

***“Miss Roessel, what is it you want?
I’m willing to negotiate.”***

She looked at his hand on her arm then back into his eyes. “But I’m not, Mr. Shields. As a matter of fact, I think you should be more concerned about whether I want to sue you than whether my wolf-dogs will be the performers in your next project.”

He dropped his hand. “Sue?” He was obviously startled.

“Yes, sue. You arrived uninvited today, tried to kill one, or all, of my animals and instead shot me. I know my wound isn’t that bad, but a good lawyer—”

“Now, hold on, lady,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I thought those dogs were attacking you. They looked lethal, and it didn’t appear you could control them. I fired the first shot into the air to distract them, and the second and third only happened because you attacked me.” His eyes turned a dark stormy blue as he stared at her. “You can’t sue me because you haven’t got a case, and you know it. For heaven sakes, Terry, you don’t want to go to court any more than I do. Join me in this project, and I’ll sign over half the profits to you.”

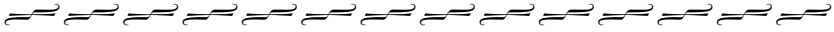
Tarralee’s rage flamed. Was that all the man could think of, his project and the profits to be made? Did he think she was that shallow, or hard up? Blood thundered in her ears as she fought down outrage.

“Mr. Shields, I am not interested. If you know what is good for you, you’ll leave. Now!”

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE BY M. V. MABERY

Memory's Desire (as Gale Storm)

Forever Love (2010)

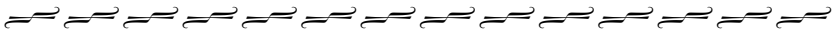


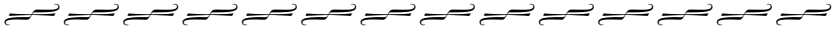
ICE

and

FIRE

M. V. Mabery





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ICE AND FIRE

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CHAPTER 1

t was a lovely late September day in the high north-western Cascades, with the crisp, sharp bitterness that foreshadowed January and winter fires. Tarry loved it. The first snow of the season fell rapidly as she pulled to a stop beside her cabin, feeling exhilarated. Her crossbred wolf-malamutes had performed flawlessly on the training run, and she was thrilled. For the first time the dogs had actually been a team, pulling her smoothly over the eight-mile distance without any of their usual resistance, bickering and squabbles.

She hurried to unhook the dogs, praising them, rubbing each of their heads. Training animals as stubborn and independent as wolfdogs required infinite patience and a deep understanding of how their minds worked.

She had caught a dozen fish at Blue Lake. She lifted the basket from the back of the sled and went to the shed where she kept the dogs' open kettle. Tarry had learned from her father how to feed her motley crew in the most inexpensive way. The whole fish, raw and minus the bones, were mixed with water, rice or oatmeal, lard, vegetables and any other suitable table scraps she had on hand. She also kept a stock of chicken backs and necks on hand for when fish wasn't available and to provide variety. This mixture gave her animals the carbohydrates they needed plus the basic nutrients they required to remain healthy and perform in top condition.

And, since they lapped their bowls clean day after day, they liked it.

She turned on the small electric cookstove and left the kettle simmering as she went back outside to give all ten wolfdogs a rub-down. Like all of those who loved the unique animals, she hated the term hybrid, which was inaccurate and, she thought, demeaning. Living creatures as delightful as her boys and girls shouldn't be labeled as if they had no more personality than corn. She only used seven as sled dogs; the other three were still puppies.

With a sharp whistle, she summoned them to her side and softly ordered them to sit. They obeyed instantly, even the high-spirited pups Cedar, Jeans and Greyson for a change. Then, that finished, she went to the shed to stir the *mélange* she had prepared for their brunch, but her mind was on her future.

When her parents died, she had made up her mind to keep the rest of her family together. David, the eldest at nineteen, had followed her instructions and been awarded custody of her and the three youngest boys. Their family had always lived frugally, growing their own food and keeping meat on the table by hunting, banking much of her construction-worker father's wages. With Social Security payments and a substantial life insurance policy, they had not lacked for money for necessities. The bulk of the responsibility for ensuring that was hers.

As soon as she reached sixteen the following year, she dropped out of high school, and from that point on her family and her animals were her only concern. She had never regretted a single moment.

