

[Holly Price] followed [her date], but stopped a cautious two feet from the dropoff. Below her, Alex scrambled toward the mushiest patch of ground she'd seen since moving back to godforsaken eastern Washington. "Why are we going down there?"

"That's where the bird went." His teeth gleamed against his tanned skin. "Stay close."

Feet sliding on the rocky soil, he charged after his bird dog and vanished into the tangled foliage lining the Snake River.

Well, damn.

When he'd invited her to Big Flats, she'd heard "hike," while he meant "hunt." Given the glorious fall day—sunshine and a blue sky that went on forever—she'd expected another picnic. Two weeks ago, Alex had taken her to a mountain meadow. A sandwich and a bottle of wine later, they'd kissed like teenagers and she'd thought about throwing both caution and her clothes to the wind.

Today, he'd morphed into some kind of Neanderthal maniac—me mighty hunter, you Jane. It was a mixed metaphor, but a slow burn started in her belly. She'd tried to be a good sport, but this was ridiculous.

She checked the land behind her—a dry plain dotted with stunted sagebrush, cheatgrass, and jumbled rocks—as if a giant "exit here" sign might appear.

No such luck.

She could probably find the parking lot.

Maybe.

Ditching Alex held a huge appeal, but the thought of quitting chafed as badly as the grit in her boot.

Alrighty.

Hands spread for balance, she eased down the goat trail to the boggy tract. She dodged some blackberry canes and stepped onto a line of broken reeds that marked the path through the underbrush.

Alex had been so proud of the first rooster he'd shot that morning. He'd held it out, expecting praise the way her mother's cat, Fonzie, did when he laid something brown, furry, and dead at her feet. All Holly had seen was the beauty of the mottled breast feathers, the brilliant bands of neck color, and the lifeless flop of the pheasant's head.

She sighed, resigned. Chasing birds and shooting at them didn't even register on her Fun Things To Do list. She and Alex really didn't have much in common. Maybe she shouldn't keep dating him.

Even if he was fun.

When he wasn't playing with guns.

She shoved further into the thicket and followed the faint trail of bent stalks. Getting lost was so not on her agenda. She never had trouble with directions in the city, but out here she couldn't tell one bush from another.

The trail split, the narrow ribbons churned to muck by hunters' boots. She glanced behind her. She didn't have any breadcrumbs to mark the way back to the cliff.

"Alex?"

Only vague thrashing sounds answered her.

Okay, she could figure this out. The left-hand side looked slightly more trampled, so she pushed past the leaning cattails. Willows, canes, and some kind of bushes towered overhead, crowding the

boggy track. Soft mud sucked at her boots. The air stank of rotting vegetation and gulls squabbled in the distance. A dozen yards later, the trail divided again.

She peered forward and behind. "Alex," she called, louder this time. "Where are you?"

She might be the commitment-phobe in this relationship, but surely Alex wouldn't leave her out here. Everywhere she looked, dangling leaves and dried canes blocked her path.

She edged past a mushy spot. A harsher tang that reminded her of the dead fish they'd passed earlier grew stronger with each step. Nose covered with her hand, she rehearsed choice phrases to unleash on Alex when she finally found him, starting with a sarcastic, "Thanks for your concern," before descending rapidly to "asshole."

Something big rustled in the dense undergrowth behind her. Heart pounding, she spun around and peered into the thicket. They had coyotes out here. And drug grower/dealer guys. The only person they'd seen between the gravel parking area and this jungle was an Aryan Nation skinhead dude. Her heart stutter stepped. Oh, crap. What if this was his territory?

The noise from something plunging through the brush grew louder, closer. Blindly, she turned and crashed through the tangled foliage.

The rushes ended at a mound of dirt. She staggered into the clearing, her gaze zeroing in on Alex. Leaning over something on the ground, he tugged at Duke's collar. The dog struggled, twisting his body in a muscular objection.

"Alex. Thank God." Her knees felt weaker than she wanted to admit. "I heard something in the bushes back there."

"Probably a deer. Stay back." He wrestled the dog to the side.

His brusque tone shattered her mini-panic.

*Well, don't I feel silly.*

A quick glance around registered the details. A drooping cottonwood canopied the clearing. Sunlit water lapped at the muddy shore. Gulls whirled overhead in a protesting flurry, lingering in a swirling complaint of dirty white feathers. The clearing looked like a teenagers' party spot. Tattered food wrappers and empty beer bottles littered the ground. Filthy, torn clothing formed a soggy heap at the water's edge.

The wind gusted off the inlet, carrying a stench across the clearing.

"Phew." As bad as it smelled, she wondered if a dead fish was caught in the trash. A few birds remained near the river, their wings raised high, voices screeching defiance.

The pile of clothes had female-shaped contours. Eyes narrowed, Holly gave it a closer look. A pale, mud-streaked foot extended toward her. "Is that a woman?"