

SAVING ANDI
St. John Sibling Series: FRIENDS
By Barbara Raffin

CHAPTER ONE

Andi Johanson scanned the snow-covered tree line stretching west from her lakeside cabin. It was something she did at least once a day, usually more. As caretaker of half a dozen seasonal hunting camps, it was her business to keep an eye out for unusual activity.

The thick plume of smoke rising into the blue sky on this windless Valentine's Day, however, didn't alert her. This one she knew the source of. She'd built the fire in the wood stove creating that plume when she'd plowed a wide, neat swath in front of the Jackson family cabin so Kelly Jackson could have her winter wedding with Dane St. John on Angel Point where they fell in love.

Longing pinched at her stomach. Romantic love was something she'd witnessed but never known herself. Hell, she'd experienced little love in any form in her twenty-eight years of life.

Not that she doubted her mother had loved her. And she had loved her baby brother and he'd loved her enough to give his life protecting her, a fact that yet gnawed at her even after two years.

But she still longed for the kind of love binding Kelly and Dane. A love for which a man would give his life and a woman hers, but with an added depth that made them of one mind and one heart. The kind of love Andi had long ago accepted she'd never know.

Still, a tiny smile tugged at her lips as she thought of Kelly and Dane exchanging vows up on Angel Point. She was glad the late winter weather held a hint of spring in the air for Kelly. She liked Kelly, even if she was a *woods cop*. Andi's family had never mixed well with law enforcement of any sort.

But Kelly had always been nice to her in school and, since following her old man's path as a DNR officer, had pretty much turned a blind eye to any poaching Andi did. Or maybe her Department of Natural Resources friend didn't know. Andi was good at covering her tracks—good at not putting Kelly in an awkward position. Besides, she took from the land only what she needed to survive on.

No, that thick, white plume rising from the vicinity of the Jackson camp didn't bother her. But the thin, gray one to the north did. She raised her binoculars to her eyes and zoomed in as tight as their magnification would allow.

There wasn't a vehicle tire or snowmobile track to be seen between the trees leading toward that camp. No surprise. The owners of the camp from which the suspect smoke rose were downstate Michiganders who used the camp twice a year. Autumn deer hunting season and a summer fishing trip.

Even if they'd made an out-of-season trip to their Upper Peninsula camp, they'd have notified her to at least plow the road. They weren't the type to snowshoe the trek from the county road into their camp.

She sighed, tucked the binoculars inside her fleece-lined jacket, checked the secureness of the sidearm holstered to her hip, sat down on the snowmobile she straddled, and fired up the ignition. Giving a sharp whistle to let Tuff Stuff know she was invited along, Andi gunned the sled across the two-lane highway toward the county road, the leggy malamute mix running at her side.

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Andi approached the cabin on snowshoes, having left the sled at the bottom of the nearest hill. Riding in on a noisy sled wasn't the best entrance to make when checking out a break-in, especially if the person or persons having broken into the camp were still on site as the smoke from its chimney

suggested. The northern most of Michigan's state prisons was less than fifty miles away and, though no breakouts had been reported, no sense taking chances.

Tuff Stuff found the intruder's trail first. Blood drops coming from the direction of the bluffs. A light smear even where the intruder had fallen and dragged himself back onto his feet in the knee-deep snow in the woods.

"Doesn't look good," Andi murmured to the dog.

Reason told her she should backtrack home and call in the authorities. Let them handle this. But the last time she'd *called in the authorities*, her older brother wound up in prison and her baby brother dead.

Andi winced. Whether because of that unfortunate turn of events or gut feeling, she didn't want to chance leaving someone possibly bleeding to death to wait out the arrival of *the authorities*.

She crept up to the cabin. The curtains were closed over the windows except for the one in the door where the pane of glass nearest the lock had been broken.

Cardboard had been pressed into the opening and the curtain left askew. It was enough for her to make out in the dim interior a form bundled up in a sleeping bag by the wood stove. Big. Definitely man-sized. And not moving.

"Not good," she muttered to the dog at her side.

She removed her snowshoes, opened her jacket, and unsnapped the holster guard from her pistol. Slowly turning the doorknob, she commanded Tuff to wait. The hinges gave a squeak of protest as she opened the door.

