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Opening extract from **Black Ice**

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CHAPTER ONE

If I died, it wouldn't be from hypothermia.

I decided this as I crammed a goose-down sleeping bag into the back of my Jeep Wrangler and strapped it in, along with five duffels of gear, fleece and wool blankets, silk bag liners, toe warmers, and ground mats. Satisfied nothing was going to fly out on the three-hour drive to Idlewilde, I shut the tailgate and wiped my hands on my cutoffs.

My cell phone blared Rod Stewart crooning, "If you want my body," and I held off answering for a moment so I could belt out the "and you think I'm sexy" part along with Rod. Across the street, Mrs. Pritchard slammed her living room window shut. Honestly, I couldn't let a perfectly good ringtone go to waste.

"Hey, girl," Korbie said, snapping her bubble gum through the phone. "We on schedule or what?"

"Tiny snag. Wrangler's out of room," I said with a dramatic sigh. Korbie and I had been best friends forever, but we acted more like sisters. Teasing was part of the fun. "I got the sleeping bags and gear in, but we're going to have to leave behind one of the duffels: navy with pink handles."

"You leave my bag, and you can kiss my g-ass money good-bye."

"Should've known you'd play the rich-family card."

"If you've got it, flaunt it. Anyway, you should blame all the people getting divorced and hiring my mom. If people could kiss and make up, she'd be out of a job."

"And then you'd have to move. Far as I'm concerned, divorce rocks."

Korbie snickered her amusement. "I just called Bear. He hasn't started packing yet but he swears he's gonna meet us at Idlewilde before dark." Korbie's family owned Idlewilde, a picturesque cabin in Grand Teton National Park, and for the next week, it was as close to civilization as we were going to get. "I told him if I have to clear bats out of the eaves by myself, he can count on a long, chaste spring break," Korbie added.

"I still can't believe your parents are letting you spend spring break with your boyfriend."

"Well—" Korbie began hesitantly.

"I knew it! There is more to this story."

"Calvin is coming along to chaperone."

"What?"

Korbie made a gagging noise. "He's coming home for spring break and my dad is forcing him to tag along. I haven't talked to

Calvin about it, but he's probably pissed. He hates it when my dad tells him what to do. Especially now that he's in college. He's going to be in a horrible mood, and I'm the one who has to put up with it."

I sat on the Jeep's bumper, my knees suddenly feeling made of sand. It hurt to breathe. Just like that, Calvin's ghost was everywhere. I remembered the first time we kissed. During a game of hide-and-seek along the riverbed behind his house, he'd fingered my bra strap and shoved his tongue in my mouth while mosquitoes whined in my ears.

And I'd wasted five pages recording the event ad nauseam in my diary.

"He'll be back in town any minute," Korbie said. "It sucks, right? I mean, you're over him, right?"

"So over him," I said, hoping I sounded blasé.

"I don't want it to be awkward, you know?"

"Please. I haven't thought about your brother in ages." Then I blurted, "What if I keep an eye on you and Bear? Tell your parents we don't need Calvin." The truth was, I wasn't ready to see Calvin. Maybe I could get out of the trip. Fake an illness. But it was my trip. I had worked hard for this. I wasn't going to let Calvin ruin it. He'd ruined too many things already.

"They won't go for it," Korbie said. "He's meeting us at Idlewilde tonight."

"Tonight? What about his gear? He won't have time to pack," I pointed out. "We've been packing for days."

"This is Calvin we're talking about. He's, like, half mountain man. Hold up—Bear is on the other line. I'll call you right back."

I hung up and sprawled in the grass. Breathe in, breathe out. Just when I'd finally moved on, Calvin was back in my life, dragging me into the ring for round two. I could have laughed at the irony of it. He always did have to have the final say, I thought cynically.

Of course he didn't need time to prepare—he'd practically grown up hiking around Idlewild. His gear was probably in his closet, ready at a moment's notice.

I rewound my memory several months, to autumn. Calvin was five weeks into his freshman year at Stanford when he dumped me. Over the phone. On a night when I really needed him to be there for me. I didn't even want to think about it—it hurt too much to remember how that night had played out. How it had ended.

