

THROUGH WINTER SKIES

BY

COLLETTE SCOTT

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Collette Scott

Cover art copyright © 2012 by Naomi Shawnee Webster

All rights reserved.

For information address Marimay Publishing, P.O. Box 11821, Tempe, AZ
85284

ISBN-13: 978-1468191189

ISBN-10: 1468191187

*For Jim "Papa" McKay: A special birthday gift to last the
ages.*

*And for Naomi: To be able to take a few sentences and
create a scene is a tremendous talent. Thank you, my dear
friend.*

Chapter 1

Something felt wrong.

Though there was a chill in the air, it was not a brisk feeling that cut through his bones. Rather, it felt heavy, still and the silence bordered on eerie. A full moon loomed overhead, casting a white glow on the front walk, and the only sound around was his footfalls as they scuffed the concrete. The hour was late, a time when no one was about in the sleepy neighborhood except for a random house cat looking in vain for an unsuspecting mouse. Nevertheless, it felt wrong - different from when he left just a few short hours ago.

Suddenly a shrill scream pierced the empty silence in the small cul-de-sac. Midway up the walk, Zachary halted and cocked his head to the side as the goose bumps prickled the hairs on his arms. Glancing around the neighborhood with a gaze that shifted in his otherwise frozen countenance, he searched for anything that could be out of place. All seemed normal. He allowed his head to swivel in the direction of Emery's house. The scream had undoubtedly come from there. As he strained to hear more, he noticed the horrific sound faded to an almost imperceptible gurgle that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to join those on his arms rising in warning.

Without thinking, Zachary raced across the gravel of his

front yard, vaulting over a blooming, purple Texas sage bush before pausing at the front door. Hoping she was just watching a horror flick and would laugh at his panic, he realized that would not be the case when he saw the door was slightly ajar. The muffled sound of male laughter greeted him once he pushed it open with a single finger. It was the laughter of a pack of males who knew they were doing something wrong. He had heard it before, in his own kitchen as a teen throwing a party while his parents were out. They had snuck into the liquor cabinet and stolen a drink, laughing in a remarkably similar way. But he knew Emery was a good kid, studious and honest. She would never throw a party without her mother's knowledge, especially one that included boys... and trashed her house.

Zachary's response was immediate. Reaching into his pocket for his cell phone, his thumb dialed 911 as he took in the sight just beyond the front door. The living room, always so neat and orderly, was in shambles, and there was no sign of fifteen-year-old Emery or her mother Marie. Feeling the panic well inside him to a burning terror and need to protect his childhood friend, he continued to advance inside. School books were strewn across the floor with notebook papers scattered in all directions, and from upstairs came the sound of male voices again.

Something *was* wrong.

Though he knew he was being foolish, the surge of adrenalin prompted him to react. Breaking into a run, his thumb hit the send button on his cell phone. He was breathless as he gave the address to the 911 operator, taking the stairs two at a time to Emery's room.

Surprise worked in his favor that night.

Later reprimanded for his reckless actions, at the time all Zach saw was the blood. Emery's room was no longer a pale pink and green spring-time haven of youthful joy and memories. It was a mass of black-clad bodies, male forms hovering in the room like giant specters of evil. A boy was tied in a chair, wet with blood and head lolling lifelessly. Smears like

Through Winter Skies

grimaces and splatters like tears replaced the smiling faces in the posters on the walls. In the split second before he sprang into action, his keen gaze took in the blood sprayed walls, the soaked carpeting, and the horrific scene on the bed. Emery was no longer recognizable. He knew he was taking a risk, but the scene overtook all reason. Zachary reacted.

With a mixture of panic-induced rage and youthful rashness, Zach remembered everything his father had taught him and tackled the man with the gun first. He took him down to the ground using his sheer bulk and wrestling skills, grasping the gun in one hand and aiming at the second man's leg before either could react. A blast pierced the shocked silence, and the second man went down with a horrified scream as Zach turned the gun on the man on the floor. Using his surprise as an advantage, Zach again placed a non-lethal shot to immobilize him before he launched himself at the bed, pulling the third man away from Emery and slamming him up against the wall. The clatter of the knife landing hard on her desk and splattering the white top with blood only spurred Zach on. With as much strength as he could muster, he pounded his fist into the intruder's face. Ignoring the pain in his hand, he continued landing blow after blow, taking pleasure when the man's head slammed against the wall. Over and over again he vented his rage until the third man went limp and slid to the ground with a low moan.

Breathing heavily and sweating profusely, Zach hurried to Emery's side. Though everything had happened in just a matter of minutes, he felt as though hours had passed in this room of unspeakable horrors. Dropping to his knees beside the bed, for the first time Zach realized the seriousness of the situation and what he had done. His hands trembled, and his ears rang with her terrible, noiseless screams. The sound was like nothing he had ever heard before, a rush of air mingled with the bubbling of blood. It frightened him more than any scary movie had.

Staring down at the face he had known most of his life, he gasped in horror. It was worse, far worse, than he thought.

Emery's throat had been cut.

With a garbled curse, Zachary Evans sat bolt upright in bed. He was sweating, and the sheet clung to him damply. Still trapped in the remnants of his dream, he scanned the room frantically in an effort to escape the haunting visions of Emery's splattered, pink walls. Pink was replaced by dusky blue, now a dark gray in the lingering darkness. Cheerful white furniture covered with photographs of Emery making silly poses was replaced by heavy, dark wood. A dresser, a nightstand, a king-sized bed - yes, he was in his home. No frilly teenage furnishings here... only sparse simplicity.

Inhaling deeply, Zach drew a hand down his face with a shaky sigh. All traces of sleep seemed to disappear with the horrifying sound of Emery's breathless screams. They echoed in his head even now, ten years later.

"Aw, man," he muttered into the dark silence of his bedroom.

His eyes drifted closed, and he willed the memories away. Ten years... that was a long time. Why all of a sudden was he having the dream again? He had not seen Emery since she had been released from the hospital. She had refused to see him, refused to see anyone after that night of torture. His sweet, cheerful little neighbor, the tough and vibrant young girl he had watched grow up, had been broken in a single night of terror so profound that no one could imagine it, even the best horror writers.

Knowing from past experience that sleep would elude him the remainder of this night, Zach peeled the damp sheet away and swung his legs over the side of the bed. There was no sense in even trying to get another hour or two. Opting instead for an early morning run, he dressed in some sweats and a hooded sweatshirt and greeted the day with a furious pace. The quiet residential streets of Chandler were deserted this early in the morning, and he ran down the orange, streetlamp lit roads with only the occasional bark of a dog to invade the silence.

Within moments, he was out of his peaceful and sleepy development and on the main road. He continued to run, more

Through Winter Skies

in an effort to clear his mind of the old nightmares than to stay fit. Fit he was. There was no fear of him slipping in that area. No, his problems lay in his mind. Again he wondered why, after ten long years, Emery still haunted him. After another mile, a good sweat had broken out, and his sweatshirt was clinging to him in much the same manner as his sheet was just a short time ago. But still she haunted him.

Picking up the pace, Zach broke into a solid run. Moving all out, he allowed himself to grow breathless and enjoyed the burn in his lungs. As his feet pounded the pavement, he concluded that it had to be his new appointment. Though he did not yet have all the details, he had pursued this new assignment to work with the Drug Enforcement Task Force mainly because of what had happened to Emery. It must have stirred up the memories in his subconscious. Yes, that had to be it.

Slowing his pace, he came to a stop and bent over, resting his hands on his thighs while he struggled to regain his breath. The sun-bleached concrete shifted and molded into a vision of the sweet face he had always cherished. Emery Marie Flores. What happened that night had changed both their lives irrevocably. In fact, his role, albeit brief and too late, had nearly cost him his dream of joining the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Psychologically, it had taken him a lot of work to break through the barriers and get a clear bill of health. He had turned that negative experience into a will and drive to make sure no one else suffered the way she had.

Finishing off his run at a more sedate pace, he returned to his two-bedroom condo just as the sun was peeking over the mountains to the east. After a hot shower, he dressed carefully and went to the spotless kitchen to prepare a breakfast of granola and juice with fresh banana slices. Taking a seat at the counter, he turned on the television for some background noise to override the empty silence while he ate. Spartanly furnished and immaculately clean, on this day he suddenly noticed just how lonely his lifestyle was.

He usually preferred it that way.

Personal ties had no place in a life that was filled with crime and loss, and he was inclined to remain alone. Oh, there were some casual relationships brought about from his evenings out in Scottsdale with his cousin Hayden, but they were infrequent due to his schedule and overall lack of interest in anything permanent. Simpler was easier in his mind. He was better off not getting attached. Or so he had always thought. For some reason this morning he was disturbed.

Finishing his breakfast, he carried his bowl back into the kitchen, gave it a careful rinse and placed it in the dishwasher before wiping down the counter distractedly. It had been awhile since he contacted his parents to check in on them, he thought. Now retired from the police force, his father had taken his mother and moved up to northern Arizona where they enjoyed the slow-paced life among the ponderosa pines and tranquil lakes. That meant Zach no longer saw them as often as he used to. Perhaps a visit was in order. Maybe that would lighten the sense of unease he was feeling.

As soon as the sky had brightened enough to make an appearance at the office, Zach grabbed his bag lunch, straightened his jacket and tie, and ran a hand over his closely-cropped, dark hair before once more jogging down the stairs to his car. The Phoenix area was beginning to warm up, and the April day promised to have highs in the low 80s. Wondering what the temperature was like out his parent's way, he again pondered taking a short break to clear his head up in the clean, high country air. He took a deep breath and stared across the parking lot, over the covered parking spots to the park beyond. The sprinklers were running over the summer Bermuda grass, and it promised to be a dark green in no time. Spring was here, and the heat would be quick to follow. This was as good a time as any to head up north.

The office had already come to life when he arrived, and he greeted his co-workers with a brief nod before making his way to his desk. Dropping his lunch down as he passed, he continued straight to his boss' office and knocked on the door.

"You look awful," Agent Aaron Banks rumbled in greeting.

Through Winter Skies

For a tall, thin man, he had a surprisingly deep voice that caught many off guard. In Zach's opinion, his voice matched his determination. Although Zach came from a family full of law enforcement officials, he still viewed his boss with a touch of awe. Smart and capable, Banks was not one to be crossed and could be ruthless when angry. Luckily for Zach, he had never crossed the man and therefore was considered one of his favorite agents.

Zach nodded, though one dark brow rose over his blue eyes. "And good morning to you."

"Just being honest."

"I didn't sleep too well last night. Must've had a pea under my mattress," he replied with a smile.

With a cheerful sparkle in his hazel eyes, Banks graciously swept out an arm inviting Zach to take a seat in the chair across from his desk. "To what do I owe this honor first thing in the morning?"

"I was thinking I may take some time off. I have vacation stored up and thought I'd use it."

Nodding thoughtfully, Banks rubbed his chin. "Okay, I can approve that. You just finished up a tough case. The paperwork's all in. Now would be a good time before you start your new one."

Zach agreed. "That's what I was thinking."

"Yes, it's probably a good idea," he mused in a low voice that warned Zach all was not what it seemed. His suspicion proved correct when Banks continued. "Especially considering I just got wind of an old friend of yours."

Zach frowned. The memory of the dream that he had not yet escaped from sat heavily in his mind. He pushed it back impatiently, but the feeling of unease refused to recede. "I'm not following you."

"Your next assignment, as a matter of fact," Banks continued as though Zach had not spoken.

"What about it?"

"You'll be working rather closely with Ian Evans. One of your cousins, I imagine?"

Zach nodded.

“All you Evans’... You’re all over law enforcement,” Banks murmured distractedly. Lowering his gaze to his desk, he shuffled around some papers as he continued. “Ian’s already been working this case and has brought in some valuable intel.”