Now, fifteen years later, the boys were grown and gone—her youngest brother, John Huxley Roessel, named for their father, had celebrated his twenty-first birthday by being accepted to UCLA Medical School this fall. For the first time, Tarralee had time to think about her own future, and so far all she was at a loss for what that was going to be. There was still enough money to pay the taxes and insurance on her property, which she supplemented by selling scarves and shawls she knitted of wool yarn mixed with hair from her wolves on consignment at craft fairs across the country.

She stepped out of the shed and looked at the magnificent mountain peaks that surrounded her. They were beautiful in their first blanket of snow, especially when they were storm-masked like today. All of the mystery of early winter hid their height and awesome possibilities. She sucked in a deep breath of frosty air and marveled at the sense of freedom that vista brought her. She loved the mountain, her lifestyle and her independence now that her brothers were busy with their lives. There was strength and wisdom in the cold landscape. She felt, with all her heart, that she could match the beauty around her with her self-confidence and the patience she had developed bringing up her brothers and the different animals she hosted in her menagerie. Life and living were wonderful. A future comprising spending the rest of her life here, doing what she loved to do, didn't seem too bad.

Clouds crowded against each other on the tops of the mountains, blocking their grandeur from her view then flexing over the peaks; and for a moment the craggy crest's dramatic height was emphasized by a trick of light and shadow. She watched in fascination, oblivious to the cold as the drama unfolded.

She finally turned to the log house and grinned. It was cozy and comfortable, with nine bedrooms and an attic that was used one part for storage and the other as her bedroom. Her life was full and should have been utterly fulfilling.

And yet, thanks to David, the oldest of her brothers and one year younger than she, she felt a gnawing dissatisfaction, as if something was missing.

"It's time you got out of the mountains, enjoyed life, met other people, experienced something just for yourself," David had lectured. She knew the rest of her brothers felt the same way. They had watched her sacrifice everything for them as they grew up. They felt guilty that she insisted she was content to remain on the mountain when she had given up so much for them through the years. She knew they would continue to condemn her lack of selfishness until she did something besides train animals and remain within the confines of the mountains.

That was what really caused the dissatisfaction, she decided—others' opinions. She felt secure, comfortable and protected as

long as the guardian peaks were within view. Without them she would be alone and have to make it on her own. She wasn't particularly afraid of doing that. It was just that it was totally outside her realm of experience, and she wasn't sure what her first step should be.

Her mother had always said that when you were ready the new door would open by itself, but sometimes it required an open heart to see the crack and the possibilities.

Tarry poured the mush into the washtub to cool. Then she went to the barn, fed her few chickens and poured oats into the trough for her old mare. All the other animals she had sold in August; and though she missed them, there was a sense of relief in not having them dependent on her during the upcoming winter months.

She heard the dogs barking and lifted her head. What could that be? Surely, elk or deer hadn't strayed into the yard again? Of course, it might be Torpon. For the past two years, he had hibernated in her dugout; but he had not yet gone into deep sleep and periodically roused to scavenge scraps or tantalize the dogs, whom he had known all of his life. She had raised him from a cub, and the dogs were jealous of her attachment to the now fully-grown American black bear.

Going out into the snow-covered yard, she watched a red four-wheel-drive vehicle pull up beside the cabin. She straightened to her full height of five feet, two inches as she strode toward it. The dogs had surrounded the newcomer, ready to defend their territory, if needed; and Cedar was pressed against the driver's window, his teeth barred in a smile of welcome. Tarralee knew the pup could be intimidating even to the most experienced animal lover; and she wasn't surprised to note that the driver, his hands gripping the steering wheel, remained inside staring at the ten dogs.

She whistled for them to allow the visitor out of his vehicle.

Snow was falling faster now, big wet flakes that almost blotted out colors and distinct lines. Rounder, the alpha, suddenly decided all work and no play was a bad idea. He thumped her squarely in the chest with both front paws, and she dropped to her knees, laughing as she rolled in the snow, the dogs mock-snarling as they

tugged at her jacket and hood. It was a game she played often with them, and for a moment, she forgot the man in the vehicle. She knew the dogs would never hurt her, and she was totally without fear as they growled and snarled.

She gasped as the crack of a gun exploded in the crisp mountain air. Instantly, she was on her feet and starting to turn toward the SUV. Before she could, someone grasped her hood, and she was thrown onto the passenger seat. Spinning around, she saw a bearded stranger take aim at Cedar with an automatic weapon.

