

Halfway down the run, Hagan lost sight of Maddie in the trees. She was indeed faster than him, and her smaller size gave her an advantage in the narrow chutes and tightly spaced trees. He was sorry he wasn't able to catch up with her, but would concede defeat graciously when they met up again.

Maybe it was just as well she'd outpaced him. He could do with some time alone to cool off. Following her up the trail, he'd had the enticing view of her curvy backside in front of him for the better part of a half hour. The sight had made it impossible for him to focus on anything else. He was definitely aroused, almost oblivious to the arduous climb as his mind conjured erotic fantasies involving a naked Maddie, a very large bed, and the time to explore each other properly. He'd proposed the race as a physical outlet and a distraction.

Of all the women who had practically thrown themselves at him, why would this one -- who had at times seemed to barely tolerate his presence -- been the one to catch him off guard? She was as different from the pretty flirts and sexy sirens he usually dated as he could imagine.

Which was part of the problem. He gravitated to easy, uncomplicated women because they posed no danger of engaging deeper emotions. But a woman like Maddie, one who aroused not only his physical passion, but his curiosity and his protective instincts, was definitely dangerous to his well-being.

He'd felt the danger there in the coffee shop, when he'd told her about his past as a software writer. He'd revealed more about himself to Maddie than he'd told anyone for years. He told himself he'd done it to comfort her. She'd obviously been upset at learning her former competition had achieved a goal Maddie had long sought. He'd understood that feeling and wanted her to know she wasn't alone.

But such confidences made him feel too vulnerable and he'd forced himself to pull back. He liked Maddie and valued her friendship, but he couldn't afford to take things further. He didn't want to venture into the messy territory of more intimate relationships, where the fallout from a single misstep or misjudgment was too much to bear.

He took his time making his way back to the parking area, where the others were packing up and preparing to head out. He stopped beside his truck and began to take off his own skis when Andrea approached him. "Where's Maddie?" she asked.

He looked around, and realized Maddie was not in the group gathered around the cars. "She was ahead of me," he said. "I thought she was already back."

Andrea looked worried. "She's not here. And the last time I saw her, she was with you."

He took his skis from the rack and clicked into the bindings once more, his voice calm, though his heart was pounding. "We'd better look for her." Even someone who was familiar with the area could get lost in the back country. She could ski into a box canyon, or an area of cliffs. She could fall and break a bone, or get trapped in a tree well. His stomach twisted as his mind catalogued the possibilities. He never should have let her ski off by herself that way.

Andrea alerted the others and they soon gathered around Hagan. He supposed as the most experienced in backcountry rescue, both as a patroller and with the local Search and Rescue squad, they looked to him as a leader.

"Zephyr, you and Bryan stay here with the vehicles in case she comes back here," he said. The two snowboarders would have a more difficult time in the varying terrain they'd need to cover. "Do you have whistles?"

"I have one," Bryan said.

"Me too," Zephyr added.

“Signal if she comes back here.” Though in the vast terrain, with all the sound-absorbing snow and trees, it was possible a whistle might not be heard. “If no one responds to the whistle, honk one of the car horns.”

“If that doesn’t work, I can plug in my guitar and turn the amp up loud,” Zephyr said.

“We want an emergency signal, not an avalanche trigger,” Max said.

The searchers set out: Max and Casey with the dogs, Trish with Andrea, and Hagan by himself.

“Maybe you should come with us,” Andrea said. “It would probably be safer.”

“I’ll be all right on my own.”

She looked up at him, her face drawn with worry. “Do you think she’s all right? I mean, she’s had backcountry rescue training, right?”

“She hasn’t been gone that long,” Hagan said. “She will be fine.” But he knew things could turn bad very quickly out here. The backcountry was a fun place to play, but the isolated terrain, below-freezing temperatures and natural hazards could also be deadly.

He headed toward the area where he’d last seen Maddie ski into the trees. He moved quickly, forcing himself to make note of landmarks, to maintain an awareness of his surroundings. The last thing they needed was for him to lose his way also. He silently inventoried the emergency supplies in his pack: extra food and water, first aid supplies, matches and firestarters, whistle and signaling mirror, compass, knife, maps, space blanket. Was Maddie as well-prepared? Even if she was, none of it would make any difference if she was injured.

He forced the thought out of his mind. She was an experienced skier and not the type to panic. She would be all right.

It was after two in the morning and by all rights he should have been exhausted, but adrenaline and nerves lent strength to his muscles. He moved forward with strong, sure strides, until he came to the area where he was sure Maddie had raced ahead of him out of sight.

The moon was still bright, and he studied the snow, searching for a single set of tracks heading away from all the others. He found twin lines in the drifts of powder heading downhill and followed them, growing increasingly worried as he advanced. If these tracks were Maddie’s she was heading away from the parking area, toward a ravine choked with trees.