Zach tried to suppress his smile. He was not surprised to hear of Ian’s good work. In contrast to his happy-go-lucky older brother and Zach’s closest friend, Hayden, Ian was as straight-laced as they came. For as long as he could remember, Ian had been one to intensely focus on the task at hand, whether it was playing a game of football or doing his job. He had always been a perfectionist at heart.

“You’re smiling,” Banks commented when he glanced up.

“I know Ian well.”

“He’s done a great job so far.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Returning his attention to his desk, he pulled out a sheet with a mug shot and handed it across the desk. Zach reached for it, but the paper almost slipped through his fingers when he saw who it was. Though ten long years had passed, Zach would never forget the face that stared intensely at him from the safety of a piece of paper. The haughty tilt of the head, the lifeless black eyes, the scruffy hair and tight lips were almost as familiar to him as his own features. It was the face that had utterly and completely ravaged the soul of the most vivacious, honest and spirited girl he had ever known. It was the man he had dragged away from Emery that night.

Scowling, Zach resisted the urge to crumple the paper in his hand. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

Banks shook his head, all signs of teasing now gone and replaced with complete seriousness. “Unfortunately, no.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s not as bad as you think. Vazquez was shanked... He passed away at three this morning.”

Not even aware he was holding his breath, the air trapped in Zach’s lungs came out in a low rush through his pursed lips. “Well, that’s good news.”

Through Winter Skies

He continued to stare down at the face, taking in the details in disgust. Antonio Jesus Vasquez. Born May 5, 1978. Five foot nine inches tall, 180 lbs, black hair and brown eyes composed his physical attributes. Following that, a rap sheet that spanned everything from smuggling and narcotics to breaking and entering and the rape and torture of a minor filled the page. However, his most serious crimes were murder and attempted murder, and Zach read on even though he knew every indictment and every charge by heart. The drug dealing shipment that had gone wrong had found innocent Emery caught in the middle of a web of crime that destroyed her youth.

“The good news for you is that he’s gone... But there’s bad news as well.”

Raising his gaze, Zach noticed that Banks was studying him intently. The unsettled feeling that haunted him all morning suddenly flared in intensity. “What do you mean?”

“All Phoenix offices got word from ICE that the new leader, some kid named 2Tuff, has made it a personal mission to find the missing stash of cash that mysteriously disappeared that night. He wants to use the funds to restore the gang to its former glory. An informant advised us that he’s determined to return to human smuggling, and he needs the money to find and set up new safe houses.”

When Zach opened his mouth to comment, Banks held up his hand to stay his words. “There’s more.”

Zach nodded expectantly.

“One of the men in the Flores assault is on the lamb. Two days ago, he was in the process of being transferred from ADX Florence down to Beaumont when the transport vehicle was run off the road by an unidentified van. Four prisoners are still unaccounted for, one of them being Adan Augustin. There’s little doubt he’s going to make his way back here, and when he does he’ll most likely hook up with 2Tuff. He was there that night, so he has information that 2Tuff wants. That means this guy has to be tracked down before he tells 2Tuff what he knows.”

Though his urge to pursue was high, Zach struggled to remain calm. “What about Emery and her family?”

“The Victim Notification Service has been activated. An attempt to notify has just been made.”

Zach nodded thoughtfully. Suddenly vacation seemed like a worthless waste of time. He had not seen Emery since that night, but he knew he needed to help get Augustin back in prison for her sake. “I’ll take my vacation once he’s caught. I’d like to get going on this one.”

“I appreciate your dedication, Zachary, you know I do.”

Zach’s brows rose at his boss’ use of his Christian name. That was almost unheard of. He frowned. “But...”

“I think vacation is a good idea for you right now. Go lay low.”

“I’d rather hold off until this is settled.”

“I knew you’d say that, but trust me when I say I have my reasons. I was actually going to suggest you take some time off even before you came in here this morning.”

In other words, his staying and working the case was not an option. Zach’s hands tightened on the paper in his hands until it began to crumble. “Why?”

“There are a couple of reasons. First and most obvious is that you were closely connected with the case. Now don’t get me wrong... I’m not saying I think you couldn’t maintain a professional detachment. My main concern is the safety of my team, and you’ll be a target.”

“So? It’s not like we don’t face that often enough.”

Continuing as though Zach had not even spoken, Banks lowered his voice. “Second is that notification was made to Ms. Marie Flores in Chandler, Arizona.”

Zach nodded impatiently, struggling to keep his frustration at bay. “Emery’s mother.”

“Understood. Problem is that Ms. Flores doesn’t know where Miss Flores is.”

Zach shook his head in disbelief. “How’s that possible? Those two were tight.”

“Apparently Miss Flores moved some years ago and only

Through Winter Skies

maintains contact sporadically. Ms. Flores cannot say with any certainty where her daughter is.”

Pressing two fingers against the bridge of his nose, Zach closed his eyes and squeezed. He could feel a headache coming on. In a low voice, he asked what he already knew in his heart. “So you’re saying they can’t notify her?”

Banks shrugged. “She hasn’t contacted the local FBI office to update her residential address.”

With a determined set to his jaw, Zach scowled at his boss. “That’s all the more reason that I stay on and help catch this guy.”

Banks pursed his lips again. Having seen the expression multiple times before, Zach was well aware of that gesture. It was a face he made when he already had a plan in mind. “Or you can take a vacation in the Rocky Mountains. I think that was where Ms. Flores’ last communication came from. Do you have any experience with the witness protection program?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

Taking his handkerchief out of the breast pocket of his suit, Banks patted his furrowed brow. “Well, unofficially I can’t do anything here. But you do have a good, solid four weeks of paid time off. Maybe you should use it.”

“If I refuse?” Zach asked, still scowling.

Banks was not deterred. His voice was sharp with finality. “Then I’ll assign you to another lead. Ian Evans already has some intel he’s working on, and from what I’ve heard he’s pretty thorough and plenty capable.”

Zach realized with a twinge of irritation that he had nowhere else to go with this argument. The decision had been made even before he set foot in the office, which made him wonder how long Banks had known about this. Had something been mentioned the day before? Maybe Augustin’s name had been dropped in passing that his subconscious picked up. Perhaps that was why the dream had hit after all this time.

Seeing the frustration on Zach’s face, Banks conceded slightly and gave him a sympathetic smile. “I know how close you were to that family. I also know you put your own life on

the line to help that girl. I think you're an exemplary special agent now and don't behave as rashly as you did ten years ago, but you do have a history there that may put you and others in danger. I can't have that. I also think the victim in this case could be unknowingly placing herself in danger. If her mother is unable to reach her, she's basically a sitting duck."

Zach spoke through clenched teeth. "I can handle this from here... I don't want her ever to have to think about that time in her life again."

Banks spread his hands in surrender. Leaning forward, he placed his hands flat against the highly-polished desk and spoke in a low voice. "Speaking off the record, as a friend and not your boss, what better way to visit an old friend than enjoying a vacation?"

His smooth lie did not go unnoticed. Zach again met his steady gaze, this time with a new understanding. As the silent communication was spoken through meaningful glances, Banks nodded wordlessly before sitting back and sighing in victory. Zach allowed his glance to rise over Banks' thinning brown hair to the plaque on the wall. Fidelity, bravery, integrity. On vacation, his integrity could not be brought under question if he was merely visiting an old friend. Banks had just given him clearance to watch over Emery until the appropriate agencies did their jobs, meaning he would spend his vacation in an unofficial capacity. Unofficial did not mean he would not be able to take action. He was allowed to engage in defense of himself or others, so he could wait with Emery for them to come. When his gaze finally lowered, he found Banks staring at him expectantly. "Okay. Effective when?"

Banks' eyes flashed in triumph. "Finish up any odds and ends and go. Vacation officially starts tomorrow."

Chapter 2

Zach stared out the window at the Spanish territorial home from the driver's seat of his car. Not a lot seemed to have changed since the last time he visited. The grass was still well-manicured in an oval patch out front, and the mesquite tree still had a broad umbrella that shaded the front of the house. However, the walk was now paved with flagstone instead of the customary cement the rest of the neighborhood used, and Marie had recently planted some annuals in the desert rock landscaping, adding some reds and blues to compliment the blooming, purple sage bushes.

Sighing, Zach stared at the closed front door. It was a door he had not seen since he had completed his JD degree and had hoped to celebrate with Emery. That last time he visited the modest house the Flores' had moved into after the attack, Marie was forced to turn him away with a sad shake of her head as she had with every one of his attempted visits. Still unable to speak then, Emery grunted her panic, and her flight up the stairs to escape him had sealed his determination to keep his distance. The last thing he wanted was to cause her further angst, despite the heaviness in his heart when he walked away. At that point in her recovery, the extent of the injury to her vocal cords was still uncertain, and her doctors were taking a wait and see

approach before offering her further surgery to attempt a reverse of the remaining damage. Despite his hurt feelings, Zach was wise enough to realize she did not need any further stress from him.

His eyes closed briefly. Now that Emery was gone, it would no longer be necessary for him to keep in touch with Marie via the occasional email. He could visit the older woman whenever he had the urge. Too bad the urge had not been present in recent years.

Though the car was growing warm from the heat of the sun, he continued to wait outside, reverting back to his childhood routine of waiting for Marie to greet him. She had lived off the reservation for years, but when he was young he made it a point to respect her Navajo customs out of childish fascination and respect for her culture. It was considered polite to wait for her to greet him first, and Zach knew she appreciated his thoughtfulness even though she laughed about it. Today would be no different.

Almost as if she sensed the direction of his thoughts, the front door opened and Marie appeared. "Zach? Is that you?"

Still an attractive woman, Marie Flores had changed little in the five years since he had seen her last. Her high cheekbones and smooth forehead tapered to a round chin, giving her heart-shaped face a delicate beauty enhanced by her large, almond-shaped brown eyes. Though he noticed the lines around the dark, expressive orbs had deepened, they were dancing with the same happiness he had grown up admiring. Her long, black hair was now sprinkled with gray, but it still shone like silk in the morning sunlight.

Pushing open his car door, Zach climbed out just as she hurried down the flagstone path to greet him. Her smile was warm and welcoming, but his sharp gaze noticed the sadness well-disguised by her obvious joy.

"It is you! Silly man... you're still greeting me in the *Dine* way!"

He could not stop the grin that appeared on his face. "Hello Marie."

Through Winter Skies

“Let me get a good look at you! Even more handsome than before. You’re taller and so strong, my brave champion.”

He chuckled as he bent to embrace her in a friendly hug. She continued gushing to such an extent that he pulled away with a blush. “Enough!”

She laughed. “Well, it’s been a long time. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” Zach answered solemnly, realizing just how true it was as he spoke the words. Only one quick conversation at his parent’s Christmas party five years prior marked just how much their relationship had changed.

Marie studied him carefully before taking his hand with a brisk nod. “Come in, and let’s catch up,” she said gravely.

Reminding himself of his true purpose for being at Marie’s door, Zach obediently fell in step behind her. They passed through the elegantly furnished living and dining room to the back of the house, where a tidy kitchen and den waited. She busied herself taking down two glasses, throwing him an expectant look over her shoulder.

“Sit down. I’ll be there in a second.”

After pouring two glasses of ice water, she joined him at the kitchen dinette and pulled out the chair directly across from him. He took a thankful sip of the cold drink and smiled at her. “So how are you, Marie?”

“I’m doing well. And you? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

He shrugged evasively, knowing without having to say a word that she would not approve of his solitary existence. “I just finished a case. We’ve also started a new collaboration. It’s been pretty busy.”

“You’ve done well for yourself. I’m very proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

“I haven’t received a wedding invitation yet. I hope that means you’re not yet married rather than overlooking me.”