With a surge of adrenaline, Tarry was out of the vehicle and flying at the man with the gun. She tackled him, knocking him to the ground as the gun exploded again. She heard a scream of agony from one of her dogs.

Fury blinded her to the danger she was in. Grabbing the man's arm, she wrestled for control of the gun. Again the weapon exploded as she finally managed to pull his arm down between them. She felt a sting along her rib cage.

Shoving the man into a snowbank, Tarry pushed to her feet and threw the gun as far away as possible. She ran to Cedar and fell to her knees beside him. The others crowded around her, upset by the noise and the smell of blood; with a sharp whistle she calmed them and had them sit.

Rounder, his body tensed to spring on the stranger, growled. Tarralee admonished him with a sharp "No!" to remain still. Cedar was breathing and there was very little bleeding from the dark red wound low on her her left flank. She made the pup lie still as she probed it. Luckily, the bullet had only made a flesh wound.

A sound behind her spun her to her feet and around to confront the intruder with the black beard.

"Get out!" She hissed, hardly raising her voice. "Get out, before I sic the whole pack on you. Wolves are extremely protective, mister, and right now they would like to rip your throat out! Get out, before they, or I, kill you!"

First, he just stared at her with a stunned expression in his faded-denim eyes. Then, abruptly, his body sagged as he gripped his left shoulder. He paled even more as Rounder growled, and slowly backed toward his vehicle.

What is wrong with him? Tarry wondered as he swayed, his eyes closed. Her temper cooled as she watched him.

He opened his mouth and closed it, shutting his eyes. "I don't think I can drive."

He fell on his face at her feet.



It took less than a minute for her to react. Kneeling beside him, she turned him over and saw the bright red stain on his jacket. Snow fell on the blue fabric, making her think of the stars on the flag as it combined with the red. Sickness invaded her stomach as she realized he might be fatally injured.

How had this happened? Why had it happened? She touched the jacket as the man groaned. The pain she always felt for any wounded animal blotted out her fury. He did not open his eyes.

Gritting her teeth, she wrapped her arms around his chest from behind and dragged him to the cabin door, sweating profusely. She pushed it open and hauled him inside. Letting him slump to the floor, she ran to the kitchen and grabbed her first-aid box.

It took only seconds to remove his jacket and shirt and pull his T-shirt off. A seeping hole in his shoulder greeted her. He'd lost a fair amount of blood, but the wound wasn't serious, though it would be painful. It was ugly and ragged and would need stitches; but thankfully, like Cedar, there was no bullet lodged in the soft tissues of the shoulder muscle. She packed his T-shirt on the wound to stop the bleeding.

His eyes fluttered open as he flinched. "Where...?" He stared at her, his face ashen.

"You're in my home." She said to restrain the resurgent rage she felt toward him. "I couldn't drag you any farther. Can you sit up?"



Painfully, Tyrone managed it, and the woman shifted him so his back was supported against the large wood box. The fragrant scent of cedar filled his nostrils. He turned his head and took in his surroundings.

What he saw amazed him—it had been a long time since he had been in a home where simple living took place.

The interior of the cabin contained a clean, spacious living room and dining area, connected by a wide square arch to a kitchen built for a large family. On the far side of the living area he could see the bottom riser of a flight of stairs.

Yet for all its rambling space, the house felt comfortable, and reflected the personality of its residents with its blue-gold-gray sofa, the four easy chairs before an open fireplace, the handmade braided rugs scattered over the gleaming hardwood floor. The rich contrast of snow-white and forest-green pillows and a knitted turquoise throw draped over the sofa like a waterfall brought to mind the simple beauty of a forest glade. He was positive the interior decorator had meant to convey just that relaxing, cozy image.

“You’re okay?” he asked in astonishment as the woman moved in front of him, blocking his view. She was pretty, with a petite build, and had a low husky voice, and eyes as dark and blue as a raven’s wing in the sunlight. A metallic glow burned deep within them, clear indication of determination and stubbornness.

“I’m fine,” she snapped, “but you’re lucky you’re not dead.”



Renewed anger changed Tarry’s voice into one she did not recognize. The man flinched as he wrapped his good arm around her shoulder so she could lift him to his feet. Their faces touched; his black beard scraped her soft skin. She jerked away as if needles had pricked her nerve endings, and she couldn’t wait to be away from him. Hurrying him despite his obvious daze, she marched him to a kitchen chair and shoved him into it.

“Let me look at your shoulder in the light.”

