

# ONE

Twenty-four-year-old Lucy Kincaid had certainly needed a break, but skiing hadn't turned out to be quite as much fun as her brother Patrick had promised. In fact, Lucy had spent more time *in* the snow than *on* the snow. Snowsuit notwithstanding, she was cold, wet, and miserable.

"I told you I didn't know how to ski." Lucy shivered in the passenger seat of Patrick's truck. She put her hands directly in front of the heater vent.

"You just need more practice. We'll try again tomorrow."

"No."

"Wimp."

"Is it wimpy to not want to freeze my ass off?"

For just a second, Patrick took his eyes off the curving mountain road. "Since when have you been a quitter?"

"It happened the thousandth time I hit the snow."

Patrick laughed. "You weren't all that bad."

"It's no fun to fail."

"You're just cranky because everything usually comes so easy to you."

“Not true,” Lucy protested, though she wondered if her brother was right.

Patrick grinned.

“You think this is funny?” she asked.

“I think you’re scared.”

“I’m *not* scared.”

“Are too.”

“God, you’re a brat.”

Lucy stared out the passenger window as they carefully made their way back down to the lodge where they were staying for the four-day weekend. The winding mountain road was treacherous in parts, and the increasing wind coupled with the falling snow didn’t help. She found it strange that less than two hours ago, they were skiing under bright blue skies dotted with white clouds, but during the thirty minutes they’d sat at the coffee shop at the base of the ski lifts the sky had darkened, as if a gray, fluffy blanket had been laid over the mountains. The snow flurries had begun blowing almost as soon as Patrick started the ignition.

“I’m glad we didn’t take the snowmobiles this morning,” Lucy said. “We’d be coming back in this.”

“We’re almost there.” Patrick’s expression had grown from light to concerned as he slowed and kicked the SUV into four-wheel drive.

The drive to the Delarosa Mountain Retreat yesterday afternoon had been lovely, with striking scenery and crisp fresh air. Lucy loved the outdoors, though she preferred it at least forty degrees warmer. Now, unfamiliar with the treacherous road, she was as tense as Patrick, and wondering why the weather report had told them a “mild” storm system would be passing overnight, when it was four in the afternoon

and this was no mild storm. With every passing minute the snow increased, and Lucy suspected a blizzard would be in full force before sundown.

She trusted Patrick to get them safely back to the lodge and hoped that though fierce right now, the storm would quickly pass.

She closed her eyes, considering Patrick's comments about how she didn't take failure well. While she was in great shape from running and swimming, being fit didn't seem to matter when she couldn't find her balance on those damn skis. She was more than a little irritated that she'd failed her first day skiing because anything athletic usually came easily to her. In fact, most things came easier to her than to others. She studied in school, but never as much as her peers. She'd been an honors student, received two bachelor's degrees and a master's from Georgetown, and spoke four languages fluently. And because her mother had nearly drowned when she escaped Cuba, Rosa Kincaid made sure every one of her seven children could swim. Lucy ended up being on the swim team in high school and college and had been scouted for the Olympics, but she couldn't commit the time and energy such an opportunity required. After she'd been attacked on the day of her high school graduation, her priorities had changed dramatically.

Lucy came from a military and law enforcement family. Her father was a retired army colonel; her oldest brother, Jack, was also retired army. She had a cop for a sister, a private investigator brother, and another brother who was a forensic psychiatrist. They'd all married into law enforcement in one way or another. Patrick was a former e-crimes cop, and now worked

for a private security company with Jack. Joining the FBI seemed not only natural, but what Lucy was supposed to do. She had everything planned—she would submit her application this summer. It could take up to a year to go through the testing and review process. In the meantime, she had plenty of work with her new D.C. medical examiner’s internship and volunteering at a victims’ rights group.

She opened her eyes to see if the landscape had changed. The snow continued to stream down at a forty-five-degree angle, the wind rocking the sturdy truck.

It didn’t look as though they’d get another opportunity to ski this weekend. Secretly she was pleased. She didn’t like being so cold her teeth chattered, though at the same time she wanted a second chance. She didn’t want to return home a failure at the one new thing she tried and didn’t get immediately.