She stilled. The body in the sleeping bag didn't move. She waited a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the interior dimness, just in case the guy on the floor wasn't alone...or maybe what filled out the sleeping bag was simply bait for whoever made this guy bleed and might be tracking him.

But there was no sign of another living soul in that one-room cabin. So she slipped inside, leaving the door ajar. Tuff could be counted on to come to the rescue, as long as whoever threatened Andi didn't know the malamute mix would more likely lick them to death than rip out their throat. Tuff Stuff's sheer size was usually enough to back down any threatening stranger.

Carefully, Andi approached the prone form. Still no movement.

Judging by how thin the smoke plume was rising from the cabin's chimney, it'd been some time since he'd added wood to the stove. Unconscious? Or dead? Andi wasn't sure which she preferred.

But she knew she preferred that hint of a barrel peeking out from the sleeping bag wrapped around the guy on the floor not to be a gun. She closed her fingers around the grip of her sidearm and, keeping herself clear of that protruding barrel should the man holding it be playing possum, she toed the sleeping bag back from the suspicious protrusion.

It was a pistol and it was in the intruder's hand.

Simultaneously, she drew her gun and brought her foot down on his wrist, then swatted the man's gun away with her free hand and called for Tuff. The intruder grunted but barely moved. Tuff Stuff stopped at her side.

"He's in bad shape," she said to the dog, dropping her sidearm back into its holster, removing her foot from the man's wrist, and squatting at his side. Lifting the flap of the bag, she found a bloodstained hole in his shirt low in his side.

She felt his pulse. Weak but steady. That was good.

"It'll take an ambulance twenty minutes to half an hour to get here," she thought aloud, "and that's after I get back to the cabin and call them. Then it'll take them that long again to get through the snow to him."

Andi looked at the dog. "Looks like we best get him out of here ourselves, and the first order of business—make sure he's stopped bleeding."

A first aid kit sat on the kitchen table. Clearly, the guy had tried to patch himself up.

Still, she cut his clothing away from the injury. The gauze he'd taped over his wound bore a small bloodstain. Rather than waste time re-bandaging him, she added another layer of gauze, in the process discovering a bigger hole in his back.

"Exit wound," she muttered, glancing at Tuff, who sat to the far side of the stranger, tongue lolling. "Gunshot for sure. And whoever shot him had some heavy artillery for the bullet to go through him like that. They meant to kill him."

She eased him onto his side for a better look at the exit wound. The gauze on his back was sloppily applied—no surprise—and soaked through with blood. But the wound beneath seemed to have stopped bleeding.

She doused the wound with what remained of the hydrogen peroxide and re-bandaged it. Her intruder groaned and his eyelids fluttered. Damn, he had long lashes.

But dry lips. Well-defined, nicely shaped lips, but dry. He needed hydrating big time.

She stuffed a towel between his back and the blood-soaked sleeping bag, wrapped a heavy blanket around his upper torso, and zippered him into the bag. Strapping him onto the camp toboggan she'd retrieved from the storage shed, she skidded him down the hill to her snowmobile, then dragged him home.

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He'd always pictured angels with blue eyes and blond hair, above which hovered a golden halo. His had dark eyes and was wearing an orange chook pulled down over her ears. Then everything had gone dark again.

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"I should have left him on the toboggan out front and called an ambulance," Andi said to Tuff who stood beside her staring down on the man she'd dragged into her cabin and deposited between her couch and fireplace, toboggan and all. "My back's going to ache tonight."

And I should have my head examined for even considering not calling the authorities about a gunshot intruder who had a pistol on him.

She felt the weight of the handgun she'd zippered into one of her parka pockets and turned to the wall-mounted phone. No cell phone for her. They were unreliable in this neck of the woods anyway...except for folks who could afford the satellite version, which didn't include her.

Ridiculous to take this on myself.

She reached for the receiver, but her hand hung in the air just short of contact. Her hesitation couldn't be about her baby brother. She'd called for help *before* he was even on the ground bleeding out.

She looked at Tuff Stuff who'd been her only companion—only confidant in the two years since... "What if he is a prison escapee?"

Tuff tilted her head at Andi.

"A felon," she said.

Like my big brother.

Much as she hated Dalmar, he was still her brother. Still a human being. A deeply flawed one, but who wouldn't be with the father that had raised them? The only thing that had kept her from sharing her older brother's inborn meanness was having been the lucky recipient of more of their mother's genes than their father's.