Zach could feel his cheeks grow warm. “I haven’t married, Marie, but when I do you’ll be first on my invite list.”

“Ah, that’s what I like to hear.” She paused and studied him again. “I also hope you haven’t married due to your job rather

than the... alternative?”

When she reached across the table to follow up her words with a pat on his hand, he flipped it over and grasped hers instead. Though not particularly liking the direction of the conversation, she had inadvertently brought up his reason for being there. He used that to his advantage, leveling her with a serious stare and avoiding her personal question entirely. “How are things... really?”

She instinctively knew what he was asking, and her fingers went tight around his. For a moment, he thought he spied the beginnings of moisture in her eyes before she proudly tilted her small, round chin. “Still not one to shoot the breeze, are you?”

Zach smiled. “Nope.”

Inhaling deeply, she pursed her lips. “Okay then... I’m good. I was promoted at work the first of the year. I love my job. I’m now the Reading Specialist.”

“That’s great,” Zach said with an approving nod. “I guess congrats are in order.”

“Thank you. It’s the kids, you know.”

“What about them?”

“They keep me going.”

He nodded again in understanding. Though not direct victims, they both had suffered after Emery’s attack and battled their own personal demons. He fought his by catching bad guys, and she fought hers by doing her best to prevent a new wave of them. Though not initially obvious, it had occurred to him that their future actions were made to somehow make up for the events that had transpired.

Seeing there was not much point in avoiding the obvious, he took another sip before setting the glass aside and reaching for her other hand. Holding both loosely, he pinned her with his sharp gaze. “Where is she?”

Marie met his gaze with sad eyes and a brief smile. “When they came looking for her, I knew you’d follow. It was just a matter of time, although I did not expect you so quickly. I know how busy you are.”

He waited patiently for her to continue. After several long

Through Winter Skies

minutes of watching her contemplate him, he felt as though he would start to squirm if she did not speak. Sensing his growing discomfort, Marie finally broke his gaze and glanced down at the clear glass of the table. “She prefers not to be found.”

“I respect that,” he said evenly. “And I’d never ask you to break her confidence if I didn’t feel it was of dire importance.”

The wistful smile reappeared. “You two had such a fated bond, you know that, right? You loved each other so much, even as children. My sister tells me that she’s like Changing Woman now. You’re her Sun.”

He nodded, though he was not sure what she meant by that.

“You were always so good to her when you two were growing up. You were the brother she never had.” She squeezed his hands again. “Do you remember teaching her how to ride a bike? And you were the one who carried her home when she fell off the swing and broke her collarbone. Do you remember that?”

The tears Marie had proudly held back earlier swam in her eyes, and Zach was forced to look away as his own memories began to return in a rush. His chest ached as they invaded his thoughts, happier times he had managed to bury in the darkest recesses of his memory. Emery. Her bright green eyes laughing at him when he hurried over after she had fallen off her bike the first time. She had brushed off his worry and bravely remounted it. Emery. This time those crystalline depths expressing the pain she bravely repressed as she cradled her injured arm. Emery. Finally, those same eyes, the only recognizable feature after her attack, that silently begged him to save her. They went hollow and empty as he gathered her into his arms and carried her from the house. Oh, how that last memory still haunted him.

He could not blame her; he would not want to be found either.

Clearing his throat, he closed his eyes briefly before responding, and he could hear the strain in his voice. “I remember, Marie... I remember everything.”

“But some things are best forgotten,” she said softly.

He watched as a single tear spilled over her dark lashes. Releasing one of her hands, he reached across the table and wiped it away. For a second she leaned into his hand, but it was brief. She straightened and visibly composed herself.

Clenching his teeth to avoid the memories, Zach leveled Marie with his intense, blue gaze. “Have you forgotten?”

She shook her head.

“I haven’t either. I won’t. Emery’s too special to dishonor who she is now, who she’s become.”

“My daughter disappeared that night,” Marie said sadly.

Though he had expected many things from Marie, Zach’s eyes went wide. The finality of her words took him by surprise, no small feat considering, and he frowned at her. “Those are very strong words.”

“She never returned to me.” Marie waved her hands as she struggled to find the words to convey her meaning. “She was here; she completed high school and then college in this house. But she was never here. It was just her and her art. She spoke through her art.”

Zach felt the heat of an angry flush stain his cheeks. “Do you mean she’s still not speaking?”

“Oh no, she can speak.” Marie sighed as she thought of her daughter’s injuries. “Perhaps not the same clear voice she had as a child, but she’s able to speak. She just chose not to.”

When she saw his continued confusion, she explained further. “She left as soon as she was able. I hear from her when she wants to contact me. I don’t know where she lives or have her address. As soon as she was able to leave me, she did.”

Marie’s voice broke as she finished speaking, and it was then Zach realized just how painful it was for her. Having seen similar reactions from family members too many times to count, his response was automatic. “It wasn’t your fault,” he said gruffly.

“I didn’t protect my daughter, and she hates me for it.”

“That’s not true.”

The smile she offered him wavered. “I don’t blame her for hating me. She never should’ve gone through what she did. I

Through Winter Skies

should've been home for her. The least I can do now is respect her wish for privacy."

Sensing the growing emotion, Zach realized it was time to regain control of the conversation. Swiftly changing the subject, he gave her hand another squeeze. "Did they tell you why they were here, Marie?"

She sighed. "Yes, I'm family and was warned as well."

"You know they can find her." It was not a question. Rather it was a statement hopefully imparting the seriousness of the situation. Unfortunately, it did not work, for Marie just shook her head.

"Not through me. She had no other friends."

Zach grimaced. "We have no leads, but they might. Are you taking precautions?"

She gave him another of her brief smiles. "When the school year's complete, I'm finally going to return to the Nation to visit my sister. I've been a coward too long. It's time I return. Dollie's been praying for Emery since I called."

"She has?" A cynical smile deepened the corners of his mouth.

"Yes. I haven't seen her in a long time, and I'll be far enough away to be forgotten by anyone looking for me."

In all the years he had known his former neighbors, the family had been much of a mystery to him. Though Zach knew Marie's ex-husband had never been in the picture, he still considered him a viable lead. "What about Emery's father?"

Marie's brows shot up in surprise. "Luke?"

Zach nodded. "Yes. Collins, right? Did you ever tell him what happened? Could he and Emery have reconciled?"

With lips pressed together tightly, Marie shook her head. "I did notify him, but he never came. You know he left us when she was born? He never tried to see Emery – not once. She didn't even blink when the letter came that he died."

"He passed away?"

"Heart attack. Six years ago."

Zach made a mental note to check out Luke Collin's background. In his experience, people did not just disappear

without help from someone. If Emery had no friends and did not communicate her plans to her mother, she had to have had help from someone.

“And did she finish college?”

At this change of subject, he saw Marie’s face grow less guarded. “She did. She graduated with honor from the Academy of Art University.”

Hearing the pride in Marie’s voice made Zach smile. Inside, he made another note to research the school. Perhaps she made some friends there that her mother did not know about. “I’m glad to hear that. She was always a smart girl.”

“She began to communicate visually instead of verbally, Zach. Some of her earliest work was devastating to view.”

A not uncommon response, he thought sadly. “Did it ease over time?”

“Perhaps a little. I wouldn’t know.”

“So she just up and left you one day without a word?”

Marie shrugged. “Pretty much, yes. She was always a strong and determined girl. One day she packed some stuff into her car and drove away. As I said, it feels like my daughter vanished that evening and left a stranger in her place.”

“Don’t say that,” Zach said firmly.

“No matter whom we hired for counseling or what the doctors said, she was gone. In her place was a stranger – a loner – a person who wanted to disappear. I wasn’t strong enough to help her.”

Zach felt a twinge of guilt when he heard the hopelessness in Marie’s voice. His overprotectiveness of the child he grew up with apparently had not eased over the years of denial. No matter how much he wanted to reject it, he still remembered watching Emery grow up. Now it appeared as though things had gotten out of control during a time when solidarity was needed the most.

If anyone could find her, he knew he could. Coming to his feet, he downed the rest of his water and stared at the woman who had been a second mother to him. Placing his hand on her shoulder, he smiled grimly. “I’ll find her, Marie, and I’ll bring

Through Winter Skies

her back for you.”

He spoke with more certainty than he felt, but he was determined to help this fractured family. Not only was it his job, but it was also his heart. Emery deserved no less.

“In that case, start in Colorado,” Marie said as she walked him back to the door. “I had a Christmas card postmarked from there last winter. It was the last time I heard from her.”

He paused. “Do you still have it?”

“Of course I do. I’ll get it for you.”

For the first time during his entire visit, Zach felt as though there might be some hope. He watched Marie disappear upstairs before his gaze wandered to the dining room, where a large, framed desert landscape painted in oil hung on the wall. He was surprised to realize he had not noticed it when he first entered the house. Apparently he had been more nervous than he thought, for the painting was striking. The realism was startling, and Zach approached with a feeling of awe at the detail and beauty of the familiar scene before him. Four Peaks was a mountain to the east of Chandler, a majestic sight soaring into four, jagged peaks. It was a spot he had once taken Emery for a picnic when he first obtained his driver’s license. They found a rattlesnake that day, and eleven-year-old Emery had shrieked and then screamed in terror when he threatened to pick it up.

Smiling wistfully, he continued to study the painting before him with interest. The artist had even cast the shadows of the jagged peak with minute detail. He was still lost in the minutiae when Marie returned and saw him studying it.

“That’s one of hers,” she commented. “It was the first one I was able to display. I had to beg her to stop those pencil drawings and focus instead on life, nature and the innocence of animal life. She finally took one of my suggestions, and look at how beautiful it is.”

“She’s very good,” he said softly. Though definitely not an art aficionado, Zach was enthralled with the scene before him. “Her color schemes are so natural, and her attention to detail is amazing. It almost looks like a photograph.”

“That’s what the art critics said when she was displaying her work.”

When he reluctantly tore his gaze away from the painting, he looked down to see Marie smiling at him in a knowing way. Apparently he was not the first person to be awestruck by her talent. Feeling his cheeks grow warm, he shifted his gaze to her hand. She held an envelope.

“You found it.”

Holding out her hand, she passed it to him, and he studied it carefully. Though there was no return address, the postmark was clear. Colorado. He suddenly remembered Banks’ comment to go visit the Rockies. So, his boss had been onto something there.

“What are you going to do now?” Marie asked.

Still staring down at the envelope, Zach shrugged. His voice was clipped and matter-of-fact. “Book a flight to Denver.”

Following up with Emery’s college first, Zach had no luck in tracking down any friends. After wasting time tracking down her instructors, he learned the same thing from every one of them. No, Emery had no known friends. Yes, she was highly talented. No, she did not leave any indication of her plans. Failing there, he turned his attention to her deceased father. Luckily, it was short work for Zach to locate Luke Collins. Within a few calls, he had a file in an encrypted email that gave him all the information he needed to begin his search for Emery in Colorado. However, with the material in hand he felt an even greater sense of urgency. The ease with which he was able to track down Collins meant that anyone with connections could do the same. That meant he had to move fast. He had to get to her before they did.

The envelope Marie had given him was postmarked from a small community to the west of Denver called Idaho Springs. An Internet search showed a picturesque town founded during a gold rush back in the 1800s. With the Phoenix area population growing to well over three million, finding a small town with around 2,000 residents was almost novel, but that

Through Winter Skies

could be dangerous if Emery was there. People in small towns tended to know one another and secrets were hard to come by.

Continuing his research, he viewed the restored mining settlement, with its small art galleries and neat, modest homes. The historic main street was cozy, consisting of well-maintained, old west buildings nestled on a narrow road with plenty of tourist appeal.