He forced himself to stop and catch his breath, and drink some water. On a hunch, he pulled out his whistle and blew a sharp blast on it, then listened for a response.

Was it his imagination, or did he hear a faint reply? Was that the wind or three blasts from another whistle? Maddie? Or one of the other searchers?

He blew again, and his heart raced as the reply came again, stronger this time. Moving as quickly as he dared, he skied toward the sound, pausing every hundred yards or so to blow his own whistle and wait for the response.

She was in such a dense stand of trees, he didn’t see her at first. Then he spotted movement and suddenly he recognized her. She was waving both arms at him, and shouting his name.

“Hagan! Thank God you’ve come.” She skied to him and practically fell into his arms.

He held her close, waiting for his heartbeat to slow before he trusted himself to speak. His relief at finding her was like a balloon expanding in his lungs, stealing his breath and leaving him weak. She laid her head on his chest, her arms around him, her shoulders shaking — from cold or from tears?

He pulled back far enough to lift her chin. Ice streaked her cheeks where she'd been crying. "Shhh," he said. "It's all right now. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Only my pride. I can't believe I was so stupid."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know. One minute I was skiing, the next I had no idea where I was. I kept trying to find my way back up to where I started, but I only got more turned around. Then I got into these trees and couldn't see a way out."

"We'll follow my tracks back out. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Just cold." She hugged her arms around her body. "Especially my hands. I can't feel my fingers."

"Let me see."

Reluctantly, she let him take her hands. He stripped off one of her gloves and studied her fingers. They were very white and the skin was hard, almost waxy. "You have frostbite," he said. "We must warm your fingers right away."

"I've been putting them in my pockets as much as I can," she said. "But it's so cold out."

"How are your feet?" he asked. Extremities were the first to freeze.

"I have boot heaters." She indicated the battery operated heaters attached to her boots. "I remembered those, it's my mittens I forgot."

"We have to get your hands warm." He let go of her and unzipped his jacket and began pulling up the fleece shirt and long underwear top he wore.

"What are you doing?" she asked, eyes widening in alarm.

"Put your hands on my stomach," he said. "My body heat will warm your fingers."

She shook her head. "Hagan, my hands are too cold, I -"

"Do it." He grabbed her wrists and forced her hands beneath his shirt.

Her skin was like ice, and he sucked in a sharp breath, but refused to allow her to pull away. After a few seconds, she relaxed, and spread her fingers wide, shaping them to his abdomen.

As the first shock of cold subsided, he was aware of her touching him, of the smallness of her hands, the softness of her skin. The intimacy of their position moved him -- not only the physical closeness, but the emotional vulnerability he felt, as if he'd bared more than his skin to her. He was used to adopting a certain distance with people, even his lovers. But Maddie breached his reserves and touched parts of him he'd kept carefully hidden away for years. The knowledge troubled him, and yet he found himself wanting to be with her more and more, like an adrenaline junky drawn to danger.

She stood with her head bent, not looking at him, but he was aware of her breathing, shallow and rapid like his own. She wore a blue knit hat with a large pom pom on top, and he could just see the curve of her cheek, a lock of her brown hair curling against it. It took everything in him not to pull her to him, to hold her and kiss her and confess how afraid he had been that she had come to some harm.

And beyond that relief were deeper feelings of longing and desire. As they stood in that intimate embrace, surrounded by moon-washed darkness, his earlier arousal returned stronger than ever. Standing so close, she had to be aware of his physical response to her. Was she appalled, or angry?

Or was it possible she wanted him also?

The idea shook him. He didn't want to be this caught up with anyone, to feel so close to losing the careful control he'd perfected all these years. For ten years, he'd been the one in charge of whatever relationship he was in. With Maddie he felt as if he was no longer calling the shots – as if some force outside himself was compelling him to seek her out, pushing aside reason and caution in favor of his need to be with her.

"I...I think my fingers are thawed now," she said. But she made no move to pull away.

He kept one hand on her shoulder, but wrapped the other around her fingers. They were warmer now. "How do they feel?" he asked.

She grimaced. "They hurt. A lot."

He nodded. "That's supposed to be a good sign. It means the nerves aren't damaged."

She slipped from his grasp then, and looked at her reddened fingers. "I guess I'd better have my gloves back." Still she didn't look at him. Just as well. He didn't know how well he could keep his own feelings from showing in his eyes.

She put on her gloves while he zipped his jacket. "Can you follow me out of here?" he asked.

She nodded. "If the alternative is being left behind, I think I could do anything."

"Let's go. When we get up a little closer to the road I'll try signaling to the others."

She looked dismayed. "Is everyone out looking for me?"

"Most of them. Zephyr and Bryan are waiting at the parking area, in case you returned there."

"How humiliating," she moaned. "They'll never let me hear the end of this."