A bright green flash to her right, up the mountain-side, caught Lucy’s eye. She leaned forward and immediately recognized that a person was rolling rapidly down the steep, tree-dotted slope. As she said, “Patrick! Someone’s in trouble!” she saw the tumbling figure smash into one of the trees. The person grabbed the trunk and tried to stand, but that only sent him falling again, trailing a streak of pink behind him.

“I see him.” Patrick stopped the truck as quickly as he dared on the icy road. He turned on his emergency lights and they both got out of the car. The icy, damp air hit Lucy’s lungs before it registered on her skin. She trudged to the back of the SUV and grabbed the first aid kit, then followed her brother, fighting the wind-driven snow.

Above them, the man grabbed at a sapling, caught it, and stopped. He was still twenty feet from the road.

“That’s Steve,” Lucy said, recognizing the lodge owner’s twenty-year-old son now that they were closer. It seemed to be getting darker by the second, the blinking lights in the front and rear of the car turning the snow alternately red and yellow.

Patrick called out, “Lie on your back and slide!”

At first Lucy didn’t think Steve had heard, but then he turned around and lay back. The snow was stained red where his head had rested. She couldn’t see an injury, but as she watched, blood seeped from his scalp.

“Let go!” Patrick commanded.

Steve complied and slid down until he hit the slush on the roadside. He tried to stand, but stumbled and fell, unmoving.

Patrick reached him first. “Lucy, get the first aid kit—it’s in the back.”

“Got it.” She knelt next to Steve and unlatched the red emergency kit.

“What happened?” Patrick asked Steve, brushing the snow from his face.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“We saw you hit your head on that tree up there. Lie still a minute.” Patrick began inspecting the young man’s body for breaks. “Tell me if it hurts anywhere.”

The cold could send him into shock, especially if he had internal damage. Lucy wanted to get Steve inside as quickly as possible, but they had to make sure moving him wouldn’t make any injuries worse.

“I’m fine,” Steve repeated.

“Can you move your legs and arms?”

“It’s just my head.”

Lucy handed a thick gauze bandage to Patrick, who pressed it on Steve’s still-bleeding wound. “Head injuries can be serious,” Patrick said. “You need to lie still for a moment. I’ll tape this up, then we’ll get you in the truck.”

Lucy handed Patrick pieces of tape and he affixed the bandage. Steve didn’t protest. Other than the gash on his head from hitting the tree, he had only a couple of minor scratches on his face. His body was well protected with a GORE-TEX jacket and pants over layers of clothing.

“I’m freezing my ass off,” Steve said. “Let me up.”

Patrick helped Steve sit up, watching his eyes carefully. “Just hold it right here for a minute. Are you dizzy?”

“I was just stupid.”

“What were you doing going up that slope?” Lucy said. “It’s too steep.”

“I didn’t walk up the slope,” he said, as if she were an idiot for asking. “I slipped at the top.”

“So you decided to take the fastest way down to the road?” Patrick joked, helping Steve to his feet.

“Ha-ha.” Steve rolled his eyes, trying to pretend he wasn’t in pain, but his hand clutched his stomach.

Lucy said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he snapped. “Are you going to give me a ride or do I have to walk?”

Patrick helped Steve to the truck, and Lucy put the supplies back. She made sure the heater was at maximum, and handed Steve a blanket while Patrick started back down the mountain.

“I don’t need it,” he said.

“Humor me.” Lucy smiled. Steve probably felt stupid and clumsy, which contributed to his foul attitude. He grumbled, but took the blanket and closed his eyes.

They’d met Steve briefly yesterday afternoon when they first arrived at the Delarosa Mountain Retreat. He was young, didn’t talk much, and seemed conscientious in his considerable duties running the lodge. It didn’t seem likely that he’d make a dumb mistake like getting too close to an unstable ledge.

“Steve,” Lucy said, “what were you doing up there?”

“I was coming back from inspecting our outlying cabins—we close them in the winter—and checking for animal tracks. We have been having some problems with four-legged predators, and I wanted to make sure they hadn’t returned. I knew the storm was going to get bad as soon as the sky turned, so I took a shortcut. Stupid.”

“Why didn’t you take a snowmobile?” Patrick asked.

“They were all out when I left, and I can’t get to two of the cabins with my truck. I do this all the time,” he said defensively. “I just lost my balance. And my favorite skis.”