Pulling up a map of the area, he plotted out the information he had received so far. Luke Collins had owned property in Idaho Springs. First it was a bare lot bordering the pristine forest land, but he later applied for a permit to erect a building. Over the next several years, water and electricity lines were added, and in Zach's opinion it could be a nice spot to hide out in. His research on the property's title did not show it had been sold. Chances were pretty good that as soon as he obtained a copy of Collins' Last Will, he would see that the property had been passed down to Emery.

At least that was the hope.

Suitcase packed, he placed a call to Banks to give him the news. His boss was abrupt as always. "What have you learned?"

"I have a flight to Denver in the morning. I'll be there by noon," Zach said, staring at the suitcase waiting by the door.

"I have nothing on my end, but not for lack of trying. They're still focusing on Texas, trying to get more details on the van that forced them off the road."

"Locally?"

"Everyone here is on high alert. Our contacts will let us know if they see any heightened activity or hear any news. I'll keep you in the loop, don't worry."

"I'm counting on that," Zach said stiffly. Though still annoyed at being sent away, he knew he could still do his part from Colorado. There was no way he was going to let Augustin get away. Banks was right; it was personal.

"I need you there. I couldn't come up with anyone better for that job," Banks said impatiently.

"Unofficially, of course."

"Exactly."

Zach ran a hand down his face and sighed wearily. Put that way, he knew he would have objected loudly if Banks had offered to send someone else. Emery was his responsibility. They had history.

“I’ll check back when I’ve got her. I have the file and a starting off point. Shouldn’t be long.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

Zach chuckled, but there was little humor in his voice. “That makes two of us.”

“I have faith in you. You know what you’re doing.”

Though the compliment was appreciated, Zach changed the subject quickly. “Marie’s finishing out the school year then going north. I think her sister’s up in Window Rock.”

“She mentioned that to the guys who went over there.”

“She’ll be taken care of while I’m gone?”

“Naturally.”

“Good.”

Reassured, Zach signed off and leaned his head against the back of his sofa. On his lap rested his laptop, still open to a photograph of the Argo Gold Mine and Mill. The large, brick red building provided a stark contrast to the golden sand and green pine trees on the hills around it. An obvious building in an unobtrusive foreground...perhaps Emery would stand out for him in much the same way.

One could only hope.

Chapter 3

The red squirrel held a pine seed and began to chatter noisily when JJ came galloping back into the meadow. However, it bravely held its ground while the intruder explored the perimeter of the clearing. Angrily voicing its displeasure, the squirrel began to vocalize a longer, warning call, a sound almost as eerie as a Maine loon. The noise caught JJ's attention, and he raised his nose from the ground, ears perked in awareness.

"Oh no," she whispered. She knew what that meant.

Sure enough, JJ caught sight of the squirrel and crouched slightly, gathering up his strength before he came bounding back in her direction at full speed. The 120 pounds of solid muscle and ferocious features were softened only by the long, undocked tail that wagged excitedly from side to side.

Emery Flores watched his approach with an indulgent smile from her spot several feet from the tree. She would have called out for JJ to stop, but the sight of him eagerly approaching his old friend was too amusing to resist. With one last angry call, the squirrel scurried back up the tree, where it began to chatter furiously once more from a higher position. Though safe, it remained wary and kept a close eye on JJ as he fervently sniffed where his prey had been relaxing. He quickly grew bored and

ran off just seconds later, but the scene of the squirrel was lost. Though the sketch was not complete, Emery felt she had enough to work with. She gathered up her pencils, stuffed them in the pocket of her heavy parka and closed her sketch pad while she scanned the meadow for JJ. As was usual, after growing bored he went in search of new and exciting things to toy with and had already snuffled his way across the meadow. Confident he would catch up, she rose from the log she had been sitting on and began her trek back to the house without him. The morning may have been cut short, but she was eager to start the new project anyway.

After stumbling upon a New York Times article reporting that the nearly out of control pine tree bark beetle infestation was being caused by global warming, Emery had begun a series of new images. They were planned to display the wildlife that depended on the pine forests for survival. The last she heard, nearly 3.5 million acres had been destroyed by the pesky insects in the last 15 years. Once beautiful green mountainsides were now discolored by the dead trees, trees turning red with the agony of their demise.

Giving one last glance at the pristine hillside behind her home, Emery sighed softly. Luckily, her small corner of the world had not yet been hit. But talk in town warned her of the impending arrival. Something had to be done soon, and she was eager to do her part. A portion of the profits of her new project were being sent to the Forest Service to aid their unending fight to regain control, and that meant she had much work to do. Spring was approaching fast, and she had set herself a deadline to have the full exhibit done by fall. There was no time to waste.

The ground beneath her boots was soggy as she crossed the meadow to return to the trail back to her home. Though the trail itself was still thick with snow, the meadow had melted and green shoots of fresh grass were appearing. The dampness that coated her boots was just another reminder that spring was imminent. This was her favorite time of year, the time when the forest came back to life. New life.

With JJ happily trailing behind her, Emery entered the

Through Winter Skies

wooded trail that led back to the cabin. In the shadow of the pines, the temperature was noticeably cooler, and she shivered when the breeze struck her uncovered cheeks. Though her steps never faltered, she reached up and pulled her zipper higher around her chin to keep her neck warm. The day was growing cloudy already, and she heard on the news that winter had not yet given up its hold on the mountains. Another storm was fast approaching. It promised more snow, which meant solitude and quiet for her to get some work done.

Still hugging her pad to her chest, she followed the path that had been worn down by her frequent treks to the hidden meadow. Though she had neighbors on both sides, not many hiked out far enough behind their property into the forest to find the secluded spot. It was now her favorite area to come for peace and solitude. Many of her pieces of art originated in the small hunting hide she had erected near the copse of pines on the north end of the meadow. But instead of threatening the wildlife with a hunting rifle, she painted, sculpted or carved them.

By the time the small cabin nestled among the tall, lodgepole pines came into sight, the sky had darkened even more. The cabin had originally been erected in a small clearing between two separate stands of the magnificent trees, and the location was effective at hiding the cabin from view on all sides. It definitely granted her the privacy she craved. While she liked it, and in fact preferred it that way, the seclusion did not come without some work. When winter storms came in, it was necessary to view the trees objectively to see if any branches were in danger of falling on the house. Things had shifted slightly since the last storm, but she was relieved to note that everything still appeared solid. Though not afraid of hard work, the risk of taking down branches alone was not one she took lightly. All it would take was one simple mistake, and she could be critically hurt. But today she was off the hook, and her steps were lighter as she completed her trek through the snowy path. With one less thing to do out in the cold and increasingly cloudy day, she hurried inside to make a cup of hot tea and

some lunch before she started her preparations.

After a quick shower and a tally of all her batteries, Emery settled into her normal routine of checking her closet-sized pantry. With the nearest warehouse club over 30 miles away in Littleton, she had made a deal with Faith. The owner of the gallery where she displayed her work was her eyes and ears in town. Her son Gage was also her handyman, a burly young man who initially provided the extra muscle she needed when she remodeled her cabin from a hunting retreat into a home. In reward, she had given him her old car when he obtained his driver's license, and that move had earned her a strong set of muscles eager to help her out. In addition to being her only friends, the two completed her shopping in Littleton while she maintained the yearly dues for all of them. It was a trade-off that suited them well.

Done more out of habit than necessity, she took a tally rather quickly. During Gage's last trip for supplies, she had stocked up on almost all the canned goods and bottled water she could need to get by. With meat stored in a freezer in her garage below the cabin, she was confident she would be set for this storm.

Turning her attention to the television, she scanned through the channels until she found the weather report. Winter storms, despite their danger, were her favorite time of year. She felt safest when the roads were blocked and there was a blizzard raging outside. Every other time, she was always on guard. The feeling that something bad was going to happen never truly went away.

Over the sound of the television, she could hear the wind picking up outside. The storm was forecasted to arrive in early evening, yet she deduced she would have only a couple more hours before the first flakes fell.

Pursing her lips, she realized the weather forecasters had a nearly impossible job of trying to be right all of the time. Jeez, even when she lived in Arizona they could never get the monsoon storms right. She smiled briefly as she remembered Zach once placing a bet on a date for when it would arrive, but

Through Winter Skies

it quickly faded. With the memory of Zach's teasing and joking came darker memories, ones she had no urge to revisit. That life was over, she thought fiercely. All she had left to do was bring up some wood from the pile out back and make sure she had enough sand to make the pathway safe. With that thought in mind, she pushed the memories of Arizona away and came to her feet to prepare for another trek outside in the cold.

Named after the famous naturalist and painter, John James Audubon, her loyal dog and constant companion raised his head eagerly when she pulled on her boots, his tail thumping rapidly against the throw rug in the great room. Eager for a trip back outside, JJ began to come to his feet, but she held up a hand to stay him. Having him along when carrying wood to the house was a treacherous risk, for her enthusiastic buddy often cut her off and even once tripped her. She smiled when his head sullenly dropped back to the floor, and he gave her a mournful stare with eyes that bemoaned her decision to leave him behind. However, he obediently remained where he laid even though his ears perked as she hurried out into the wind.

The cold greeted her immediately when she closed the door behind her. The wind chill had grown bitter as quickly as the sky had darkened, and she pulled her beanie lower on her forehead reflexively to ward off the biting gusts. With hurried steps, she went around the back of the house to begin gathering up the wood. Knowing her list of chores was nearly complete, she worked quickly, the actions of one who had done the same countless times. It was a relief to know she had only a few more things to do before she could buckle down and get to work while the storm raged safely outside.

Little did she know her day was only just beginning.

After passing the elusive driveway three times, Zach finally spotted the overgrown and well-hidden dirt road leading to the small cabin he was almost certain Emery now called home. In what ended up being a very frustrating visit to Idaho Springs, Zach had begun to doubt he would ever find the place. In fact, when he finally recognized Emery's artwork in the window of

one of the quaint galleries on the main street, he had tried to charm the owner into giving him information. She had not budged, forcing him to flash his credentials before she reluctantly gave him cautious and rudimentary directions.

Having tried everything with the exception of bullying to find out more about Emery's possible whereabouts, he finally conceded he was not surprised that she chose Idaho Springs to live. The town itself was picturesque and small, but the quiet residents were evidently very protective of their own. Contrary to what he originally thought, if Emery wanted a place to hide she had certainly found support in that loyal group.

He turned into the heavily forested drive with some hesitation. While the unwelcoming entry could be explained if Emery did live here, if not, he could possibly be facing a very angry, very private homeowner. His concern grew as he eased the rental car to a gentle stop before a closed and locked gate surrounded by a rusted chain that appeared as old as the surrounding trees themselves.

Sighing in frustration, Zach put the rental in park and shut down the engine. The day had gone from partly cloudy to gray skies, and the wind chill had dropped noticeably. He was neither dressed for the changing weather nor looking forward to the snow he had been warned about at the gallery. Time was growing short to find Emery. If he was in the wrong place, he would have to pack it up for the day, or possibly days according to the shop owner, and try again when everything cleared.

Avoiding the snow banks as best he could, he climbed over the driveway gate that blocked entry to the narrow concrete and wood bridge spanning a rushing creek below. He could hear the water racing below and almost feel it rumbling under his feet. It made him wonder how any drivers gained the courage to drive over the narrow bridge with no railings, knowing what lay below.

Through the dense trees he could see what appeared to be a small log cabin ahead, but it was well hidden and cast in shadow. Nevertheless, he crossed the bridge and made his way down the drive, listening to the rushing water grow more

Through Winter Skies

distant as he left the main road and rental car behind.

“If she wanted privacy, she sure got it,” he muttered while instinctively confirming the reassuring presence of his firearm under his jacket.

The drive was dirt, and the frozen ground was uneven under his oxfords. Though mostly clear of snow in the tire tread marks, he still mentally reprimanded himself again for not preparing for the weather. In Phoenix the temperatures were already reaching this area’s summer highs, while here it was still winter. A fact he was very well aware of in each and every blast of the ice-cold air that seemed to blow right through him.