Afterward, taking pity on me, Korbie had uncharacteristically agreed to let me plan our upcoming senior spring break, hoping it would cheer me up. Our two other closest friends, Rachel and Emilie, were going to Hawaii for spring break. Korbie and I had talked about spending our break with them on the beaches of Oahu, but I must have been a glutton for punishment, because I said adios to Hawaii and announced that in six months we would be backpacking the Tetons instead. If Korbie knew why I'd chosen the Tetons, she had the sensitivity not to bring it up.

I'd known Calvin's spring break would overlap ours, just like I'd known how much he loved hiking and camping in the Tetons. I'd hoped that when he heard about our trip, he'd invite himself along. I desperately wanted time with him, and to make him see me differently and regret being stupid enough to give me up.

But after months of not hearing from him, I'd finally gotten the message. He wasn't interested in the trip, because he wasn't interested in me. He didn't want to get back together. I let go of any hope of us and hardened my heart. I was done with Calvin. Now this trip was about me.

I closed my mind to the memory and tried to think through my next steps. Calvin was coming home. After eight months, I was going to see him, and he was going to see me. What would I say? Would it be awkward?

Of course it would be awkward.

I was ashamed that my next thought was so incredibly vain: I wondered if I'd gained any weight since he'd last seen me. I didn't think so. If anything, the running and weight lifting I'd done to prepare for our backpacking expedition had sculpted my legs. I tried to cling to the idea of sexy legs, but it wasn't making me feel any better. Pretty much, I felt like throwing up. I couldn't see Calvin now. I'd thought I'd moved on, but all the pain was surging back, swelling in my chest.

I forced a few more deep breaths, composing myself, and listened to the Wrangler's radio playing in the background. Not a song, but the weather report.

"... two storm systems set to hit southeastern Idaho. By tonight, the chance of rain will rise to ninety percent, with thunderstorms and strong winds possible."

I perched my sunglasses on top of my head and squinted at the blue sky stretching from one horizon to the other. Not a wisp of cloud. Just the same, if rain was coming, I wanted to be on the

road before it hit. Good thing we were leaving Idaho and driving ahead of the storm, into Wyoming.

"Daddy!" I hollered, since the house windows were open.

A moment later he came to the front door. I craned my neck to look at him and put on my best little girl pout. "I need money for gas, Daddy."

"What happened to your allowance?"

"I had to buy stuff for the trip," I explained.

"Hasn't anyone told you money doesn't grow on trees?" he teased, observing me with a patronizing shake of his head.

I jumped up and kissed his cheek. "I really need gas money."

"Of course you do." He opened his wallet with the softest of sighs. He gave me four faded, rumpled twenties. "Don't let the gas tank drop below a quarter full, you hear? Up in the mountains, gas stations start to thin. Nothing worse than getting stranded."

I pocketed the money and smiled angelically. "Better sleep with your cell phone and a tow rope under your pillow, just in case."

"Britt—"

"Only kidding, Daddy," I said, giggling. "I won't get stranded."

I swung into the Wrangler. I'd dropped the top, and the sun had done a fine job of warming my seat. Sitting taller, I checked my reflection in the rearview mirror. By the end of summer, my hair would be as pale as butter. And I'd have added ten new freckles to the ranks. I'd inherited German genes from my father's side. Swedish from my mother's. Chance of sunburn? One hundred percent. Lifting a straw hat off the passenger seat, I squashed it on my head. But dang it all, I was barefoot.

Perfect attire for 7-Eleven.

Ten minutes later, I was in the store, filling a cup with Blue Raspberry Slurpee. I drank some off the top and refilled it. Willie Hennessey, who was working the register, gave me the evil eye.

“Good grief,” he said. “Help yourself, why don’t you?”

“Since you offered,” I said cheerfully, and stuck the straw between my lips once more before refilling.

“I’m supposed to keep law and order in here.”

“Two little sips, Willie. Nobody’s going bankrupt over two sips. When did you become such a crank?”

“Since you started pilfering Slurpee and pretending you can’t operate the gas pump so I have to come out and fill your tank for you. Every time you pull in, I want to kick myself.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t want my hands smelling like gas. And you are particularly good at pumping gas, Willie,” I added with a flattering smile.

“Practice makes perfect,” he muttered.

I padded barefoot through the aisles looking for Twizzlers and Cheez-Its, thinking that if Willie didn’t like pumping my gas he really should get another job, when the front door chimed. I didn’t even hear footsteps before a pair of warm, calloused hands slipped over my eyes from behind.

