

Urban Limit

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Tales From Zell, Inc. TM
Portland, Oregon

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Chapter 13

The snow never stops up here.

Kristi changed to comfy sweats, her equipment and snow-covered outer-wear already hung and warming over grates in the mudroom to dry.

It had to stop snowing sometime. But it wasn't like some big dump truck in the sky emptied its load and moved on. As long as conditions were right - the temperature low enough, the moisture high enough - snow would keep forming and falling. Kristi figured the only real limiting factor was the Pacific Ocean, and that big dump truck wasn't going to be empty any time soon.

Firewood crib, planter, boulder...object by object, their backyard was disappearing into a barren white landscape of unrecognizable shapes. The snowfall had begun beautiful, become awesome, and now it was frightening.

It could go on forever.

The automatic blowers whooshed on again. They kept the doorways clear, one link of an electronic chain that kept the occupants of the Carroll home feeling cozy and safe; *normal*. The walkways were heated, as were the drains beneath them to carry the melted snow away.

They wouldn't be snowed in; if she *had* to get out of the house she could.

But then what? Where would she go from there?

Snow had risen halfway up the first floor windows, and a few feet past those blower-cleared doorways those same coziness-creating blowers had built a snow bunker

that was shoulder high now. She would literally have to climb out.

She could ski or use a Ski Doo, but that soft-whipped topping she stared at now covered boulders, deep holes, throat-high wire fences; it created false ledges at the edge of the road. You could be sailing along a killer snow pack one second, free falling to your death the next.

Even with her skills, a trip to town would be deadly now.

As long as the power was on they were protected and warm inside. They had tons of food, gallons of bottled water if they needed it; extra fuel for the generators if the transmission lines went down. No need to feel trapped; they were sitting smack in the middle of an oasis here.

But one thing they lacked if things did go south was medical help. No emergency room. No big hospital nearby. She did know there was a Fire Station in Cedar, and there were Search and Rescue people like Mark.

But how would they make it up here in a blizzard?

The difficulty of getting out of here, getting out fast if she needed to, hadn't concerned her before. Now that thought wouldn't leave her alone, like a warning light pulsing on that bare edge of things Kristi Carroll, who'd always believed exercise and a balanced diet was all anyone needed to live, didn't know.

She just might have to leave, *to escape*. Because things weren't normal, *she* wasn't normal. She wasn't right.

It wasn't a matter of endorphins, it wasn't daydreams – *she was having feelings she wasn't even sure were hers; seeing things that couldn't possibly be real*.

And her stomach - out of nowhere, her stomach would churn and burn as though it's lining was peeling away, sloughing off like flakes of sun burnt skin, a little more each time it happened. The pain would come and go, and then she'd feel fine.

No, not fine, *numb*.

And their home wasn't right either. The blowers chugged on just the way they were supposed to, the furnace blew warm air through the vents, the lights worked. But it just wasn't right. Except for all the expensive gadgets running on their own, the house was eerily quiet.

The lights are on, but nobody's home. Literally

But Reed and Dad *were* home, Kristi could feel them there, they were just...very quiet.

"Dog?"

Where was she?

From the kitchen she could see the makeup of the snow was changing again. Big, fat flakes replaced by tons of little ones, and they weren't floating softly anymore, they streaked like stars through hyperspace. Eventually it would pack and rise above the windows, little by little blotting away the outside light. The view she had from here was the same one toys get when they're being packed for shipping: all those soft little Styrofoam beads piling up

around them, slowly snuffing out the glow of daylight over their heads. Total darkness was eventual, inevitable. They were being packed inside this house. Packed with snow.

“Reed? Daddy?”

Reed probably had his earbuds set on *destroy*. Dad must be in the studio. But Dog heard all, barked at all, and absolutely had to play with all. Kristi was home and Dog hadn’t bounded up to greet her, hadn’t made any sound at all.

Sadness, exquisite and absolute, it flowed from downstairs, filled the room... packed her in like a toy. Again, the tears flowed, emotion so overwhelming her knees buckled. She dropped to the floor.

“*Help me!*” Mom’s voice again.

Oh, God, no I am not right. I am not right in the head. Mom isn’t here. *But she isn’t far away.*

“Where are you?”

There was no answer. And as if a switch had been flipped, the sadness was gone.

Absolute dread took its place with a single revelation:

The water in the creek is toxic.

Every day I've filled my water bottle with mountain-pure poison. How many brain cells were gone now? How many esophageal cells? How much poison is in my blood? Do I even have red cells anymore? Do I still have a liver?

Stop.

She wasn't like this. She didn't worry, she worked out. She overcame. That's how Kristi was, had always been. She trained, she practiced and she won. She would win this too. She would fight the poison inside her and win.

But she needed help; she needed a doctor.

Then, as quickly as it had come, that feeling of dread vanished.

She didn't need anything. She felt great! She was strong, she was *invincible*. The spring was back in her step as she ran through the house. Kristi flew nearly to the ceiling, swam back down to the floor to plant her feet firmly on the hardwood again, her legs strong and resilient as saplings, her toes digging deep into the mountain drawing strength from its soil. She *was* the mountain. She *was the biggest, baddest thing on this f'ing planet!*

There was no ground below the last few feet of the den, only a drop-off; eighty feet of shear nothing until the rocks below. The ultra-wide, ultra-high den window there gave her a clear view of what was happening to the world north of their house. What had been green forest and blue sky for as far as human eyes could see was a stretch of pointed shapes now, not trees but tombstones leaning into a slate sky. *And so much snow...*

And just as quickly as her mood had changed, the snowfall broke, hesitated, as if the sky itself had taken a deep and healing breath.

Then the white rocks flew; rat-a-tat against the windows.

Even through those expensive double paned windows with their crazy inert gasses, through the walls themselves, she felt the hail strike like machine gun fire, in an all-out assault on their house.

Kristi listened, but now she watched it all from her lofty perch above the canyon...and smiled.

Eventually the white rocks gave way, fewer and fewer now, but the sky hadn't pressed *pause* this time, it had simply added warm water to the mix. Rain gushed, splattered against the windows, and sheeted down them.

Kristi knew exactly what this meant: *the danger ante had been upped*. In half an hour it would be ice, not snow, shrouding the outside world. Moving through the

forest would no longer be death-defying; *it would be death itself.*

She nodded, acutely aware of these new odds.

“Bring it on.”

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