"Anyone can get lost out here," he said. "It's one of the realities of the back country. Even experts have accidents. People who teach avalanche courses have died in avalanches. People go out for one hour, the weather changes and they get off course and we find them three days later. Everyone who lives here knows these things. No one will think less of you for this."

The smile she gave him was like an arrow to his heart. "Thank you," she said. "For saying that. And for finding me. For warming my fingers and...and for everything."

Her eyes shone with such admiration and true affection, he had to look away. That, or pull her to him and kiss her until they both were breathless. Instead, he turned and started out of the bunched trees. "Follow me," he said. "This will all be over soon."

Maddie welcomed the hard work of making the climb back up the slope. It warmed her body and forced her to concentrate on something besides the man ahead of her. Back there in the trees, warming her hands beneath Hagan's shirt, desire had hit her with the force of an avalanche. She'd felt his pulse beneath her fingers, and the ridged line of muscle along his abdomen and had to lock her knees to stay upright.

Along with physical desire came a feeling of profound connection to the man before her. When he'd held her so tightly after he'd first found her, she'd felt so safe. So comforted. And when she'd looked into his eyes she knew that he understood her — her fears and flaws and silly weaknesses — in a way that maybe no one else ever had. The certainty of this knowledge and her powerful physical attraction to him caught her off guard.

On the heels of this came the realization that she was not alone in her response to the situation. Hagan was aroused as well. Was it only the situation that caused this, this unexpected intimacy in the moonlit darkness? Or was it *her* he wanted?

At the top of the ridge, they stopped to rest and Hagan blew a long sharp blast on his whistle. "I hope everyone hears that and comes in," she said. "I hate to think of them out searching for me in this cold."

"They will be glad to know you're all right," he said. He hesitated, then added, "I should have never let you ski off alone that way. I knew you were unfamiliar with the area."

"It's not your fault," she protested. "I was the one who wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"I feel responsible. When I returned to the parking lot and you weren't there..." He shook his head, his expression grim. "I have never felt so sick at heart."

His evident distress moved her. She reached out and squeezed his arm. "It's okay. You found me and I'm fine." She wanted to say more, but she couldn't find words for all she was feeling. And given his penchant for avoiding emotional entanglements, maybe that was just as well. She'd come to value his friendship; no sense ruining that with deeper feelings.

He nodded and stashed the whistle in his pocket. "Let's go. The others will be waiting."

Zephyr and Bryan ran to meet them as they emerged from the trees into the parking area. "Way to go, Hagan!" Zephyr said. "Where was she?"

"I got turned around in a bunch of trees," Maddie said, trying to make light of the situation.

"Hey, Maddie! Are you all right?" Andrea clicked out of her skis and ran to meet them. She threw her arms around Maddie, almost knocking her over.

"I'm fine," Maddie said, laughing.

"We were so worried," Andrea said.

"Hagan, did you find her?" Max and Casey joined the group and Max slapped Hagan on the back.

"I was probably the last to see her, so I had a good idea where to start looking," he said. "She was smart enough to stay in one place and wait for someone to come along."

*Not smart. Terrified,* she thought, but didn't correct him.

"I think maybe Hagan just wanted an excuse to get you off by himself," Max said, ignoring Hagan's scowl.

"I'd have been a basket case, out there in the dark by myself," Casey said, hugging Maddie.

"I'm glad you're okay, Maddie," Bryan said.

"Me too," Zephyr said. "We were all worried about you."

Somehow, in the weeks since she'd arrived in Crested Butte, alone and feeling so isolated, she had become one of them -- part of this family of friends who cared about one another. The competitive racing world didn't foster this kind of closeness, and she wasn't sure yet how to handle it. But their genuine concern touched her more than she could find the words to express. "Thanks, everybody," she said.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Casey asked.

"I'm fine." She stifled a yawn. "Just tired."

"We all are," Hagan said. "Let's go home."

The heater in Andrea's car going full blast, she and Maddie joined the caravan down the pass. "I'll bet you were really glad to see Hagan when he showed up," Andrea said.

"I was." She would have been grateful for anyone coming to her rescue, but Hagan had not only rescued her, he had salvaged her bruised ego. In so many ways he was different from

her, not only because he was a man and she was a woman, but because they had entirely different outlooks on life. He kept his emotions hidden, while she wore hers close to the surface. He avoided intimacy at all costs while she welcomed the newfound closeness to others that her career had previously made difficult to find.

Despite these difference, in those minutes when she had stood with her hands on his stomach she had felt not only deep physical awareness of him, but an awareness that Hagan, of all people, understood her. The revelation surprised her and made her more than a little uneasy.

In those moments, she'd fallen a little in love with him. She hadn't meant for it to happen — hadn't wanted it to happen — but it had been as inevitable as the sunrise.

There was nothing she could do about it, of course. Hagan had made it clear there was no room in his life for long-term love. Her feelings for him would have to be her secret. Something she would consider with longing and regret.

One more dream that would never come true.