“Guess who?”

His familiar soapy smell seemed to freeze me. I prayed he couldn’t feel my face heat up under his touch. For the longest moment, I couldn’t find my voice. It seemed to shrink inside me, bouncing painfully down my throat.

"Give me a clue," I said, hoping I sounded bored. Or mildly annoyed. Anything but hurt.

"Short. Fat. Obnoxious overbite." His smooth, teasing voice after all these months. It sounded familiar and foreign at the same time. Feeling him so close made me dizzy from nerves. I was afraid I'd start yelling at him, right here in the 7-Eleven. If I let him get too close, I was afraid I might not yell at him. And I wanted to yell—I'd spent eight months practicing what I'd say and I was ready to let it out.

"In that case, I'll have to go with . . . Calvin Versteeg." I sounded carelessly polite. I was sure of it. And I couldn't think of a bigger relief.

Cal came around me and leaned an elbow on the aisle's endcap. He gave me a wolfish smile. He had nailed the whole devilishly charming thing years ago. I'd been a sucker for it back then, but I was stronger now.

Ignoring his handsome face, I gave him a bored once-over. By the looks of it, he'd let his pillow style his hair this morning. It was longer than I remembered. On the hottest days of track practice, when sweat dripped off the tips, his hair had turned the color of tree bark. The memory made something inside me ache. I shoved aside my nostalgia and eyed Calvin with cool detachment. "What do you want?"

Without asking, he bent my Slurpee straw sideways and helped himself. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Tell me about this camping trip."

I yanked my Slurpee out of his reach. "Backpacking trip." I felt it was important to make the distinction. Anyone could camp. Backpacking required skill and moxie.

“Got everything you need?” he went on.

“And a few wants, too.” I shrugged. “Hey, a girl needs her lip gloss.”

“Let’s be honest. Korbie will never let you leave the cabin. She’s terrified of fresh air. And you can’t say no to her.” He tapped his head wisely. “I know you girls.”

I gave him a look of indignation. “We’re backpacking for one full week. Our route is forty miles long.” So maybe it was a teensy exaggeration. In fact, Korbie had agreed to no more than two miles of hiking per day, and had insisted we hike in circles around Idlewilde, in case we needed quick access to amenities or cable TV. While I’d never truly expected to backpack the entire week, I had planned to leave Korbie and Bear at the cabin for a day and trek off on my own. I wanted to put my training to the test. Obviously now that Calvin was joining us, he was going to find out about our true plans soon enough, but at the moment my biggest priority was impressing him. I was sick of him forever insinuating that he had no reason to take me seriously. I could always deal with any flak he might give me later by insisting that I’d wanted to backpack the whole week and Korbie was holding me back—Calvin wouldn’t find that excuse far-fetched.

“You do know that several of the hiking trails are still covered in snow, right? And the lodges haven’t opened for the season, so people are sparse. Even the Jenny Lake Ranger Station is closed. Your safety is your own responsibility—they don’t guarantee rescue.”

I gazed at him with round eyes. “You don’t say! I’m not going

into this completely in the dark, Calvin," I snapped. "I've got it covered. We'll be fine."

He rubbed his mouth, hiding a smile, his thoughts perfectly clear.

"You really don't think I can do it," I said, trying not to sound stung.

"I just think the two of you will have more fun if you go to Lava Hot Springs. You can soak in the mineral pools."

"I've been training for this trip all year," I argued. "You don't know how hard I've worked, because you haven't been around. You haven't seen me in eight months. I'm not the same girl you left behind. You don't know me anymore."

"Point made," he said, flipping up his palms to show it was an innocent suggestion. "But why Idlewilde? There's nothing to do up there. You and Korbie will be bored after the first night."

I didn't know why Calvin was so set on dissuading me. He loved Idlewilde. And he knew as well as I did that there was plenty to do there. Then it hit me. This wasn't about me or Idlewilde. He didn't want to have to tag along. He didn't want to spend time with me. If he got me to drop the trip, his dad wouldn't force him to join us, and he'd get his spring break back.

Digesting this painful realization, I cleared my throat. "How much are your parents paying you to tag along?"

He made a big deal of looking me over in mock critical evaluation. "Clearly not enough."