Picking his way along, he watched the small cabin come into view. It was quaint and nestled between two large stands of pine trees. Well shaded and well hidden, his first view was of two windows on the first floor and two windows above that followed the peaked roofline. A small flight of stairs led up to a porch that disappeared around the side. The front door lay midway down the length of the cabin with large glass windows on either side. Unfortunately, they were covered by heavy blinds at the moment, and of course they were closed.

Zach was shivering by the time he reached the stairs, and he hurried to the door with new urgency. The sooner he checked the place out, the sooner he could escape the freezing wind. With knuckles turning red from the cold, he reached out and knocked, and naturally received no answer.

Except for the sudden shifting of a large weight with claws that he could hear scamper across the floor and jump against the door. From there it escalated into noise, a lot of noise.

Over the barking of what appeared to be a large and ferocious dog, Zach could hear the sound of a television and knew for certain there had been some activity in the house recently. Sighing in frustration, he was again reminded that he would have to resume his search after the storm passed if Emery was not at this location. Stubbornly he waited, his keen ears hoping for some movement inside that indicated someone was home - aside from the guard dog.

After what seemed an eternity with no response, Zach was

again undecided. Did he wait out in the cold or retreat to his car? If the homeowner was out somewhere, he or she could not return without pulling behind his little rental, which currently blocked the gate. He could wait there and hope for the best. But still he hesitated. There was no clear view of the house from the end of the driveway. If he returned to the shelter of the car, he would not be able to watch for activity.

He sank to the steps, ignoring the ferocious guard dog and cupping his hands in front of his mouth. Within moments, he was shivering harder. The cold slap of reality was almost as brutal as the biting wind. It would be foolish to remain out in the elements dressed in oxfords, slacks and a light jacket. Though unaccustomed to defeat, he grudgingly accepted he would have to wait somewhere out of the cold.

Just as he was accepting the setback, he heard the sound of tentative footsteps crunching through the snow from around the back of the cabin. Though moving slowly, he could still tell that the weight was slight and most likely female. Relief rushed through him as she came into sight, and he knew even before he saw the petite figure in the oversized parka that he had found Emery.

Watching her approach between the two large pine railings that hid him from her view, Zach waited to confirm her identity before revealing himself. Though covered from head to toe and holding a bundle of wood against her chest, he caught a glimpse of the small, straight nose when she turned to look questioningly at the now-empty doorway, behind which the dog was still growling menacingly. Her large, green eyes, still framed with long, black lashes, were wide with a mixture of apprehension and confusion. After years of staring into those emerald depths, he knew those eyes almost as well as his own. He came to his feet with a surge of triumph that his frustrating search was over.

“You should know by now I always win hide and seek, Squirt,” he said in greeting.

A low, strangled cry was her response, and the wood she carried fell to the ground at her feet when her arms dropped

Through Winter Skies

lifelessly to her side. His triumphant smile faded slightly as he realized there was no welcome in the green eyes he knew so well. Instead, she stared at him in pure terror. Holding out a placating hand, he offered her a more tentative smile. "I'm sorry, Em. I didn't mean to scare you."

Though she remained motionless, almost frozen to the spot, Zach caught the panic in her eyes before she rapidly blinked it away. He stood still and allowed her to absorb his presence with a mixture of shock, awe, and fear all jumbled on her heart shaped face. As recognition slowly dawned, the color drained from her tawny cheeks, everywhere except for her nose which remained pink from the cold. Her lips parted into an O of surprise.

Moving cautiously down the stairs, Zach held her gaze as he slowly approached and bent to pick up the kindling at her feet. She never moved, though her wary gaze watched his every movement. Gathering up the wood in his arms, he straightened with a half-smile and took a step back. "So Squirt, how've you been?"

After staring at him curiously for a few moments, she cocked her head to the side and frowned. Not sure how to interpret that, Zach felt what was left of his smile begin to fade. It was gone by the time she gave him a wide berth as she passed him and climbed up the stairs, pulling open the door with a single glance over her shoulder. One brow was raised in question, so he took that as an invitation and followed behind her into the warmth of the house.

The scent of wood smoke greeted him as the warmth of the cabin thankfully enveloped him. Compared to the relatively simple exterior, he was surprised to notice that the inside of her cabin was inviting and cozy. Nestled between a small kitchen and dining room, the doorway opened into a great room that spanned the entire width of the home. It was open to the ceiling, and the thick pine beams above were solid and dramatic. On the opposite side of the house, a spiral pine staircase led to a small loft above. The staircase itself was an eye-catching work of artistry that belied the bland impression

he had received outside.

There was a massive stone fireplace across the room that travelled from floor to ceiling, and the stove insert was radiating much welcomed heat. He wanted to make his way over to the fireplace, but he remained cautiously by the door as Emery soothed the giant Rottweiler who did not appear any more pleased to see him than he had sounded. The dog was enormous, appearing to take up half of the great room with just his massive head alone. Emery did not bend when she placed her hand on his head and made several random hand gestures that had the beast of a dog approach him and give him a curious sniff.

Although never one to fear dogs, Zach had learned in his time not to take them for granted. Shifting his bundle in an effort to gain freedom for one hand, he held it out, palm down, and remained still while the monster sniffed him. After what seemed an eternity, the dog gave a cautious wag of his tail before turning and lumbering back to the rug in the great room, plopping down with a contented groan.

“Nice dog,” Zach commented.

Emery, who had remained silent the entire time, offered him another raised brow. The hostility in her gaze was not mistaken, and he could feel his frustration begin to spike. Still unsure how to take her cold reception, he paused to remember everything she had gone through and the resulting scars she most certainly carried.

Just as he was about to determine she still did not speak, she nodded her head in the direction of a handsomely carved pine box resting alongside the fireplace. “You can drop those in there.”

She spoke slowly, as if measuring out her words, and he was startled by the sound of her voice. It had changed much in the ten years since he saw her last. Sadly, her once high-pitched and girlish voice had been altered from her attack to a husky tone more suitable for a phone sex goddess than a petite, slip of a girl with such a traumatic past.

Although normally very good at hiding his emotions, Zach

Through Winter Skies

still turned to place the bundle in the box in case any of the surprise he felt was displayed on his face. Once he finished, he turned back to see that she had removed her heavy parka and hat and was hanging them on a peg by the door. No longer just a lanky teenager, Emery had developed into a curvaceous woman dressed in a thick turtleneck and skinny jeans that seemed to match the tantalizing voice that nearly knocked him off his feet. Shoulder length, thick black hair spun around her face in wayward strands when she faced him. Though mentally prepared for Emery's reclusive change in personality by Marie, Zach had not been prepared for the other changes in her. In his mind's eye, he still saw the child she used to be, and the reminder of how much time had passed saddened him as much as it shocked him.

"You look great," Zach said before he could stop himself.

She was lovely, almost startlingly so. The turtleneck she wore hid the most obvious of her scars, leaving the face he recognized but almost did not, with the same dainty nose, full lips and almond-shaped, emerald eyes that had always captivated him when she was trying to charm him into doing something when they were young. But this woman before him was no longer a child.

Shrugging off his lame compliment, Emery waved a hand in the direction of her sofa. "Sit down. I'll make some tea, and we can discuss why you're here."

Again she spoke slowly, and Zach wondered if it had something to do with her injury rather than distaste for him. Pity creased his brow. She had been through so much in her short life, and it bothered him more than he thought it would that she was hiding away in such a remote area.

Though she was not giving him the warm welcome he had hoped for, he was still inside. He planned to make the best of it, and the soft leather and cloth sofa with overstuffed pillows was a lot closer to the fireplace than the doorway. He crossed the room and sat down as close to the fireplace as he could get while the beast of a dog watched him warily.

With the light from the floor to ceiling windows taking up

the entire back of the house, Zach was able to see the kitchen clearly from his vantage point. Stainless appliances and golden silver granite counters matched the high-gloss pine cabinets nicely and added to the cool but functional feel inside the cabin. He bit back a smile. She may be remote, but she certainly was not lacking the comforts of home. A flat screen television was mounted on the wall, and it was tuned to The Weather Channel. Currently the meteorologist was speaking through a pricey surround sound system resting upon the glossy pine shelving unit below.

“This is a nice place,” he commented.

She did not turn from her task of pulling down a pair of mugs from one of the cabinets, but his astute gaze easily picked up the tension in the way she moved. Her shoulders were stiff, and her hands appeared to be shaking so badly at one point that the tea bag missed one of the mugs entirely.

Deciding silence was the best route to take for now, Zach settled back in the plush sofa and rested his head against the soft cushions. Despite the lack of pictures on the wall and the sparse furnishings, her small cabin hidden in the woods had a homier feel than his condo did. While he continued to wait, he allowed his gaze to continue absorbing his surroundings. There was a lot to learn about a person when seeing the way they lived. Not surprisingly, his first impression of Emery was that she was someone who cared little for fluff and circumstance, preferring to maintain a simple, yet comfortable, lifestyle. In addition to the furniture and stove, a lone pine bookshelf rested against the far wall. Scanning the titles, he noticed grimly that she preferred thrillers and horror rather than light comedies or romance. From his vantage point, he could barely make out the contents of the loft. Of what he could see, only paints and canvases filled that area. Obviously, that was her workspace. He could not see what lay beyond the kitchen, but assumed it was her bedroom and bathroom. He wondered if it had the same unassuming, comfortable furnishings as the main room had.

The tea kettle began to whistle, and Zach returned his attention to the enigmatic woman in the small kitchen. He

Through Winter Skies

watched as Emery poured out the boiling water with the ease of one used to the chore. Judging by the cold weather that made his bones ache, he could imagine her sipping tea all day just to keep her insides warm. If he lived here, he would like nothing more than to do just that.

She returned slowly to the great room, and he came to his feet to meet her. In the light pouring through the windows, he was once again struck by how beautiful she had become. So familiar and yet so different from his memories of the child he once knew. With a small smile, he reached for one of the mugs, but he saw the tightening of her lips as his fingers brushed hers.

The awkward silence remained as they regained their seats, with him on the sofa and Emery perching on the edge of the footrest in front of the single chair by the fireplace. Her monstrous dog plopped down beside her immediately, resting his head on her knee while she absently stroked him with her free hand. It seemed to reassure her slightly, for the hand holding her tea began to tremble less with the dog's protective presence.

Taking a sip of the warm tea, Zach watched her with concern. This was not the girl he had known since she was barely out of toddler years. Her eyes no longer shone with innocent adoration when she looked at him. Instead, she remained guarded and hostile, her eyes narrowing with undisguised resentment. Marie had been right. She appeared to be someone else entirely.

"It's good to see you again, Squirt," he said softly.

He had hoped using his pet name for her would cause her to lighten up a bit, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. Her cheeks colored just enough for him to notice, and her lips narrowed into a thin line. Her voice was clipped and unwelcoming. "What brings you here, Zach?"

"I came to see you."

"Why?"

Zach's own gaze narrowed at her continued terseness. "I haven't seen you in ten years, Emery. I wanted to see how you were doing..."

“So you flew up here?”

“I’m on vacation and thought I’d stop by.”

“You’re not dressed for Colorado.” She stared pointedly at his jacket, her gaze slow as it travelled down his length to his shoes. He had the undeniable urge to squirm but held it in. Unaccustomed to being on the other side of an interrogation, he decided then that he did not like it. Not one bit.

“I wasn’t aware of a blizzard coming until I reached town. I thought it was spring. I was expecting flowers and run off, not snow.”

She scoffed at him. “They’ve been talking about it all week.”

“Well, I just landed today,” he retorted.

She frowned in mistrust. “I thought you said you were on vacation? What did you do? Land, get a car and drive out here?”