Blackbeard watched her as she examined her makeshift bandage again. The packing had fallen away, but the wound was no longer bleeding freely. She glanced at him, surprised that such a minor wound would cause a man his size to pass out.

“It isn’t too bad. I’ve got to check my dog—just hold this here and I’ll be right back to clean this and put a real bandage over it.” She pushed the used T-shirt into his hand, turning away.

“There’s blood on your side, miss,” the man stated as she moved toward the door.

“Yours, I’m sure,” she tossed back.

The stranger stood up and caught her wrist so quickly she could hardly believe he had moved. Her eyes widened in surprise as she tried to yank her wrist away, but he was too strong for her, holding her securely.

“You’re still angry.” He eyed her curiously, staring right into her soul.

“You’re damn right I’m angry!” Her voice rose as her anger exploded. “I hate you and your stupid gun. You tried to kill Cedar, you murderer!”

Blackbeard squeezed her wrist. Immediately, Tarry saw red. She wanted to scratch his eyes out. All she could think of was getting even with him for destroying her beautiful day and hurting her dog.

“Let me go! The dogs will break down that door if I whistle!”

Blackbeard moved, again so suddenly she didn’t see him do it. One minute she was on her feet, the next she was in his arms being carried towards the couch.

“What...? You idiot! You’re bleeding! Put me down, you fool!” she raged.

His mouth formed a tight, straight line as he ground his teeth. “You’re bleeding much worse than I am, you stupid female. That last bullet hit us both. Quit fighting.”

Tarry wiggled violently in his arms, her fists colliding with both sides of his shoulder, forgetting about his wound.

“You little hellcat!” he bit out as he dropped her onto the floor beside the couch. Breathing heavily, he sank down beside her. “You deserve to bleed to death!”

He pressed the broad palm of one hand against her flat stomach to hold her in place. With the other, he gently touched her where her jacket was ripped. Tarry felt a searing pain shoot through her side.

He said, “Now do you believe me?” showing her the blood on his palm.

“No!” she shouted, disregarding the sudden weakness that overwhelmed her as she struggled and sat up. She struck out at the arms that locked around her torso to prevent her from rising. Wildly, she lifted her hand and hit him a blow to the jaw.

There was a resounding thud, and Blackbeard fell backwards. A dazed expression crossed his faded-denim eyes as he looked into hers.

White-hot pain shot through her arm as tears of weakness filled her eyes. A sob caught in her throat. She had never hit anyone or anything before in her life. Not when her siblings taunted her to madness with their juvenile antics, not when the puppies had ripped her best shirt, not even when Rounder chewed her best tennis shoes and destroyed them. Now, she watched as Blackbeard sat up, lifting a hand to his cheekbone where a red welt was forming. Although he touched it tenderly, he seemed to struggle with a fierce inner passion so intense she was suddenly frightened.

He took an uneven breath as she cowered against the couch, holding her fist to her mouth. A whole minute passed as the silence in the cabin surrounded them. Then, he leaned forward, his arms on either side of her, pinning her against the couch. He peered deeply into her wet eyes.

“I deserved that, I suppose. Now, miss, can we take care of each other’s wounds before we kill one another?”

Tarry dropped her gaze and saw fresh blood on his bandage and a spreading darkness around a ragged tear in her jacket. Swallowing, she closed her eyes, accepting that she, too, had been shot. It made her stomach turn over. Slowly, she nodded.

The man gripped the zipper at her throat. She remained still as he dragged it down and peeled off her coat then carefully pushed up her layered shirts. Cold air on her bare skin made her shiver. She couldn’t bring herself to open her eyes. She held her body rigid as his fingers pressed against the flesh of her side, lifting her long-john top to expose her full braless breasts.



Tyrone sighed as he looked at the abrasion and small hole on her side. “The bullet appears to have slid up your side and

lodged into the soft tissue near your right breast. We were both lucky.”

The woman opened her eyes, and there was in them a sense of wonder, apparently at the obvious sound of relief in his voice.

“Stay still,” he ordered, although his voice was no longer as strong. “I’ll get that washed and bandaged, and then I’ll get you to a doctor and have the bullet taken out.”

Everything was in slow motion now, and she watched as he moved to pick up the first-aid supplies. He watched from the corner of his eye as, biting her lip, she frowned as she peeked at the damage to her chest and side. The flesh was split in an ugly arc from her belly to her right breast. She touched the pale skin beside the raw edge and flinched.