So that's how we were going to play this. A little meaningless flirtation here, a little banter there. In my imagination, I took a black marker and drew a big X through Calvin's name.

“Just so we’re clear, I argued against having you come. You and me together again? Talk about uncomfortable.” It had sounded better in my head. Hanging between us now, the words sounded jealous and petty and mean—exactly like an ex-girlfriend would sound. I didn’t want him to know I was still hurting. Not when he was all smiles and winks.

“That so? Well, this chaperone just cut your curfew by an hour,” he jested.

I nodded beyond the store’s plate-glass window toward the four-wheel-drive BMW X5 parked outside. “Yours?” I guessed. “Yet another gift from your parents, or do you actually do more than chase girls at Stanford, such as hold down a respectable job?”

“My job is chasing girls.” An odious grin. “But I wouldn’t call it respectable.”

“No serious girlfriend, then?” I couldn’t bring myself to look at him, but I felt immense pride over my oh-so-casual tone. I told myself I didn’t care about his answer one way or another. In fact, if he’d moved on, it was yet another flashing green light telling me I was free to do the same.

He poked me. “Why? You got a boyfriend?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, right.” He snorted. “Korbie would have told me.”

I stood my ground, arching my eyebrows smugly. “Believe it or not, there are some things Korbie doesn’t tell you.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Who is he?” he asked warily, and I could tell he was thinking about buying my story.

The best way to remedy a lie is not to tell another lie. But I did anyway.

"You don't know him. He's new in town."

He shook his head. "Too convenient. I don't believe you." But his tone suggested he might.

I felt an overpowering urge to prove to him that I had moved on—with or without closure, and in this case, without. And not only that, but that I'd moved on to a much, much better guy. While Calvin was busy being an oily womanizer in California, I was not—I repeat, not—moping around and pining over old photographs of him.

"That's him. See for yourself," I said without thinking.

Calvin's eyes followed my gesture outside to the red Volkswagen Jetta parked at the nearest gas pump. The guy pumping gas into the Jetta was a couple years older than me. His brown hair was cropped, and it showed off the striking symmetry of his face. With the sun at his back, shadows marked the depressions beneath his cheekbones. I couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but I hoped they were brown. For no other reason than that Calvin's were a deep, lush green. The guy had straight, sculpted shoulders that made me think swimmer, and I had never seen him before.

"That guy? Saw him on my way in. Plates are Wyoming." Calvin sounded unconvinced.

"Like I said, new in town."

"He's older than you."

I looked at him meaningfully. "And?"

The door chimed and my fake boyfriend strolled inside. He was even better-looking up close. And his eyes were most definitely

brown—a weathered brown that reminded me of driftwood. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet, and I grabbed Calvin's arm and hauled him behind a shelf stacked with Fig Newtons and Oreos.

"What are we doing?" Calvin asked, staring at me like I'd sprouted two heads.

"I don't want him to see me," I whispered.

"Because he's not really your boyfriend, right?"

"That's not it. It's—"

Where was a third lie when I needed it?

Cal smiled devilishly, and the next thing I knew, he had shaken off my hand and was ambling toward the front counter. I trapped a groan between my teeth and watched, peering between the two top shelves.

"Hey," Calvin said affably to the guy, who wore a buffalo-check flannel shirt, jeans, and hiking boots.

With barely a glance up, the guy tipped his head in acknowledgment.

"I hear you're dating my ex," Calvin said, and there was something undeniably wicked in his tone. He was giving me a taste of my own medicine, and he knew it.

Calvin's remark drew the full attention of the guy. He studied Calvin curiously, and I felt my cheeks grow even hotter.

"You know, your girlfriend," Calvin prodded. "Hiding behind the cookies over there."

He was pointing at me.

I straightened, my head surfacing above the top shelf. I smoothed my shirt and opened my mouth, but there were no words. No words at all.

The guy looked beyond Calvin to me. Our gazes locked briefly, and I mouthed a humiliated *I can explain*. . . . But I couldn't.

Then something unexpected happened. The guy looked squarely at Calvin, and said in an easy, unruffled voice, "Yeah. My girlfriend. Britt."

I flinched. He *knew my name*?

Calvin appeared similarly startled. "Oh. Hey. Sorry, man. I thought—" He stuck out his hand. "I'm Calvin Versteeg," he stammered awkwardly. "Britt's . . . ex."