His lips curved into a smile. He attempted his most charming one but feared it did not reach his eyes. “That pretty much sums it up, yes.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“To see you.”

“Me? Specifically?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Is that so bad?”

“There was no standing invite,” she said coolly.

Stung, Zach grimaced. “I didn’t realize I’d need one after all the years we’ve known each other.”

She studied him with her wary, intense gaze over the rim of her tea cup. There was no weakening of her resolve there, just pure, complete dismay. “It would’ve been nice if you had contacted me first.”

“I would’ve if I’d known where you were,” Zach muttered.

“I prefer my privacy.”

“I’ve heard that about you. It’s a shame, Squirt.”

“How did you find me anyway?” Emery’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Growing tired of the unwavering questions, he decided to be up front about it. “Look, Em, I came to see you because the victim notification you requested went to your mother’s house. I had to see you and discuss what’s happened in person.”

Through Winter Skies

As though a veil had dropped over her face, all emotion fled, but he noticed the trembling in her hand again. She sipped her tea and gazed out the set of doors between the many windows lining the back of the house. For a moment, Zach wondered if she was going to make a run for them, but she turned back to him and spoke again in her low, carefully measured voice. “The snow started. Perhaps we should discuss this once the storm’s passed. I don’t want you to go off the road on your way back.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she abruptly came to her feet. The beast of a dog quickly rose by her side and hurried before her to the door, leaving Zach alone on the sofa.

Turning slightly, she glanced at him over her shoulder expectantly. “I’ll walk you out.”

Left with no other choice, Zach also rose and set his mug on the counter while she pulled on her coat. Though disappointed with the way this visit had turned out, he hoped she just needed time to come to grips with his sudden arrival.

“I imagine you don’t have any chains with you?”

Chains? As the thought hit, he shook his head.

She sighed. “Yes, better that you leave now.”

Zach hesitated. Wanting to reach out but afraid to touch her, he leaned down to capture her gaze. “If I leave, will you let me come back, Emery?”

She avoided his stare. “Of course I will.”

“Okay, just checking.” He smiled again, but she was too caught up in opening the door to see it.

She stood on the porch watching as he walked away, her hands gripping the railing as though she could become a part of the cabin itself. While he made his way down the porch and to the steps, he worried about what would happen the next time he appeared. Deep inside, he feared she would be long gone when he next saw this cabin, and that left him feeling strangely hollow. As he stepped out onto the bridge, he turned one last time and waved.

Unsurprisingly, she did not raise a hand in response.

Chapter 4

Emery allowed the freezing wind to lash at her cheeks as she watched Zach stride away. In just a matter of minutes, she felt as though her life had been turned upside down and was now tumbling around her like a tower of children's blocks. Everything was rushing back to her now. All those years of blocking and trying desperately not to remember came to a startling end. With one look at the tall, broad shouldered and burly man with the gentle, blue eyes who she had worshipped above all others, everything came rushing back.

Why now?

Gripping the deck railing so tightly her fingers ached, Emery watched Zach stride down the long drive. Her heart was still racing painfully in her chest, and her hands grew chilled due to the sweat on her palms. What was happening was very real. It had all been real, every miserable, horrifying moment. Even now as she stood in silent shock, her mind numb from all the horrible memories, she wished it all away. She wished him away. She wished Zachary Evans had never found her.

The solitude she found in this small cabin in the wintery woods was just what she had needed to build a life. While her mother never saw it as a productive one, to her it meant everything. She liked her solitude, she liked not having

Through Winter Skies

neighbors too close, and more than anything she liked not seeing people every single day. She just wanted to be left alone. Her mother may have been right when she accused Emery of running away during that final bitter argument, but she preferred it that way. She thought of it as self-preservation.

However, hiding had not worked. She had been found, and the heavy wet flakes of snow that whirled around Zach's dark head seemed more of a threat now rather than the welcome reprieve she had recently looked forward to. Whether she wanted to accept it or not, Zach was here and determined to see her. Resentment made her frown, but she forced herself to remember that Zach had no idea the effect he had on her. He had saved her life, but he also brought the memories of that tragic night back to life.

As she watched him move farther away, into the cover of the tall pine trees that shaded her house from the road, sadness suddenly sliced into her heart. Where it came from she was not sure, but it was there nonetheless. Sadness for watching her closest childhood friend fade into the shadows and take with him all connections to the mother she had shunned perhaps? It was a strange longing overpowering everything else currently overwhelming her, and she pushed the melancholy aside to return to later – once she was alone again.

At the foot of the bridge, Zach paused one more time and turned to wave. She watched him raise his hand but could not find the strength to return his hopeful gesture. It was just too difficult. With a slight hesitation, his arm dropped back to his side, and his head dipped in disappointment when he turned around again.

Oh, but he was even more handsome than she remembered, the very essence of male. His thick, dark hair and strong jaw were more mature and striking, and the years had been kind to him. Still muscular and toned, she felt the tug on her heart that she had always felt when he was near, but this time it was different. Too much time had passed; too many things had happened. Their friendship had run its course.

Preparing herself for seeing the last of him, she compressed

her lips together and began to turn away when a flash of black appeared in the corner of her eye. JJ was running at full speed toward the driveway in pursuit of some unseen animal. Too late to call out a warning, she watched in horror as her 120 pound, muscular dog rounded the residual snow bank and ran headlong into Zach from behind. One minute he was returning to his vehicle; the next he was gone from sight, losing his footing on the slippery bank and unceremoniously knocked over the side of the narrow bridge into the rushing water below.

With a startled cry, Emery momentarily froze in shock. Pushing all resentful and selfish thoughts aside, she hurried down the stairs and ran through the hard-packed remaining snow down to the rushing creek. It was several feet deep around her property, she and Gage had seen to that two springs ago, and the currents at the moment were strong. Heading toward the spot where the creek was shallow enough for him to regain his footing, Emery hoped for the best. The water was bitterly cold and treacherous. If Zach was unable to get his feet under him and make it to the side, she could lose him forever. Though the snow lining the bank was still deep in spots and made her trek slower than she wished, when she arrived at the edge Zach was already making his way to the bank.

Trembling all over with relief, her voice was breathless when she halted before him. “Are you okay?”

“Your beast pushed me over the side,” he replied through violently chattering teeth.

Emery pushed a branch away from her face and went to the water’s edge. The snow was deep in the shadow of the trees lining the bank, and Zach’s shoes were already packed. Coupled with his dousing in the nearly freezing water, she knew she had to get him warm quick. “I saw. Are you okay?”

He scowled. “Of course. I came up here specifically to try bathing in freezing water.” One brow rose in disbelief. “Seriously, Em?”

For the briefest of moments, Emery considered smiling. Despite her view of him being a harbinger of trauma, the sight of such a large man standing in a snowstorm, sopping wet, and

Through Winter Skies

looking blue around lips currently spewing sarcasm would have been amusing if it were not so dangerous. Pulling off her parka, she held it out to him. He swatted it away and wrapped his arms around his waist.

“That was a dumb question,” she stated.

“Ya think?”

“Okay. Take the coat until we get inside.”

“I don’t want your coat. It’s cold and windy. You need it,” he growled.

“But I’m dry and you’re not.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

A sudden gust of wind and blowing snow abruptly ended the conversation. Zach had moved further up the bank, but his entire body was shuddering, making his steps painfully slow. Emery shook her head in frustration. “Let’s go before hypothermia sets in.”

Despite his shivering, the exasperated look he sent her way made her aware that again she had stated the obvious. “Too late.”

“Okay.” Sighing, Emery pointed to the house meaningfully.

The journey back to the cabin was long and slow. JJ ran circles around them, and Zach continued to glare at him with dangerously narrowed eyes. Biting her lip with worry, Emery could sense his misery and discomfort on top of the rage he was feeling toward her dog. He did not speak, but the chattering of his teeth and wild shivers making his steps uneven spoke volumes. She led the way as best she could by holding back branches and testing the snow banks to make sure the path was safe, but he still stumbled on several occasions. With rising concern, she feared one misstep might see him falling and unable to rise.

The sight of her front door was more welcome than ever. Zach’s legs were barely able to make it up the steps, but his sheer force of will paid off as one after another tackled each stair. She saw the tightening around his blue lips, and his pale face made his determined blue gaze seem even brighter than before. As she opened the door to the cabin, Emery realized the

seriousness of their situation. There was no way she could send him away now, and that meant he was not driving anywhere before the storm eased.

“I’ll start the bath,” she said as soon as they were inside. “Get out of those clothes.”

Hurrying into the bathroom, she began filling the tub. Pulling out a stack of towels, she grabbed two and raced back to the fireplace where Zach was still standing and shivering. “Why aren’t you undressing?”

He glanced down at his hands. “My fingers won’t work... Numb.”

Staring up at him hopelessly, she wondered if she could help him remove his soaked clothing. The idea terrified her, and her panicked gaze met his. “I don’t think... I don’t know.”

“Oh come on, Em. I’ve never done anything to you to earn your dislike.”

Emery winced at the anger and disbelief combined on his face. Of course he had no idea of her distaste for physical contact. How could he when she had not seen him in ten years? Gritting her teeth in indecision, Emery met his gaze pleadingly. He would certainly succumb to the effects of the cold if they did not do something fast, and she could not allow that to happen.

“I’ll try,” she whispered resolutely.

Taking a deep breath, Emery dropped the towels, reached forward and grasped the zipper on his jacket. It was still cold to the touch and dripping wet. In fact, everything on him was soaked. Reminding herself that this was a medical emergency, she pushed the jacket off of his broad and surprisingly strong shoulders and down his arms, noticing first the size of the muscles there and then noticing just how rigid they were. Zach was in a bad way.

His shoulder holster was next. She carefully removed it and set his Glock aside before turning her attention to his button down shirt. For the first time since she had seen him, Emery was happy he had not dressed in layers the way the locals did. His shirt was loose and once the buttons were free she was able to slide that down his stiff arms as well.

Through Winter Skies

Averting her eyes from his now naked and very broad chest, Emery bit her lip and reached for his waist. He wore a leather belt with his slacks, and the leather was stiff and unyielding. It took several tugs to release it, during which Zach swayed precariously. Still, he managed to keep his feet despite his violent shivers while she tugged his pants down to his ankles. Untying his shoes next, she realized that getting him to raise his feet to remove them would be the largest problem so far.

“Can you lift your foot?”

One of his hands fell heavily upon her shoulder, a reminder of his strength. Biting harder on her lip, she forced herself to tolerate it as he lifted first one foot and then the other. She pulled off the slacks, shoes and dress socks in a swift tug on either side.

“Get in the tub,” she said as she straightened.

He nodded but did not move. Realizing his muscles were exhausted, Emery grasped his arm, noticing immediately that his satiny smooth skin was cool to the touch. Wrapping it around her shoulders, she placed her arm around his waist and pulled him in the direction of the tub.

This was the closest she had been to another human being since that night.

Squeezing her eyes shut against the anxiety growing in her breast, she reminded herself that it was Zach she held so tightly. This was the man who had risked his own life to save hers. It was now her turn to come to the rescue.

“I’m sure the water’s warm,” she urged. “Come on, I’ll help you.”

“Umm, having some trouble moving,” he muttered.

He was heavy against her, and she feared she would not be able to move him without his assistance. But through sheer force of will, he again drew upon his strength to move on his own. She helped him into the watery depths, and he sank back with a pained groan as water splashed onto the tile floor.

While he soaked, she returned to the kitchen and began a new kettle of hot water to boil. Her next task was to gather up his soaked clothing and firearm, and she took special care

setting that aside for cleaning before emptying his pockets. She placed his keys, badge and wallet on the counter before returning to the bathroom. Her washer and dryer were stacked across from the tub, and she kept her back to Zach as she placed his clothes in the wash. "Is your luggage in the car?"