He didn’t open his eyes, and Lucy couldn’t tell if he was telling the truth.

She said, “I checked the weather report this morning. They said light snowfall overnight, clear tomorrow. I can’t believe they were so wrong.”

Steve laughed once. “Weather systems change often, especially in the winter. I’ve lived here my entire life

and when I saw the report this morning, I knew the system was going to shift as soon as the wind shifted. Weather reports are more reliable now with satellites and historical data all computerized, but minor changes in one location can have a chain effect, especially in the mountains.”

“How long do you think it’ll last?” Patrick asked.

Steve looked out the window. “I think we’re in for the weekend.”

“What?” Lucy exclaimed.

“We can get you off the mountain if you want, but tonight is going to be a blizzard and I don’t advise it.”

“I’m not going anywhere tonight,” Lucy said.

Patrick grinned. “What did you do, Luce? Send a prayer up for a blizzard to get you out of learning to ski?”

“On the contrary, I decided that I was going to learn how to ski if it was the last thing I did—just to prove to you that I’m not scared of failure.”

“I shouldn’t have said scared. You’re not scared of failure, you’re just pissed off. You don’t like it when you can’t do something your first time out. And you just said *learn how to ski*, meaning you have no intention of failing.”

“Why would I try if I expected to fail?”

“Indeed. I rest my case.”

Lucy was confused and sighed heavily. “Brothers.”

Patrick drove across the pressed gravel road that was now covered with a thick layer of snow, but the lights lining the lodge’s entrance helped guide him to the barn, which had been converted into a large garage. Steve jumped out of the truck and opened the barn doors. Patrick drove in and parked where he

had earlier, next to the Delarosa truck. He got out and helped Steve close the doors against the fierce wind.

“I need to gather up supplies and check the generators,” Steve said. “You should get inside before the storm gets worse.”

“With that bump on your head, you shouldn’t be out walking around,” Lucy said.

“I don’t have a choice. I’m not risking damage because I slacked off.”

“I’ll help you,” Patrick said.

“I don’t need any help.”

“Then I’ll tell your stepmother that you whacked your head. Based on her mother-hen attitude, I don’t think she’ll let you leave your room.”

“What do you care?” he asked petulantly.

“I’ve been the recipient of a nasty head injury,” Patrick said. “I know how unpredictable they are.”

Lucy didn’t say anything. Her brother had been in a coma, thanks to the man who had kidnapped her nearly six years ago. She still felt a pang of guilt that Patrick had been so severely injured while trying to rescue her. She thanked God every day that he was alive, breathing, and awake. Since his recovery, they’d grown much closer than they’d been growing up. Their ten-year age difference had been huge when she was ten and Patrick was twenty; now, at twenty-four and thirty-four, it didn’t matter much.

“Fine,” Steve said, “if you promise to not say anything to Grace. She’s a worrywart.”

“Promise.”

Lucy didn’t think that was a good idea, and she was surprised that Patrick agreed to it.

“It might be kind of hard to hide that bandage,” Lucy said.

“I’ll take care of it. We need to get this done before full dark.”

“I’m dressed for it,” Patrick said. He nodded to Lucy with a look that said he’d keep an eye on Steve, and she felt marginally better heading inside to the lodge.

“I have plenty of extra snowshoes,” Steve said. “Lucy, stick to the path—there is ground lighting that shouldn’t be buried by the snow yet. It’ll land you right at the porch.” He handed her a pair of snowshoes.

“I’ve never walked in these.”

“It’s not hard, and if you go out in those boots you’ll sink into the snow and it’ll take you longer to get to the house.”

She strapped on the snowshoes and left the barn. Steve was right, it wasn’t difficult; she just had to lift her feet up completely and take wide, deliberate steps. She could see the house only fifty yards away, though visibility was definitely worsening. The wind was at her side, wanting to knock her over, but she kept an even pace.

By the time she reached the porch several minutes later, she was winded from the exertion, but exhilarated.

The lodge was a larger replica of the Ponderosa, the home of the Cartwrights of *Bonanza* fame. But the main floor was eight stairs up from the walk, and Lucy had to take the snowshoes off to climb the stairs. She opened the door, the wonderful aroma of simmering

stew reminding her that she was starving. Falling down a lot apparently worked up a huge appetite.