And the only thing keeping her from calling the police was the fiasco her last call to them had resulted in. It'd cost her baby brother his life. Besides, the man on her floor wrapped in the sleeping bag might already be dead.

Tuff Stuff woofed.

Andi dropped her hand and faced the intruder. "I should check him. Should have done that

before I put in all that effort to drag him inside."

She knelt beside the stranger and pressed two fingers to the pulse point on his neck. "Wonder of wonders, he's still ticking."

Tuff Stuff made a snuffling sound.

Andi sighed. "If I'm not calling for help, I better deal with his injuries, huh?"

She unzipped the bag, spread open the blanket she'd wrapped around him, and pulled off the knit cap she'd put on his head...her chook. Shaggy, dark hair sprang out from his head. It matched the stubble on his jaw.

If he were an escapee, he must have been on the run for a few days, judging by the beard growth. But that didn't fit with the gunshot wound. A woman didn't hunt her own dinner without learning what a fresh gunshot looked like.

Reminded of his wound, she retrieved her first-aid kit, one considerably larger than what had been at the downstater's camp. Not that she needed to keep such a well-equipped kit anymore since her father and brothers were gone. But old habits die hard. Fortunately for her *guest*, they did.

She cut off his shirt and undershirt. He had broad shoulders and nicely defined muscles.

Prison-yard muscled?

Not from what she'd seen the one time she'd visited Dal. But that didn't mean a lot.

No crude, prison-applied tattoos, just one professionally applied to his upper arm. A military tattoo. The fallen soldier. Okay, so he was military and he cared enough about his fallen comrades to honor them with a tattoo.

Judging by the scruffy condition of his hair and beard, she amended that to *former* military.

The watch on his wrist had a military look to it, too...or at least an athletic look, what with its black composite wristband, oversized face, and numerous buttons. But it pretty much ruled him out as a prison inmate. Prisoners didn't need watches, not when someone else told them when to move. Then again, he could have stolen it.

Or not, she amended as she unbuckled the watch from his wrist and noticed the tan line it left.

If not an escapee, what did you do that someone should want to shoot you?

She studied his face. Behind the paleness of blood loss was a face weathered by experience. Yet there was something about him that suggested he wasn't as old as the gray in the stubble on his chin suggested. Late thirties, early forties?

What are you that someone wants you dead?

Firelight glinted off something around his neck. She fingered a gold chain from the crease in his neck, easing it out from under him. Its links were sturdy but slim for a man. Men who wore gold chains generally liked them big and showy.

She held up the chain by what had been strung on it: a ring that looked like a man's wedding band. Removing the chain from his neck and ring from the chain, she tested it on the third finger of his left hand. It fit.

But why not wear it on his finger then? Loss of the partner it linked him to?

He groaned, his hand flipping toward his gauze-covered wound below his ribs.

"I got better things to do than ponder what *this* means," she said, removing the ring from his finger, restringing it on the chain, and dropping it into the breast pocket of her shirt.

Beneath the bandaging, the front wound didn't look too bad. But there was plenty of blood dried to his skin and the dark trail of hair disappearing into the waistband of his jeans...which bore a large dark stain.

She shook her head, muttering, "Need to see if that back wound is bleeding again after the rough ride he had down from the camp."

She spread the camp blanket on the floor next to the toboggan. Tuff Stuff grumbled.

She met the dog's gaze. "Hey. No sense bloodying up any of my blankets when I already have

this one and the bag to clean before returning them to the downstaters' camp. Not to mention I've got to replace their hydrogen peroxide and whatever else he used. The cost of taking care of this guy myself is adding up."

Untethering the man from the sled, she rolled him belly-down onto the blanket. He grunted. Tuff Stuff gave a low woof.

"I suspect I'm going to hurt him a lot worse than that before I'm done," she muttered, peeling away the gauze bandage from his back and examining the exit wound. "Good thing the bullet went through him, but it made a big hole coming out. It's going to need stitches."

She poured hydrogen peroxide into the wound and over the needle and thread from her first-aid kit, and lowered the needled toward the gaping hole. "Here's hoping he doesn't wake up in the middle of this."

His body bucked slightly with the first prick, a guttural sound escaping him. Tuff Stuff licked the man's cheek and temple.