"Yes."

His voice was thick, but he seemed more alert. Breathing a sigh of relief, she started the load of laundry and hurried from the room, closing the door behind her to offer them both some privacy.

It was not a long trip to his car, but the return journey with a briefcase and suitcase in either arm once again had her heart racing. Already the snow had begun to accumulate, and she silently cursed the storm for placing them both in such an awkward position. Setting his items inside the door, she returned in time to catch the kettle whistling and JJ waiting impatiently for her at the door. She glared at the exuberant dog.

"You were very naughty," she admonished lightly, knowing full well he had no idea what she was talking about.

JJ gave her a guilty look before slinking over to his favorite corner of the rug and plopping down with a groan. He watched her remorsefully with his head on his front paws as she again filled two mugs, this time with hot cocoa.

Placing her elbows on the counter, she lowered her head to rest her chin on her folded hands. Zachary Evans was here. Now he would be riding out a spring blizzard with her in her tiny cabin.

Closing her eyes tightly, Emery remembered back to her days with her counselor Maggie. "*Life can only defeat you if you allow it,*" she had told her so many times that Emery was sure she would never forget those words. In the early days it was her mantra; today it was her fear. How could she face life when the only person in the world that reminded her of the horrors of that night was soaking in her bathtub?

Taking a deep, calming breath, Emery chided herself. Zach needed her now; she must detach and help him the way he had once helped her. She was strong enough to put the past behind

Through Winter Skies

her before. There was no reason why now should be any different. Perhaps she just needed to view him as a man she had never met before, a stranger in need.

Gathering up the mug of hot cocoa, she knocked on the bathroom door before entering. Zach was in the same position she had left him, only his head rested on the back of the tub and his eyes were closed. He was so large he made the tub look uncomfortably small, but it appeared to be doing the trick for his shivering had lessened and he appeared more relaxed.

Averting her eyes away from his almost completely nude body, she picked a spot above his reclining head to stare at as she placed the mug on the rim of the tub. “How are you feeling?”

“Cold, Emery,” he muttered.

She cringed. He did not sound very pleased. “Do you need me to add water?”

His head shook slightly. “No, I did.”

“Can you try the cocoa? It may help.”

“In a minute.”

Though his eyes remained closed, she nodded approvingly. “I hope you didn’t have any plans this evening. You’re going to be stuck here for a bit.”

“I know. I heard the wind.”

He sounded so beaten that she fought the sudden urge to reach out and touch him. Guilt should not have to be in the equation, she thought sullenly, but then again, it was her dog that knocked him into the water. Waving her hands helplessly, she took a step back. “I’ll make up the sofa bed for you.”

He did not answer, but the corner of his lips curved slightly in what she assumed was thanks.

During her second year in the cabin, she had made a large sale to one of the winter ski resorts that consisted of a painting for each of their 225 rooms. Granted the project had taken her a tremendous amount of time and effort, but it had done wonders for her career. Her success had spiraled, and it had given her the opportunity to transform the cabin from a basic hunting lodge into a full-time residential home. One of her only

furniture purchases was the sofa set in her great room, and for that she spared no expense. When she bought it, she hoped it would be the only set she would need for many years. Looking back, she now applauded her wise decision. The sofa bed had an upgraded mattress, which she now hoped would support Zach's burly frame comfortably enough. As rude as it seemed, she did not want to give up the privacy of her room.

She had made the bed and fluffed up pillows when Zach emerged from the bathroom dressed in sweats from the suitcase she deposited inside the bathroom door. Seeing him fully clothed in his Columbia Law gear helped her frazzled nerves, but the guilt remained as she watched him move slowly, almost painfully, to the sofa bed and stare at it longingly. "Thanks."

Taking a step back, Emery held out her hand in invitation. "It's set to go if you want to lie down."

She need not have asked twice. With a heavy sigh, he stretched out and pulled the heavy blankets she had folded back invitingly over his body. "I feel as though I've run a marathon."

"I'm not surprised," she whispered. "I'm sorry about this. I don't know what JJ was chasing."

"I've decided that I do *not* like your dog," he muttered. To soften the blow, he opened one eye and gave her a half smile. "But I guess I should thank him. This saves me from having to hunt you down again."

"You wouldn't have had to..." Her voice trailed off guiltily. They both knew that he would have. Even as she had watched him walk down the drive she had been making plans to be nowhere around when he did make a return appearance; there was no sense in lying about it now.

"You were right," he continued as though she had not spoken.

"About what?"

"I do have a reason for being here, Emery." His voice was firm, a no nonsense tone that she was unfamiliar with and did not like very much. "This storm will ensure that we have plenty of time to discuss it."

Through Winter Skies

“I see.”

“We can talk about it later.”

“Fair enough,” she said softly.

“And we *will* talk about it.”

Though she did not like the implication of his serious words, she nodded abruptly. “Then I’ll let you rest for a bit, and we can talk over dinner.”

“Sounds great.”

Rolling over, he gave her a view of his broad back. With no other choice at the moment, she stared beyond him to the wintery skies outside. The snow was coming down in large, pristine white flakes. The wind was blowing fairly hard, and the television warned that it was only going to get worse. As she turned away, she began to fear the storm was not the only thing taking a turn for the worse.

What began as a nap turned into an all-out early bedtime. Zach never stirred when Emery prepared dinner, nor did he move when she stoked the fireplace for the evening and turned off the television. Covering his dinner in plastic wrap, Emery placed it in the fridge and retired to her own bedroom, closing the door securely behind her. Too anxious to settle down with a book, after reading the same page three times she finally gave up and took a quick shower.

Taking one last precaution in case they lost power, she refilled the bathtub before creeping out of the bathroom. Zach’s even breathing filled the dark and silent cabin, causing shivers of unease to race down Emery’s spine. Having any man this close made her jumpy, and being trapped in her small cabin during a blizzard made it worse. Though she told herself that of all the men who could have arrived at her door Zach was the only one she could have wished for, she still did not trust. She could not.

She knew she never would again.

Chapter 5

The wind was howling outside her window almost to the pitch of a train whistle, and the ominous sound matched the screams that drew Emery reluctantly from her sleep. She felt exhausted, and her limbs felt heavy like someone was holding her down.

Holding her down...

Three men laughing. A boy tied to a chair, his eyes wide in horror as the knife approached. It glinted in the lamplight. Threatening, mocking, menacing.

Eyes opening wide, Emery sat bolt upright and realized the screams she heard were hers. Her hands immediately clutched her neck, and she furiously kicked the tangled covers away from her body. Startled from his slumber beside her bed, JJ came to his feet and nudged her thigh, causing her to jerk away in a panicked flight that nearly sent her over the other side.

“Easy, Em,” came a deep voice in the darkness.

Another strangled cry emerged from her lips when she heard the voice. The sound of hands fumbling for the switch on the wall, and then the room was awash with light that stung her eyes. Confused and frightened, she shot out of bed, nearly tripping over JJ, who scampered away hastily with a startled yelp.

It was Zach.

Through Winter Skies

She squinted before focusing on the tall, broad shape of Zach standing several feet away, his eyes drowsily half-closed but appearing very concerned as he stared at her. His voice was sleep-laden when he spoke. "You okay?"

Feeling awkward and embarrassed, Emery raised a hand to cover her exposed neck. Once again her heart was racing, which made breathing difficult. She took a deep breath to calm down before attempting to speak. "I'm fine."

"You were screaming."

The look he gave her was skeptical and doubting, and she avoided his gaze. "Must've been a dream."

"A dream?"

"I suppose... I don't remember." She shrugged as casually as possible but knew she was not fooling him by the frown he wore.

"Your face is as white as a ghost's." Reaching for the heavy quilt she had sewn, Zach wrapped it around his shoulders and then took a seat in the pine rocking chair beside her bed. For the first time, she noticed the chill in the room. "I'll stay with you for a little bit," he said in explanation.

The frown she sent his way matched his. Panic loomed in her breast at the thought. "Oh no, that's not necessary..."

"Yes it is."

"But you've had a terrible experience and should be resting."

"I already did."

"But how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." His voice was clipped, matter-of-fact and a tone she remembered from their youth. This was a decision she would not be able to sway him on.

"It's too cold in here, especially since you took a dive into freezing water."

He scowled. "I told you I'm fine."

Sighing heavily, Emery continued to stand by the bed, aware of her shapeless flannel nightgown and tousled hair. Although she knew Zach would never harm her, the pounding of heart did not slow. It was just too unnerving to have him in her room, her

Collette Scott

sanctuary. “Really, you should just go back to bed. I’m fine.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you go back to sleep.”

Their gazes clashed, with Zach stubbornly staring her down until she finally caved and returned to the bed to slip back under the covers. After a few minutes of silence, she again sighed. “I will *not* be able to go back to sleep with you sitting there.”

Lifting his feet to the footstool, Zach began rocking slowly. “Then we’ll talk.” When she stared at him blankly, he smiled. “For a little bit anyway.”

Pulling her covers up to her chin, she watched as Zach closed his eyes and continued rocking. In the hours that had passed, the color had returned to his face. She supposed she should have been pleased, but at the moment all she felt was the same resentment as before. Once again he was invading her much cherished privacy and solitude. She wanted him to go back to bed and leave her to wallow among her miserable battles in peace.

Her hands bundled the blankets up closer to her scar. The puckered white skin on her otherwise smooth neck was a harsh reminder of her experience, and one she liked to keep out of sight. However, not all of her clothing sported a high enough neckline to hide the ugliness, and with Zach here now, in her most private of places, she felt as though it would be all he could see.

“Don’t hide your scar from me,” he said forcefully. His eyes remained closed, but they opened slightly when he heard her sharp inhale.

She scowled. “Since when do you read minds?”

“Since I’ve known you your whole life,” he replied.

“I haven’t seen you in ten years, Zach. I don’t know you any more than you know me.”

“That’s not true. While I may not have seen you in a long time, I still know who you are as a person. Some things may change, but inherent traits tend to stay the same.”

“Like what?”

“I know you’re sitting there stubbornly wishing me to go away

Through Winter Skies

like you did when you went through a phase of not liking boys and I had to babysit you.”

Her mouth dropped open. All resentment seemed to fade as she remembered. Feeling heat in her cheeks, she ducked her head as images of that night sent her back to her brief days of innocent youth. “You remember that?”

“I remember a lot,” he said with a chuckle.

“I never said I disliked boys,” she said defensively.

“You didn’t have to. You sat in the living room with your arms crossed and pouted all night.”

Emery felt a smile tease her lips. He was absolutely right. “I guess that was transparent.”

“You’re also thinking of ways to get out of riding out this storm with me in the same way you’d come up with elaborate excuses to get me to do your yard work for you.”

“I only did that once,” she said.

“But I’m still dead on, right?”

“Lucky guess.”

He was smiling but his eyes had drifted closed again. She watched him lazily rock back and forth and for the first time remembered them as they used to be. How close they had been growing up. “Okay, how about you hiding your scar because you think it makes you ugly?”

She stiffened as reality returned. “Who wouldn’t?”

“I don’t think you’re ugly at all, Squirt. You’re actually quite a knockout.”

Flustered by the compliment, Emery felt her cheeks grow warm. “I am?”

“And now you’re embarrassed because I was always the older boy you had a huge crush on but who never noticed you because you were so young.”

Caught again, Emery laughed out loud. The sound caused Zach to open his eyes again, and he stared at her intently until she looked away.

“You’re very beautiful, Emery,” he said in a low voice. She felt

Collette Scott

a strange tingle in her limbs when his warm tone reached her ears.

Shifting slightly, she pulled the covers more tightly around her. "I, uh..."