There was no question the wound was real. She had been oblivious to the pain, totally in denial of the injury. She would have remained that way—but he had known. Crazy, she thought as her mind slowly spun from surprise and shock.

He returned and tended to the bloody crease, using an antiseptic wash, carefully sponging up the excess. Then he taped her. When he’d finished, he sank back against the sofa, his long legs spread before him. Tarry noticed that his own bandage was now soaked through, and bright red blood was mixing with the dark hair on his tanned chest.

“Thank you,” she muttered nervously as she slowly sat up.

He ran his fingers along the side of his jaw where the mark of her fist still lingered.

“I’ve got to go out and finish taking care of my animals. The storm is getting worse, and they depend on me. I’ll be back as soon as I can, then I’ll take care of you. Just stay still and press your shirt over the wound.”

She crawled to her feet, buttoning her wool shirt. He didn’t stop her this time, just nodded without opening his eyes.

Taking a fresh jacket from a peg behind the door, she stepped onto the porch. She shivered as she mentally measured the amount of snow that had fallen since the confrontation. She guessed more than an inch of new fall was piled on the doorstep; by midnight, at this rate, it would be close to twelve. Where they

had fallen in the snow and where she had dragged him were quickly filling in.

Rounder greeted her enthusiastically as she crossed the yard, and Cedar limped to her side. Distractedly, she patted them. Cedar would be okay, but she wasn't as sure about herself and the stranger. Who was he? Why was he here? Weak and now very aware of the pain, she shut the barn door with great effort and locked the shed. He was right—they needed medical attention, but there was no way she could leave with no one to see to her animals.

She treated Cedar's wound with antiseptic then put the dogs into their run, locking the gate. The sight of the falling snow sent a chill through her. The storm was blinding now, flakes falling so fast she could barely see the cabin as she turned toward it. The switchbacks leading down the mountain would only be half their problem. Most of the roads would already be impassable. The forty miles to town would be forty miles of hazards.

There was no way to go for help or to call for it—she hadn't had a phone installed this winter, and the forest service radio wouldn't be operating because of the storm. The safest thing to do would be to wait it out. When it was over, they could try for town with the sled—she doubted her unwanted visitor would be in any shape to drive. Until then, it would be foolhardy to attempt it.

But what would the stranger think? Who was this Blackbeard, anyway?

Tarry paused at the door before going inside and turned to peer into the shadows. Darkness came fast here. She closed her eyes, and the image of Blackbeard's face was before her again. She had to find out who he was, and why he was here. Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door...to an empty room.

For a moment, she felt slightly disoriented. Surely, she hadn't been dreaming. The first-aid kit lay closed on the kitchen table. She felt a sharp stab of pain in her side and was reminded her wound was real. Then where was he?

She went into the lighted living room looking for the man, but there was no evidence of him. She was just about to call out when

she heard the sound of water running in the downstairs bathroom. Closing her eyes, she felt a wave of relief. He was here.

She wasn't sure why she felt so relieved. He was still a stranger, and he had attacked her and her dogs. He was not to be trusted, wounded or not. She still hated him, although now less so than before.

Suddenly, she recalled the strength of his arms as he lifted her. He may have suffered a bullet wound to his shoulder, but he was definitely not a weakling, nor a man to be taken lightly. An unfamiliar tension filled her body as she remembered the look in his faded eyes as he had exposed her torso to the cold air. He had been surprised and definitely intrigued by her bare breasts.

To relieve her embarrassment at this very uncharacteristic train of thought, she moved to her gas stove, turned on the burner and filled her teakettle with water. A cup of tea might help her nerves. She needed something.

She didn't hear Blackbeard enter the kitchen. When she turned back from the cupboard, he was standing directly behind her. She gasped, almost dropping the tin of tea. He reacted instantly, grasping and steadying it. He smiled at her. His smile only made Tarry more nervous and acutely aware of herself...and him.

"I...thought hot tea might...it's herbal...if you want coffee, there's instant—or brandy in the icebox," she murmured, feeling awkward and shy and hating that she was babbling.

"In the icebox?" He lifted an eyebrow as a twinkle entered his eyes. "Odd place to keep your stash."

Tarry felt heat come into her face. She didn't have to explain anything to this man. If anyone should be explaining, it should be him.

"Look," he said, seeming to interpret the glow in her eyes, "I know I'm imposing on you, miss, but I was looking for Terry Lee Roessel, the animal trainer. I heard he trains dogs, horses, even goats and chickens for people. I've got to find him. I must have taken a wrong turn in the snowstorm."

