

Snowdance

Teri felt like a fool. Ski clothing generally looked silly, but usually wearing a layer of long johns, a downy vest, bulky ski pants, and a waterproof shell, along with the helmet, goggles, and neck gator, meant that she was skiing, not that she was standing in front of a blue screen waiting for some stranger to come undress her for a commercial.

Make that a *late* stranger. Between the lights, the down, and the Gor-tex, if the guy didn't come soon, she would be a giant puddle of goo his ski boots would get mired in. And melting onto the floor wasn't worth a free season pass to Snowdance.

The door opened and a man clomped into the room. Teri's heart seized with fear. Or maybe with excitement. Possibly with dread. Most likely with all of the above. If only she could see more of him than a prominent nose and serious set of dark scruff. When he came to a stop in front of her, his thin lips twitched.

"Hey." She breathed the word out on a current of uncertainty. This situation didn't exist in any of the advice columns she read on a regular basis. Clearly, Dear Prudence and the like weren't as up on modern mores as they thought.

"Hey, yourself." His voice reminded her of maple syrup on fresh snow, a deep, unexpected treat that melted over her fears and coated the fluttering of her heart.

"Okay, folks." A man stood beside them, clipboard in hand and headset wrapped around his ear. "Undress each other. Make it look real. Go down to the swimsuit. Got it?"

The stranger was taller than she was, though not by much. *Skiers are supposed to be short*, she thought as she eyed him. She wished she could read his expression, but his goggles were dark grey and polarized. The man with the clipboard cleared his throat. She continued to look up at the stranger. What did his hands look like under his gloves? More importantly, what would they feel like on her arms? Not now, when there were several layers between her and him, but later, when he was pulling her long johns off?

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Oh, God. This wasn't worth a season pass. If she didn't eat, she could save the fifteen hundred dollars and that would be a smarter way to get one. Maybe she'd even learn some new recipes for beans and rice. Then his face stretched out into something approximating a smile and she noticed his lips were a lush pink. There was a slight movement behind the lenses of his goggles and she had the distinct impression that he had just winked.

"Got it," she said with more force in her voice than she really felt.

The man with the clipboard nodded and Teri heard his steps echo through the room as he walked away, but she was too busy looking into the emptiness of the stranger's goggles hoping for another wink to watch some guy in a clipboard who had stopped mattering the moment he'd stopped talking.

"And, action," someone called from behind her.

"I'm Zack," the stranger said.

"Teri." She stuck out her hand and his answering smile made her feel warm in a way the layers of clothing had nothing to do with. He took her hand in his, but didn't shake it. Instead he grasped her extended hand with one of his while he raised his other to his mouth, put the tips of his glove between his teeth and pulled.

A slight bead of sweat dripped out from under Teri's helmet and down her neck. The lights shining on them were hot.

Zack was hotter.

She stood, not entirely sure what to do next and hoping her goggles hid her confusion as he transferred her still-gloved hand into his exposed one. When he bared his teeth this time, she was prepared for the bright white against the eight o'clock shadow. The soft curve of his lips against the strong line of his nose. All those features were old hat now.

Then he took her hand in both of his, tucking his finger into the elastic of her glove and peeling the padded, oversized thing off as she stared down, mouth parted in wonder. *Jane Austen*, she thought. *This*

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is all the fuss in all those romance novels when the guy slowly strips the gloves from the girl and the next thing you know they're getting busy in a carriage. I get it.

And she still hadn't seen him without his goggles.

Teri walked her gaze up the zipper line of Zack's ski coat—feeling like she had to push her eyes away from her other hand as it was being bared. Once her eyes locked on his face, she smiled. So far, he had been doing all the work, but she was not going to be the passive girl any longer. This was a game and she was here to play. She pulled her hands free, reached up, and gripped the sides of his goggles. Free of the dark lenses, his eyes were a startling sea green, completely at odds with his dark complexion and hair. She trailed her finger along his rough jawline to the clasp of the helmet at his chin, which clicked under pressure. Then she pulled the helmet off him and tossed it aside.

Only after she heard it hit the cement floor did she remember the cameras and the commercial and that she'd probably cracked goggles that weren't her own. Shocked and a bit embarrassed, her head jerked back to face Zack, whose eyes twinkled with amusement. "It was worth it," he said and her neck went hot in what was surely a blush. "But it's my turn again."

She was both dreading and hoping for the moment when he pulled off her goggles. She wanted to see him without the tinge of the lenses. But she also wanted the little bit of privacy the goggles gave her. Making use of that privacy, her eyes followed his hands as he reached for her face. Instead of pulling at her goggles, his fingers danced along the underside of her chin and he fumbled with the zippers and snaps keeping her cocooned in the slick shell. The snap popped. The zipper rasped. And somehow he managed to both unzip her coat and trail his fingers down her breastbone at the same time. Through layers upon layers of clothing, the sensation of his touch tingled. Goosebumps shot down her arms onto the bare backs of her hands.

Once her coat was unzipped, he placed his hands on her shoulders and his gentleness turned rough. He pushed and shoved at the arms of her coat. With a final yank and one loud breath—whether from

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Zack or from her, she wasn't sure—her coat was in a pile on the floor. Sick of waiting, she unclasped her helmet, ripping it and her goggles off in one hard tug and throwing them on the floor. They were an old pair of goggles anyway. And it was an old helmet.

The sound of her helmet hitting the floor made her smile. The clunk broke whatever had been holding them back, encouraging them to be slow. Their arms twisted around each other as she tried for his coat and he tried for her bottoms. Teri stepped closer, needing better access to the many fasteners designers stuck on ski clothing. She cursed their ingenuity.

And, if she was being honest with herself, she was stepping closer because Zack smelled salty and soapy and piney and like a man who worked hard and played harder and she wanted to be enveloped in that scent. Whoever this stranger was, she wanted his hands on her. His lips on her. The weight on his body pressing into her.

Out of the corner of her eye a cameraman coughed and so Teri limited herself to stepping just a little bit closer.

His jacket fell to the floor, followed by his down vest and her down vest. Somehow they managed to get their ski pants off without tripping, bumping noses, or worse. Even if Teri had teetered a couple times when kicking the pants off, she hadn't fallen down. Zack was either very practiced at letting someone else remove his ski pants or he had the balance of a gymnast, because he didn't waver once.

Then he reached for the hem of her long john top and pulled it up. She was in familiar territory now. A man pulling off a long john top was no different than a man pulling off a T-shirt. Until the elastic around her wrists caught. Both wrists and she had to bend over at the waist so he could pull and pull and pull until her body popped free of the silk.

And suddenly she was standing her bikini top and long john bottoms and laughing and Zack wasn't a stranger anymore.