The interior, while bigger than the Cartwrights' fictional home, was decorated in the same Gold Rush-era style with simple wood furniture and old rugs. Clean and polished, there were no contemporary touches aside from electricity and indoor plumbing. The Delarosa Mountain Retreat was technology free: no television, no computers, no cell-phone reception.

Lucy wasn't so sure how she felt about that, but they'd be here for just three days. Maybe it was time to unplug, and really, what was a few days? They'd be out of here no later than noon on Monday. In fact, only twenty minutes down the mountain there was a ridge where they'd noted they had cell-phone reception, and fifteen minutes farther there was the small town of Kit Carson, with a restaurant, grocery, and gas station, plus a few dozen residents. Not that Lucy was planning on going to any of them and pleading like an addict, "*Please, can I log on to the Internet for just five minutes? I'll pay you.*"

Lucy started up the stairs to her room when Grace Delarosa, Steve's stepmother, stepped into the foyer. Her face fell when she saw Lucy. "I thought you were Steve. He was supposed to be back by now."

"He and Patrick went to bring in supplies and check the generators."

"Was he okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't been himself lately. I'm worried about his health. He's so much like his father, doesn't want to go to the doctor. But I finally convinced him because he was getting dizzy so often, and while they couldn't find

anything wrong, when the doctor wanted to do more tests, he refused.”

Lucy thought about Steve’s tumble down the mountain. She bit back the truth, and said, “Patrick will keep an eye on him.”

Grace smiled tightly. “Thank you. We’re having dinner early. Appetizers are already in the dining room.”

“Great, I’ll change and be right down.”

She started up the stairs and heard Grace say, “What do you want now?”

Lucy glanced over her shoulder, startled, thinking that Grace was speaking to her, but all she saw was Grace turning the corner toward the office.

Lucy’s room was the first on the left at the top of the stairs. Patrick’s was directly across from hers. There were six upstairs guest rooms in the lodge, two larger suites and four single rooms. Earlier, she’d learned that Grace and Steve lived in the small cottage behind the lodge, and Grace’s sister, Beth, had taken the caretaker’s room downstairs, adjacent to the office and kitchen.

Lucy had met the three couples staying at the lodge when she and Patrick first arrived. Alan and Heather Larson were thirty-five-year-old workaholics from the Silicon Valley who’d taken the snowmobiles to town in order to check their email. She’d almost laughed at the time, but now realized she’d been suffering the same technological withdrawal.

Kyle and Angie DeWitt were about Lucy’s age, and according to Beth they spent more time in bed than anywhere else. From their lovey-dovey display at the breakfast table, Lucy wasn’t surprised. She admitted to being a bit jealous of the newlyweds, as well as hopeful.

Jealous that she didn't have a close relationship like they did—she didn't know if she was capable of that, for she certainly had never shown such outward affection for her ex-boyfriend, Cody. And hopeful that maybe there was someone out there for her whom she could love as much as he loved her.

But that was in the future. She wasn't going to look for it. Sometimes she thought her life experiences had jaded her to unconditional love. Or worse, made her incapable of trusting someone enough to love.

She suspected someday she might be in a relationship more like the Larsons'. They obviously liked and respected each other and had a lot in common—work, intelligence, a dry sense of humor; they even looked alike, both tall brunets, nice-looking but plain, wearing almost identical wire-rimmed glasses. Lucy could imagine herself marrying her best friend out of comfort.

*But Cody was your best friend, and you turned down his proposal.*

Or maybe she'd fall in the camp of Trevor Marsh and his wife, Vanessa Russell-Marsh—complete opposites physically and in personality. Breakfast this morning had been interesting with Trevor's boisterous laugh and Vanessa's cool demeanor. While Vanessa was model-beautiful, Trevor was a bit overweight and looked a little like a cherub. She was at least two inches taller than he and they seemed mismatched, though they had an obvious silent communication going on that suggested they'd known each other for a long time. Lucy had liked Trevor's lack of pretension.

If she weren't so hungry, Lucy thought as she

stripped off her damp clothes in exchange for a warmer—and dry—outfit, she would go right to bed. She was physically exhausted. But dinner first.

A scream pierced the silence, a sound so anguished Lucy immediately knew that someone was in pain.

But she feared it was much worse.