"Dog, anybody ever tell you you're a sap? That's not going to ease any pain he feels."

Still, after covering the sutured area in antibacterial ointment and re-bandaging the wound, she ruffled Tuff's ears. The dog brought to her life the unconditional love—the humanity—that had been missing since her mother had died, leaving her to be the *woman of the house* at the tender age of ten.

While her intruder was on his stomach, Andi removed the rest of his shirt, replaced the bloody sleeping bag with her older brother's bag and rolled him into it. She took care of the smaller wound made by the bullet entering his body, and removed his boots, socks, and jeans, checking for additional injuries.

"He's pretty banged up," she murmured, examining numerous scrapes and bruises on his lightly furred legs and arms and a particularly nasty lump on his head. "Not the sort of injuries a guy being beaten up would get. More like what a body would suffer in a fall."

Or being dumped. A hit?

"A hit man with lousy aim," she huffed, eyeing the position of the non-deadly bullet wound. "Doesn't add up."

The scars of old wounds only added to the man's mystery. A slash on the underside of his left forearm suggested a defensive wound from a knife. He was either left-handed or had raised his left arm in protection while his right hand wielded its own weapon. She sat back on her heels and considered what being in a knife fight said about a man.

And this scar was thick and jagged, the kind some crude, inmate-made shiv might leave. There was that prison link again.

The scar under his chin could have come from some childhood scrape...or a nasty fistfight. Bar fight?

The one that bothered her most, though, was the puckered one in his opposite shoulder. This guy had been shot before. Hell, even her brothers hadn't been shot more than once...unless she counted the buckshot she'd dug out of their backsides in their younger years. And getting shot once was enough to end a life. She had firsthand experience with that kind of death.

She shook off the memory threatening to take hold of her. She had no time to deal with the past, not when she had the present to deal with. And her present involved a shot-up hunk of a stranger she'd brought into her home.

Tuff Stuff yawned. Andi eyed her intruder from head to toe, judging him to be a good six feet in length. Close to her baby brother's height. She winced.

"Have I made another mistake, Tuff?"

The dog stretched out beside the guy, resting her jaw on his hip, and blinked pale eyes up at her. Andi sighed. "What's done is done."

She pushed the man's shaggy hair back from his ears, checking for frostbite, muttering, "He wasn't even wearing a jacket. Pretty lightly dressed for February, even a mild day like today."

Maybe his wallet was in the missing jacket. That would account for why she hadn't found any form of identification on him. But why remove his jacket?

She picked up one hand then the other, likewise checking his fingers for frostbite. They were rough, callused. A working man's hands. What did that say about him?

The swollen, scraped knuckles suggested a fighter. The result of a struggle or anger—passion?

If the latter, what would those long, sturdy fingers feel like against her skin?

Andi shook off the thought, sat back on her heels, and scanned the near naked length of her intruder—her rather nicely put together intruder. The only thing between him and total immodesty was a pair of bloodstained, white jockey shorts. No wonder her mind kept wandering into forbidden territory.

Tuff Stuff let out a breath that sounded like a sigh.

Andi gave the dog a chastening look. "Yeah, he needs cleaning up. But he needs fluids more. And a good dosing of these," she added, lifting a prescription bottle of antibiotics from the first-aid kit."

Tuff Stuff lifted her head and gave a low woof.

"Yeah, they're old," Andi said. "But better any antibiotic in his system than none."

Andi flipped the sleeping bag over her *guest* and fetched a glass of water. Shouldering him into a semi-sit, she pressed the rim of the glass to his lips. His lips parted. She tipped a trickle of water into his mouth. He coughed and sputtered.

"Easy," she murmured at the man whose eyelids fluttered briefly up at her. "Take it slow."

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There she was again, his dark angel, her body a welcoming warmth against the back of his shoulder. Her supporting arm strong across his back while her soft voice urged him to swallow the sweet water trickling over his tongue and down his throat. He'd have liked to open his eyes further, longer, and really look at her. But his body seemed capable of only one action at a time and, right now, instinct told him he needed to drink. So he gave in to the support of her body and the safeness of her arms.