Tarry stared at him, then forced a laugh. "I can understand why you're looking for Tarralee. Your approach with animals leaves something to be desired."

The man's eyes became slits at the sarcasm in her voice.

"Look, miss, I know I made a mistake, but I thought those wolves were attacking you. I did the only thing I knew how to do, given the circumstances. I think—"

"You think?" She laughed again, almost hysterically. "You don't have the brains God gave a flea, mister. No one uses a twenty-two on a wolfdog, especially when there are nine others ready to rip your throat out." She turned back to the stove, lifting the boiling teakettle from the burner.

"I said I made a mistake. Look, miss, I'll take off now, if you'll just tell me where I can find Mr. Roessel."

Tarry filled her cup with hot water and placed a chamomile teabag in it before going to the table to sit. "Don't you think it might be advisable to see a doctor first?"

She felt lightheaded herself, and she wondered if it was anger or tension or pain that caused it. She assumed it might be all three.

Blackbeard braced his back against the cabinet as he eyed her narrowly. He twitched his shoulders, and his lips flinched at the movement.

"Do *you* need a doctor?" he asked.

"Most people do after being shot," she said evenly.

He came to the table and sat across from her. His shoulder was drooping, and she knew every time he moved he must hurt, just as she did. He was silent while she took a calculated sip of tea.

"Does your dog need a vet?"

She was surprised he would ask. Although she wished she could make him feel guilty by telling him yes, she couldn't lie.

"No. It was a flesh wound—luckily. Painful, but it will heal quickly. Cedar is still a pup."

Blackbeard nodded. "Look, my name is Tyrone Shields, and you're...?"

Tyrone Shields. That name meant something, but she was blank for a moment before she remembered. He was a director-producer from Hollywood who had made a huge reputation for himself with his controversial films. His reputation for breaking hearts all over the world was equally renowned, as was his cinematic record for excellence and creativity. He had been in a cin-

ema appreciation class at Berkeley with her brother David ten years before. The two men had become fast friends in the college drama club—she recalled David’s rave reviews of Tyrone’s work. She suspected her brother’s enthusiasm was due in part to Tyrone’s having used one of David’s plays for a production they had done on campus.

Shields had gone on to establish his credentials as a writer while he was still in college, and as a man who usually got his way and did exactly what he chose. What on earth was he doing here on her mountain, looking for her?

“Your business?” she asked.

“Is no concern of yours,” he replied coolly. “Now, will you tell me where Terry Lee Roessel is or not?”

Tarry lifted her gaze to meet his and smiled slowly at him.

“Can’t you guess?”

Shields’s eyes widened, and his pupils dilated as he reached the obvious conclusion. “You!” His well-shaped mouth was wide open.

“Me.” Tarralee nodded, meeting his gaze steadily as she took another sip of her tea.

He was clearly taken aback. He leaned toward her, then away, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“David must be laughing like a loon about now.” A robust laugh suddenly filled the house. “I played right into his hands. This is wonderful.”

Tarry didn’t see the situation as humorous at all. Her eyes narrowed as he sobered.

“Just what is your business, Mr. Shields?” she asked.

His eyes danced for a moment; then he reached across and picked up her teacup and took a deep sip from it. He made a face and put it down in front of her. “Don’t you use any sugar?”

The man was infuriating.

“If you want tea, the water is hot. The sugar is in the cupboard next to the honey.”

Standing, he took a mug from the shelf. He poured warm liquid over her used teabag then stirred sugar into it—a lot of sugar.

When he returned, he put both elbows on the table and looked straight at her.

“You can’t blame me for being a bit shocked. You looked like a child or an adolescent boy in that oversized parka, you know. Didn’t you get my letters? I’ve written three times over the past eight months. David, who by the way never told me you were a woman, said you received them, but that you hadn’t made up your mind. That’s why I’m here, to help you decide. Of course, I thought I was going to talk to a...man.” He looked at her stained shirt, seeing the sudden flush of embarrassment in her cheeks as she remembered what he had seen as he took care of her injury. “I’ll get him for this,” he muttered with a wry grin before taking a drink of his tea.