"That scar doesn't mar your beauty, not at all." When she ducked her head to hide her blush, he leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes again. "So Em, tell me about the cabin."

Startled by the sudden change of topic, she stated the obvious. "It's... uh, a log cabin, built about twenty years ago."

"You updated it then? I noticed the granite in the kitchen and the newer appliances."

"Yes," she said with a proud smile. Though she was a recluse, she certainly kept herself occupied. "I've been doing it here and there when finances permit... Keeps me busy."

"How did you get here?"

"My dad left it to me."

"I saw that... but how did you find it?"

"Idaho Springs is a small town. My father was a social person," she said simply. She did not add that he was also known for his partying.

"Then they were a lot more forthcoming with you than they were with me," he said bitterly.

Laughing at the show of petulance, Emery could feel more of the tension ease away, and her voice noticeably softened. "Maybe you just didn't ask the right people. I went straight to the real estate agent. She also happens to be the sister of my manager."

"At the gallery, you mean?"

"Yes, Faith and her son Gage help me out here."

"I met her."

Her brows shot up in surprise. "You did?"

"How else do you think I got here?"

"Really? I'm going to have to talk to her about that," Emery said firmly.

He held up his hand. "No harm done. I had to show that

Through Winter Skies

woman every bit of ID I had in order to get her to talk. Even then she pretty much left me to the wolves. I passed your driveway multiple times before finding the entry.”

“That was fate telling you to go back,” she said pointedly.

“I wouldn’t have gone back,” he said. “I’m here for a reason.”

“So you keep saying,” she muttered.

“When you’re ready, we’ll talk. Until then, I’ll just stay here with you.” He spoke with such finality that Emery’s eyes went wide. Ignoring her response, he smiled and closed his eyes. “Don’t forget, Em, I am on vacation... I have all the time we need.”

Emery groaned inside. She knew he meant every word.

When Emery opened her eyes again, it was to a room so chilled that she saw her breath vapor. Usually she awoke to JJ’s deep snores, but on this wintery morning her loyal dog was sleeping noiselessly by the side of her bed. He appeared to be huddled as close to the duvet edges as he could, most likely trying to escape the cold, too. Glancing back at the clock on her nightstand proved her suspicions correct. They had lost power during the night. Though not surprised, Emery was not pleased either. While she enjoyed the snow, the strength of the storms out here did have some cause for concern. From here on out, at least until the plows cleared the roads and the power company could get through, she and Zach would be down to the bare basics.

Zach!

Her head whipped over her shoulder to the rocking chair, and sure enough Zach was still there bundled under the quilt. His head rested at an awkward angle and his arms were crossed over his chest to keep from dangling over the side. She felt a new twinge of guilt, for he was such a large man and overwhelmed the small chair. But despite his obvious discomfort, he appeared to be sleeping soundly. His lips were parted slightly, and she could hear his even breathing in the silence of the bedroom. Taking a

Collette Scott

moment to study him, Emery grimaced slightly. Although seeing him had brought back so many painful memories, with it came the reminder of how much she had adored him. Handsome and strong, Zach had been her teenage dream. With a personality as gentle and amusing as he was confident, she knew she was not the only one who fantasized about a future with the ambitious youth.

Shaking her head, Emery thought about the trials the now grown man had been through since he had appeared at her door. A growling dog, a freezing dunk in dangerously strong waters, a brush with hypothermia, a mentally unstable hostess who awakened him with her screams, and now a bed made out of pine logs and thin cushions that barely fit his frame. But despite all that, he had taken everything in stride and maintained his sense of humor. She could not help but be reminded of how special he was.

They had stayed up until the wee hours before dawn talking. Despite the memories that had come rushing back upon his appearance, his playful teasing had replaced the terrible ones with the happier ones of their youth. She could not remember how many times he prompted her laughter, whether from a childhood anecdote or his own quirky sense of humor. It had helped her go back to sleep but with the light of day she felt the dark pall he surely brought with him looming over her head again.

Sliding out from under the covers, Emery pulled the duvet off her bed and placed it over him gently. Knowing from experience that it would take time to build up the fire again and it could be hours before the cabin was comfortably warm, she pulled on her thick, fleece bathrobe and slippers and crept from the room to get to work.

The sight that greeted her through the grey, dim winter skies almost elicited a disheartened groan. The snow outside the French doors was already a foot deep. Strong wind gusts blew the heavy flakes sideways, and tall drifts lined the eastern corner of

Through Winter Skies

the deck. Even though the meteorologists had warned that this storm would be as bad as the one back in 1995, she had hoped for a miracle. But apparently miracles were in short supply around her, she thought sourly, especially after the past 18 hours. Knowing she would have to dress and begin shoveling a path to the firewood, or at the very least a path so she could open her garage door and reach the wood that way, Emery hurried to get the fire going so she could warm up some water for coffee.

It was going to be a long day. Worse, she was stuck with Zach and his mysterious message.

With no electricity, Emery used the stove insert to heat the water. Designed like a grill, she was able to cook food on the top as well, and she counted the stove as one of the most valuable items in her cabin. Not only did it supply her with heat during the coldest winter nights, but it also provided a safer option to cook on than kerosene stoves.

While she waited for everything to heat up, she tiptoed back into the bedroom and gathered clothing to layer in. Zach was still sleeping peacefully, but she noticed he had drawn her duvet closer to his chin. She stared down at him, amazed that for the first time ever she had a man spend the night in her cabin. Growing up with just her mother, she had no idea what it was like to have a man around. Grimly, she realized that Zach would be remedying that. They had no other choice.

After dressing in the bathroom in her jeans and customary turtleneck, Emery sat on the edge of the sofa bed while she sipped her coffee and stared out at the grey skies littered with thousands of heavy snowflakes. JJ settled down beside her, his head resting on her knee, and she stroked him absently while she pondered her dilemma. She was so lost in her thoughts that she did not hear Zach open the bedroom door.

“Good morning.” The deep rumble of his voice startled her, and her coffee sloshed over the rim of her cup while JJ growled low in his throat. Zach sent him a resentful scowl before he returned his attention to her. “Sorry, I thought you heard me.”

Collette Scott

Wiping her hand on the napkin she had placed over one knee, she turned to face him. Her voice was always extra hoarse in the morning, and she self-consciously cleared her throat before answering. "Morning."

If he was surprised at the sound of her rough voice, one she considered masculine, he showed no signs. Instead he crossed his arms and scowled. "I came to the conclusion this morning that you're trying to kill me, Squirt."

Startled again, her brows shot up. "I am?"

"Yes. Death by cold. I've never been so cold in my life. I'm an Arizona kid. I can't handle a fifty degree house."

"I added more wood to the fire," she said in her defense.

"But it's damn cold right now."

"We have no heat because the power's out, and my generator died during the last storm. We have to rough it."

"Rough it is right. It's un-Godly cold in this house."

His eyes were dancing despite his sour words, and she relaxed slightly. "You were the one who opted to sleep in the rocking chair."

"Which, believe it or not, wasn't that uncomfortable. If it was a bit bigger, I'd sleep there the entire time I'm here."

Emery beamed with pleasure at his innocent compliment. "Is that so?"

"Actually, yes. It would just have to come up another foot or so in the back and have a little firmer cushion and I'd be happy." He gestured to the dimensions he had in mind before crossing his arms again and shivering. She bit back a smile.

"I'll keep it in mind," she said. "Maybe for next Christmas..."

It was his turn to be surprised. "You made that?"

"I did," she said proudly. "I've made most of the furniture in here. All the tables, my bed, the rocking chair... everything made in the garage below us."

Sinking onto the edge of the bed beside her, he glanced around the cabin with new eyes. "Squirt, you never cease to amaze me."

Through Winter Skies

He was close - too close. She jumped to her feet and took a step away. No matter how charming he was, she had to maintain the walls she had built around her heart. There was no way she could allow them to fall. "I have to get going. I'll make you some breakfast first if you'd like."

Sensing her sudden change, Zach eyed her curiously. "Going? Where are you going?"

"I have to do some shoveling. If the snow gets too heavy I won't be able to move it."

"Don't you have a snow blower?"

"I do, but it died during the last storm as well." Seeing the unspoken words ready to leave Zach's lips, she responded before he could question her sanity. "I didn't have a chance to see what was wrong with it yesterday. I was working on getting to that when you showed up."

A knowing look appeared. "I'm quite the inconvenience, aren't I?"

"Well, when you put it that way..." Though she tried to keep her tone light, the undercurrent of tension she felt was still present. He studied her with that blasted look of curiosity that made her distinctly uncomfortable, and his voice was solemn when he spoke.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Em." His lips compressed before curving into a resigned half-smile. "I would've done things differently if I could, but it seems as though the weather had a different idea."

"It's fine," she grumbled.

He shook his head, not believing her. "Tell you what... you make breakfast while I shovel."

"No."

"It's not up for discussion," he insisted.

Unable to keep the exasperation off her face, she frowned at him. "Look, I was joking before. Don't take it so personally."

"I'm not taking it personally," he said smoothly. Leveling her with a stern gaze that made her feel like a child, he caught her lie.

Collette Scott

“But I know you weren’t joking, too.”

“Zach...”

He held up a hand to stop her. “It’s okay, Squirt. It’s not an ideal position for you, I can see that. But we can at least try to make the best of it, can’t we?”

What he was asking did not seem unreasonable, except for the anxiety she felt whenever he was near. To make matters worse, he chose that moment to come to his feet and loom before her. Her gaze shifted away from him to the blowing snow outside, and she shrugged helplessly. “We have to.”

The smile he sent her was gentle, but his voice was deep and full of warning when he spoke. “That’s right, Emery. We do... More than you know.”

A sharp nudge from the toe of a boot woke Adan Augustin from his uneasy slumber. Raising his head and blinking several times, he slowly came to recognize his surroundings. He was on a pallet with a single blanket over him in some unknown garage in some unknown town in New Mexico. Three men were nearby, two he recognized and one he did not. The two *Cholos* who had organized his escape were sitting, and apparently the man who kicked him was the driver they had been waiting so long for.

“Time to go?”

“Your ride is meeting you in Arizona. Take these.” The kicker tossed down some clothing, apparently donated from some unsuspecting chump somewhere in this dumpy desert town.

Augustin sat up and wiped his eyes before gathering up the clothes. It would feel good to get out of his stripes. A smile curved his lips, and suddenly the dump no longer felt as shabby as before. He was out!

“I wouldn’t be getting too excited,” one of the *Cholos* piped in.

Augustin glanced at him with a scowl. “Why not?”

“2Tuff got you out for a reason. If you can’t give him what he wants, you’re toast.”

His smile only grew broader. He had been planning that one,

Through Winter Skies

and retaliation played a large part in the directions of his thoughts. Reaching up to finger the tattoo that covered his neck, he stroked lightly where woman's breasts indelibly marked the spot where the girl's throat had been slashed. "I have everything he needs. He just has to get me to her."

Cholo number two chuckled. "Oh he will. Go lay low and make sure you do nothing to screw this up."

Augustin pushed himself to his feet, nodding as he did so. "I got it."

The two men also rose, and neither offered him a shake before turning to the driver. They all moved off to the corner while Augustin shed his stripes for the borrowed clothes, and when they returned the driver handed him a cell phone. Augustin noticed a gun in the man's waistband of his baggy pants when he reached deep into the pocket to produce the phone.

"Know how to use this?"

Augustin glanced at it with a frown. "I'll figure it out."

"Good. When he calls, you answer."

Augustin nodded again. "Got it."

"Let's go."

Augustin followed the driver out of the garage and into the gray light of dawn. Excitement mingled with trepidation. He was really out. He had his freedom... and soon he would also have his revenge.

To Read More, Please Visit:

[Amazon](#)

[AmazonUK](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Smashwords](#)

iBooks

And other book retailers.

Happy Reading!