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While her intruder slept on the floor in front of her blazing fireplace, she parked the snowmobile in the garage and stashed the toboggan in the rafters, swept away any sign of the toboggan's skid marks, and, for extra measure, ran her truck back and forth a few times from road to cabin. Someone had shot this guy and they could very well be looking for him. She wasn't about to leave any trail leading them to her front door.

She made one more sweep around the cabin, satisfying herself she'd closed the curtains tight enough to prevent anyone from seeing inside. Re-entering her cabin, she set the deadbolt and checked on her *guest*. He was burning up and he'd sweat through Dal's sleeping bag.

Andi placed a fresh cool compress across his forehead. Tuff Stuff woofed.

"I know. Cool compresses aren't enough."

She unzipped the bag and spread it open, letting the cooler air of the room bathe his overheated body. He moaned and flailed his arms. Sweat beaded his upper lip and plastered that trail of dark, blood-crusted hair running down his belly.

Tuff Stuff sniffed. Andi wrinkled her nose. "Yeah. He's beginning to smell like a day-old kill. I've got an idea how to clean off that blood and bring down his temperature at the same time."

Filling a kettle with tepid water, a fever remedy she'd learned from the books her father had always made fun of her for reading, she gathered up towels and rags and knelt beside the feverish man. She gave his face and neck a swipe, mostly to wipe away the sweat. Stuffing a couple towels

under him, she concentrated on his torso—his core, leaving the room air to cool his limbs.

She wiped down his chest, rinsed the rag, and spread it over his abdomen to loosen what dried blood his sweat hadn't already turned fetid as well as to cool his skin. Tuff Stuff plopped her behind down opposite her. Andi cut off her hunky stranger's shorts.

Tuff Stuff cocked her head.

Andi looked up at the dog. "He's got nothing either of us hasn't seen before."

Draping his privates in another damp cloth, she turned her attention back to the rag she'd draped over his abdomen. It'd finished loosening the dried blood, and she set about washing his belly and that primal, downward-angled trail of hair.

Finished with his abdomen, she rinsed the rag, wrung it out, and eyed his covered groin. "Next on the hit parade of clean-up..."

Tuff Stuff got up, circled, and lay down, resting her head on the man's naked hip.

Andi scowled at the dog. "You're enjoying this way too much."

She removed the damp rag from his groin, tossed it into the pot of water, and went to work washing away what blood gravity had drawn into the lowest creases of his torso.

"Swell," she muttered, scrubbing the rag into the thick thatch nestling his...

It bobbed and Andi cursed. "Men! Even half-dead that part of them still works."

Tuff Stuff woofed as if in agreement, though Andi didn't think the dog sounded as bothered by the fact as she was. At least their guest wasn't as restless as he'd been when she'd unzipped him from the bag. Andi laid the backs of her fingers on his forehead.

"He doesn't feel as hot," she murmured.

Shooing Tuff off him, she rolled him over. The biggest hole being the one coming out of him, he'd bled more down his backside.

"At least we don't have hair to contend with on this side of him," Andi said, wagging her eyebrows at Tuff before catching herself. It shouldn't matter to her whether the guy had an ugly, hairy butt or a nice, firm one...like the one she now washed.

Why the hell was her mind even going there? She'd sworn off men by the time she hit her mid-twenties, having finally figured out they were all nothing but trouble for her.

While she had him facedown, she checked his back wound. No more bleeding. But something struck her about the position of the wound.

Feeling under him, she found the bandaged entry wound. Just as she thought, the exit wound was lower than the entry wound, which meant he'd been shot at a downward angle. How did that happen?

If he was running from his assailant, the entry wound would have been in his back. If he'd been forced to kneel, a hit man would have gone for his head. What'd he been doing, running uphill toward someone with a gun?

Or been in close combat with the gun between him and whoever he fought.

He shivered. She set aside her cleaning tools and retrieved a fresh sleeping bag for him—her baby brother's sleeping bag. A twinge of guilt twisted through her, distracting her momentarily from her current mystery.

Let it go. It wasn't your fault, the worn phrase chanted between her ears.

She spread the bag open on the floor next to her gun-shot intruder and rolled him into it. She stuffed a fresh pillow under his head, sat back on her heels, and looked at him. All that she had done for him—all that she was doing, he could still die. And if he did?

I'm in a world of trouble for sewing up a gun-shot man and hiding him away rather than calling in the authorities.

But calling in the authorities didn't always work out well. History had proven that.