Tarralee recalled receiving those letters when he mentioned them. He wanted to hire her wolfdogs and her for a film he was making. She hadn’t taken the offer seriously. She couldn’t imagine leaving her mountain or the other animals to go running off to LA to do a movie on wolfdogs. She wasn’t, in fact, about to do it, and had told David as much more than a month ago, forgetting about it immediately thereafter. It seemed her brother hadn’t passed her message along.

“Look, Terry...” He read the stubborn lift of her chin and said, “You don’t mind if I call you Terry, do you? After what’s happened today, I can’t be formal with you. I know we got off to a rocky start, but this film is important. I need you, and your expertise. According to your brother, no one else has your knowledge of and experience with wolf-crossbreeds. It will be a first-class piece of work, I promise.”

His overwhelming confidence and casual manner annoyed Tarry. Here was a man who had shot her prize pup, wounded himself and her, and all he could think of was his film. He was as crazy as...

She stopped. As crazy as she was. Hadn’t she rushed straight to Cedar after being shot herself, so focused on the pup she wasn’t even aware of her own injury? It was just a normal reaction, instinct. The things you care most about are the priorities in a crisis. But that really didn’t matter. The man expected to get his way, and

she wasn't about to give in to him. He had hurt her and the ones she loved. There was no way she could ever work with him.

She stood up. Her head felt light, but she ignored it. "I'm not interested, Mr. Shields. I hope you find what you're looking for somewhere else. Drive carefully going down the mountain. Good day."

She was at the stairs before he caught her, wrapping his hand around her upper arm. His jaw tightened in frustration.

"Miss Roessel, what is it you want? I'm willing to negotiate."

She looked at his hand on her arm then back into his eyes. "But I'm not, Mr. Shields. As a matter of fact, I think you should be more concerned about whether I want to sue you than whether my wolfdogs will be the performers in your next project."

He dropped his hand. "Sue?" He was obviously startled.

"Yes, sue. You arrived uninvited today, tried to kill one, or all, of my animals and instead shot me. I know my wound isn't that bad, but a good lawyer—"

"Now, hold on, lady," he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I thought those dogs were attacking you. They looked lethal, and it didn't appear you could control them. I fired the first shot into the air to distract them, and the second and third only happened because you attacked me." His eyes turned a dark stormy blue as he stared at her. "You can't sue me because you haven't got a case, and you know it. For heaven sakes, Terry, you don't want to go to court any more than I do. Join me in this project, and I'll sign over half the profits to you."

Tarralee's rage flamed. Was that all the man could think of, his project and the profits to be made? Did he think she was that shallow, or hard up? Blood thundered in her ears as she fought down outrage.

"Mr. Shields, I am not interested. If you know what is good for you, you'll leave. Now!"



Tyrone was genuinely puzzled by her manner. He had never met a woman like her. She was so tiny, and yet when she spoke there was such command in her voice and her presence it made him feel small.

It didn't help that she was right about his having invaded her territory uninvited and, clearly, unwanted. He would get David back for this, no doubt about it. Still, he was here, and his project was important enough he wasn't prepared to leave till he'd gotten her to agree to help with it. On the other hand, tomorrow was another day. She might be more willing to listen after she'd had a chance to cool off.

He stepped back, taking in her bloodstained shirt, her narrow waist and slender hips, her small booted feet. He surveyed her short-chopped brown hair, the stubborn angle of her chin and her glowing eyes. Nope, she wasn't in any mood to listen to him pitch a movie.

He turned, picking up his bloody jacket from the chair where he had discarded it earlier.

"I really am sorry about your dog, Miss Roessel, and about..." He gestured at her side. His other hand rested on the door handle. "I never meant to hurt you or the pup. I..."

She was hanging onto the stair rail now, her knuckles white; and he noticed the paleness of her face and the pain lines around her mouth.

"You need to get to a hospital. I'm not leaving unless you come with me."



Tarralee suddenly remembered the storm blowing up outside. She looked out the window and saw a white fury that would blind anyone who ventured into it. She had lived her whole life on this mountain, and she knew better than to send anyone off in a storm like the one battering the mountain now. How could she have forgotten?

"It's too dangerous." She spoke in a distracted way, nodding at the window. "You can stay until the storm is over, Mr. Shields. There are plenty of rooms you can use. But I don't want to hear about your project. I'm going upstairs to clean up and rest."

She turned, meaning to leave him there and exit with offended dignity. Instead, her field of vision began to narrow as she felt her legs buckle; and she grabbed at the rail, but it was too late. Reaction, pain, blood loss and stress worked their wills on her, and she sank to her knees.

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