

Chapter 1

What the hell? A crack split the air and snow exploded up in clouds of white powder not two feet from her. Then another. And another. This one nicked the front edge of the snowboard. She couldn't turn around to see who was shooting. All she could do was keep her board aimed down the mountain. Using her heel and toes and the angle of her shoulders to direct her movement, she traveled in a zigzag pattern.

Heart beating so fast she felt the rhythm of it drumming in her head. She was sweating. She had to get down the trail, back to the lodge where there were people. It being dusk, she was mostly alone on the mountain. Or at least she had been. Bending her knees a little more, she leaned forward to pick up speed.

Who was shooting at her? Were they shooting at her? Why wasn't she carrying her weapon? *Damn it! Would she never learn?* Another crack split the air, blowing white powder in her face, blurring her vision. "Pfft. . .pfft." She spit out the snow she'd inhaled.

"Yow!" she screeched and reached behind her where she felt a sharp pain and heat radiating from her thigh. Even though her extremities were numb from the winter weather, it hurt. She couldn't believe it. Someone shot her in the thigh. *Why?*

Lights! She saw more lights. Her winter retreat was just ahead. She was going to make it. Safety was just over the next peak. “Come on, you can do it,” she cheered and then cringed when she used her legs to steer her faster.

At the crest of the bunny hill, she took a deep breath, leaned further into her stance and – Another blast came from behind her. This one shoved her over the ridge. The toe of her boot caught the edge and there was no stopping her fall.

Face first in the snow, she tumbled down the mountain, swearing like a sailor until she hit the plateau. Thanks to her recent snowboarding lessons, she was stepping out of her bindings and releasing the safety strap around her ankle in a split second. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she tried to get to her feet using the patented style the cute instructor taught her. She couldn’t do it.

“Fine,” she muttered. She’d get up another way. Flipping over to her knees to push herself up, she halted when she saw the red stain in the pristine snow underneath her hands. She hated the sight of blood. Especially her own. And there was a lot of it.

Forget about the blood. Get your ass up and get to the house. Now!

She moved. She ran as fast as she could despite the weight and awkwardness of snowboarding boots. Despite blinding spikes of pain shooting through her leg. Breathing through her nose, she scrambled across the flat terrain trying to keep out of sight. Not really possible when the bright pink snowsuit she wore practically screamed, “See me. Hey, I’m over here.” That was the last time she’d listen to the sales clerk with the beautiful blue eyes who told her very few people could pull off the vibrant colors, but she had a bod that could. “Ha!”

Crack! Crack!

“Weave. Bob and weave.” What was she doing, boxing? She couldn’t do it anyway. Her leg gave out and she hit the hard-packed snow on one knee. “Oh, please,” she prayed and crawled. Get to the door. Only a few more feet. Heart pounding, blood pulsing from her thigh, she crawled. Finally, she reached the door. When she turned the handle it resisted. Locked. The damn door was locked. Of course it was.

“Come on,” she begged. Fumbling with her gloves, she managed to get one off. With numb, shaky fingers, she stuck her hand in her pocket in search of the key. It wasn’t there. It had to be there. She felt inside again. Nothing. She tried every pocket. Nothing. Where else would it be? Peering over her shoulder at the abandoned snowboard ten feet away, she realized where the misplaced key was. Her heart sank.

She was going to die. She was going to die and she didn’t know why or who. In defeat, her body slumped against the door. Frozen like a Popsicle and bleeding, she was going to die. Closing tear-stained eyes, her heart and body gave up. Her butt hit cold concrete and her head hit hard wood.

The next thing she knew, she was propelled backwards as the door swung open from the inside. Her head hit, made contact with the ceramic tile floor with a thud.

“Ow.”

Staring up into two pools of liquid amber, she wondered how someone with the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen could be a killer.

As her eyelids drifted shut, she knew she would never know.