"Mason."

Mason eyed Calvin's outstretched hand but didn't take it. He placed three twenties on the counter for Willie Hennessey. Then he crossed to me and kissed my cheek. It was a no-frills kiss, but my pulse thrummed just the same. He smiled, and it was a warm, sexy smile. "I see you haven't gotten over your Slurpee addiction, Britt."

Slowly I smiled back. If he was game for this, then so was I. "I saw you pull in, and needed something to cool me off." I fanned myself while gazing up at him adoringly.

His eyes crinkled at the edges. I was pretty sure he was laughing on the inside.

I said, "You should stop by my house later, Mason, because I bought a new lip gloss that could use a test run. . . ."

"Ah. Kissing game?" he said without missing a beat.

I shot a covert glance at Calvin to gauge how he was handling the flirting. Much to my enjoyment, he looked like he'd caught a mouthful of lemon peel.

"You know me—always spicing things up," I returned silkily.

Calvin cleared his throat and folded his arms over his chest. “Shouldn’t you be heading out, Britt? You really should get to the cabin before dark.”

Something undecipherable clouded Mason’s eyes. “Going camping?” he asked me.

“Backpacking,” I corrected. “In Wyoming—the Tetons. I was going to tell you, but . . .” Ack! What possible reason could I come up with for not telling my boyfriend about this trip? So close to pulling this off, and I was going to blow it.

“But it seemed unimportant, since I’m heading out of town too, and we won’t be able to spend the week together anyway,” Mason finished easily.

I met his eyes again. Good-looking, quick on his feet, game for anything—even pretending to be the boyfriend of a girl he’d never met—and a frighteningly good liar. Who was this guy? “Yes, exactly,” I murmured.

Calvin cocked his head at me. “When we were together, did I ever take off for a week without telling you?”

You took off for eight months, I thought snidely. And broke up with me on the most important night of my life. Jesus said forgive, but there’s always room for an exception.

I said to Mason, “By the way, Daddy wants to have you over for dinner next week.”

Calvin made a strangled noise. Once, when he’d brought me home five minutes after curfew, we’d pulled into the driveway to see my dad standing on the porch tapping a golf driver in his palm. He’d marched over and smacked it against Calvin’s black

Ford F-150, leaving a nice round crater. "Next time you bring her home late, I'll aim for the headlights," he'd said. "Don't be stupid enough to need three warnings."

He hadn't meant it, not really. Since I was the baby of the family and the only girl, my dad had a grouchy streak when it came to the boys I dated. But actually, my dad was a lovable old bear. Still, Calvin never broke curfew again.

And never once had he been allowed to come to dinner.

"Tell your dad I could use a few more fly-fishing tips," Mason said, continuing to hold up our charade. Miraculously, he'd also correctly guessed my dad's favorite sport. This entire encounter was starting to feel . . . eerie. "Oh, and one more thing, Britt." He combed his hand through my hair, pushing it off my shoulder. I held perfectly still, his touch freezing my breath inside me. "Be safe. Mountains are dangerous this time of year."

I gawked with amazement at him until he pulled out of the gas station and drove off.

He knew my name. He'd saved my butt. He knew my name.

Granted, it was printed across the chest of my purple orchestra-camp tee, but Calvin hadn't noticed that.

"I thought you were lying," Calvin told me, looking stupefied.

I handed Willie a five for my Slurpee and pocketed the change. "As satisfying as this conversation has been," I told Calvin, "I should probably go do something more productive. Like key that Bimmer of yours. It's too pretty."

"Just like me?" He waggled his brows hopefully.

I filled my cheeks with Slurpee, miming that I intended to

spit it at him. He jumped clear and, to my satisfaction, erased his cocky grin at long last.

“See you tonight at Idlewilde,” Calvin called after me as I pushed out of the store.

By way of answer, I gave him a thumbs-up.

My middle finger would have been too obvious.

As I passed Calvin’s BMW in the parking lot, I noticed the doors were unlocked. I glanced back to make sure he wasn’t watching, then made a split-second decision. Climbing through the passenger door, I knocked his rearview mirror out of alignment, dribbled Slurpee on the floor mats, and stole his vintage CD collection from the glove box. It was a petty thing to do, but it made me feel a smidge better.

I’d give the CDs back tonight—after I’d scratched a few of his favorites.