Kate of Ichabod Crane, a tall thin man with an Adam's apple that bounced up and down his slender neck as he spoke. He held out a hand to Kate, and shook hers with a surprising strength.

"Afraid so, Larry. This is Annie MacDonough, a client. She dislocated her shoulder. Can you fly her out tonight?"

Annie's face registered her shock at the question. "Tonight?" she repeated in a whisper.

Larry glanced at his watch. "Sure, if we get going right away. She's all gassed up. I can take you to the lodge, anyway. Couldn't get much further and still make it back before dark."

Kate turned to Annie and reluctantly met her eyes. "We should go then. You'll be more comfortable there. And they can get you to the airfield tomorrow...if that's what you decide to do."

"What about you?" Annie asked. Her eyes bored into Kate's.

Once again Kate could feel the heat between them. It made her unsteady on her feet, and she had to look away. "I'll ride along, but come back with Larry. He'll drop me off with the others in the morning."

Annie's shoulders slumped and she turned to the pilot. "Okay then, let's go. I appreciate your help."

The trio trooped off toward the plane, the pilot in the lead and Kate trailing. They waded out to the plane and strapped in, Kate and Annie sitting side by side behind the pilot. Larry made small talk all the way to the lodge, pointing out landmarks in the scenery below as they clipped along above the treetops. He didn't seem to notice that the women had little to say. He used his radio to call ahead to the lodge, so they would be expecting Annie.

"There it is," Larry announced, pointing toward the familiar log and stone lodge. Nearby was a large pond that Annie hadn't seen before, and the pilot set down on it and pulled up next to another float plane much like the one they were in.

In the final seconds as they came to a stop, Annie impulsively reached over and took Kate's hand in hers, and squeezed it, her thumb caressing the soft skin for a long moment. She said not a word, but the gesture felt so exquisitely intimate that Kate fought to suppress a groan.

The moment passed too quickly. Before she could react, Larry was helping Annie out of the plane. A van from the lodge waited just offshore.

Annie paused at the doorway to look back at Kate. She smiled, but the smile did not reach her eyes. "Goodbye, Kate."

Kate felt a sudden ache in her chest. Coward. "Goodbye, Annie," she managed.

Larry helped Annie to shore, while Kate struggled to contain her tears.

The rest of the trip passed in a blur for Kate. She joined up with the rest of the group the next day as scheduled, and they negotiated the remaining days on the river without further incident. Coop pressed her for details on how it had gone with Annie, but Kate brushed off her questions until Coop finally let it rest.

Each day she regretted more and more her inability to approach Annie about her feelings. She wondered and worried over whether the redhead would be waiting at the lodge when the group returned.

But the lobby chair that Annie had favored was empty when they got back, and a quick check at the desk confirmed her worst fears. Annie had left the morning after she'd arrived, after arranging for her gear to be shipped to her home in Atlanta.

Kate stayed awake all night that night, tossing and turning, wondering what might have been. She had stared at Annie's trip application until the redhead's address and phone number were emblazoned in her memory, but she couldn't bring herself to dial the numbers.

There were dark circles under her eyes the next morning when she and Coop met the clients in the lobby to take them to the airport. Kate was genuinely sad to see them go; she really liked this

group. But more than that, seeing them off felt like she was cutting her last ties to Annie.

If any of the women noticed she was usually quiet on the ride to the airstrip, they didn't comment on it. They were all preoccupied with reliving their final days on the river, when they'd faced the roughest stretches of whitewater. Amy and Marsha had portaged the Class Four rapids, and both were determined to return one day to take on what they'd missed.

Kate barely heard them. She stared out the window, noticing the first tinges of yellow and orange on the maple trees they passed. It would be autumn soon, and time to return to her other job, teaching music at a small community college. Back to her predictable life, and empty house.

They arrived at the airstrip just as the plane appeared as a dot in the western sky. By the time it landed and taxied toward the group, the clients had said their goodbyes and had their bags in hand.

"Excuse me, I've got something in my eye," Kate lied, turning away from the others and heading back toward the van as the plane came to a stop. She was close to tears and couldn't wait to get out of there. She had to be alone.

She was digging in the glove compartment for a Kleenex when she heard Coop holler her name. Kate looked up toward the plane.

There she was.

Annie was standing at the bottom of the stairs, staring at the van. The sling was gone. The other women were clustered around her, all looking toward Kate expectantly.

As if in a daze, Kate reached for the door handle and got out of the van.

Annie disengaged from the rest and stepped toward her. No one else moved. No one spoke. Her first steps were tentative; hesitant. But then Kate smiled, and Annie broke into a run, and a moment later, they had their arms around each other. The women gathered at the plane broke into applause and whistles.

"You came back," Kate whispered wonderingly into Annie's neck, as she hugged her close.

"Had to," Annie said, her own voice choked with emotion. "Didn't seem like you were going to make the first move."

"I didn't know...I wasn't sure..." Kate fumbled for words.

Annie pulled away to look her in the face. "Yes, you did, Kate." She caressed Kate's face with her hand. "You knew. And so did I. We were just both afraid to admit it."

Kate nodded, too overcome to speak. She pulled Annie close to her as the plane took off again, roaring away to the west.

"Come on you two," Coop interjected from behind them. She had Annie's duffel in her hand. "Back in the van. I expect you're anxious for some privacy?"

Kate and Annie broke apart, both blushing furiously. They looked at Coop, and then back at each other, grinning like idiots as they scrambled into the back seat and slammed the door.

Coop laughed and got behind the wheel.

Kate and Annie held hands and exchanged shy glances on the ride back, but said little, and Coop resisted any urge to tease them further.

Kate's heart was fluttering in her chest as they got out of the van and walked slowly toward the lodge. Coop strode on ahead, leaving them alone. Kate insisted on carrying Annie's duffel. "How's the shoulder?" she asked, breaking the long silence.

"Well enough," Annie replied.

"Well enough?" Kate repeated.

Annie pulled Kate to a stop, and looked up at her with a shy smile and a mischievous twinkle in her eye. She stood on her tiptoes and put one hand around Kate's neck. She licked her lips, then pulled Kate's face to hers and kissed her, hard.

A surge of heat roared through Kate's body. She forgot where they were. She dropped the bag and wrapped her arms around Annie and pulled her close, deepening the kiss, her tongue finding Annie's.

Several moments later, Annie broke the kiss, breathing hard. "Well enough for a proper reunion in private, if I don't overdo it," she said, taking Kate's hand and leading her into the lodge.

## **THE END**

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