

# The Thaw

By Rachelle Reese

Tonight it started the way it always did. With snow. Large, crystalline flakes fluttering to the ground, sticking to her eyelashes, touching her lips. Melting at first and then sticking. Ice covered her hands and her face. Her jeans were stiff. She was immobile. That was when she'd wake up. Every time. Slowly, she'd move her fingers, then her mouth, and finally her eyelids. She'd find herself in bed, buried deep in the covers, but shivering. Tonight she couldn't warm up, even snuggled next to Kevin. She climbed out of bed and put on her terry cloth robe. Then she started to build a fire.

A fire could always drive away the dream. Something about watching the red coals flare up into blue and yellow flames when she breathed on them made her feel powerful. Powerful enough to melt the ice. She'd been having the dream for as long as she could remember, which wasn't as long as most people her age could remember, but it was a long time. She stacked the wood carefully. Kindling cross-hatched to start. She'd add the log after the kindling caught fire. That was how she always did it. One time Kevin had asked her why and she'd answered, "Just because." The truth was, she didn't know why she built fires the way she did. She only knew she had always built them that way.

She lit a match and touched it to the shredded paper she'd stuffed beneath the kindling. An infant flame flickered, and then grew tall and wide. She watched it cautiously, praying it would light the kindling. It did. She watched the kindling burn a few moments, and then added a small split log. Then another. She sat in front of the fire, legs crossed Indian style and felt the heat creep through her blood, melting the ice, making her strong.

Eventually she went back to bed. Kevin rolled over and put his arm around her. "Dream again?" he asked.

"Mmmhmmm."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I built a fire."

"I know," he kissed her forehead. "I can smell it."

Moments later, she heard Kevin snore. She felt the tiredness seep through her and let his soft snoring put her to sleep.

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"What is your first memory?" Dr. Thomas asked. Kevin had convinced her to see a psychologist now that she had insurance that would cover it.

"Springtime," she answered. "Daffodils and mud."

"How old were you?"

"How old am I now?" She was beginning to think this was going to be a waste of time.

"Your file shows you are twenty-five."

“I was younger. I barely had breasts.”

“So, would you say you were thirteen? Fourteen?”

“Sure,” she started to stack pencils on the desk as if they were kindling.

“Why are you stacking the pencils like that?” Dr. Thomas eyed her curiously.

“It’s just something I do.”

“I see,” Dr. Thomas scribbled something on her pad. “So you remember nothing before the time you were thirteen or fourteen?”

“Nothing significant. Nothing that tells me who I am.”

“Tell me what you do remember.”

“The song itsy-bitsy spider. And a soft knee. The woman who sang it with me had white hair and smelled like lilacs.”

“Your grandmother?”

“I don’t know.”

“Anything else?”

“Smells.”

“What kind of smells?”

“Bread baking, chocolate chip cookies, bacon frying, toast, other smells but I can’t really identify them.”

“Food seems very important to you,” Dr. Thomas scribbled again.

“Food is very important to anyone who has starved.” She looked at the doctor keenly. It was obvious Dr. Thomas hadn’t missed too many meals lately.

“Then you remember being hungry.”

“I remember it very well. When I stepped out of the cave, the sunlight hurt my eyes. And the yellow daffodils were so bright. But what I remember most about that day is the hunger.”

“Okay. Let’s start there. Tell me about that day.”

“My jeans were torn and so loose I had to wrap a grapevine around my waist to keep them on. I knew I needed to eat something because my stomach hurt and I felt weak. The problem was, I didn’t know what to eat. So I sat down outside the cave and watched. The first thing I saw was a bird -- a cardinal I know now. It was bright red. It poked its beak at the ground and brought up a worm. Then it slurped it down. Well, if birds can eat worms, maybe I can too, I thought. So I dug down in the ground and found a worm. And I ate it. It was cold when it went down my throat. Cold and slimy. But I ate another and another. Eventually I felt stronger and stood up to walk around and see what else I could find to eat.”

“You ate worms?” Dr. Thomas looked at her incredulously over her reading glasses.

“Yes,” she said simply. “And I’d do it again if I had to. What? Does that make me crazy?”

“No, of course not.” Dr. Thomas scribbled again on her pad. “What else did you do that day?”

“I walked. I saw some deer grazing in a field. They were eating grass, so I tried that too. It was hard to chew, but I swallowed it anyway. Then I found some dandelions. I was wary at first because I’d tasted a daffodil and it was bitter, but the dandelions were surprisingly good.”

“Daffodils are poisonous,” Dr. Thomas noted.

“Well, I didn’t eat much of it. In fact, I spit it out. It was very nasty. After tasting the daffodil, I decided that bees were not a very good judge of what was good to eat.”

“At the time, did you know the words for deer, bee, bird, grass, worm?”

“Yes. I knew what most things were in a general way. I knew a bird was a bird, but I didn’t know cardinal or blue jay.”

“Didn’t you wonder how you got there?”

“I couldn’t remember being anywhere else.”

“I see,” Dr. Thomas scribbled some more. “So even on that day, you could not remember parents or where you had come from.”

“Less than now. At that time, I remembered one thing.”

“And what was that?”

“Fear.”

Dr. Thomas looked at her curiously, and wrote the single word in big bold letters on her pad. The bell on the desk rang. Dr. Thomas looked at her watch. “I’m sorry, Carol. It looks like we’ll have to pick this up next session.”

“Doesn’t seem like we accomplished much.”

“Be patient. These things can take some time.” Dr. Thomas pulled out her appointment book. “It looks like I have a full hour open next week if you’d like a longer session.”

Carol shook her head, “The insurance will only cover up to so much.”

Dr. Thomas shrugged. “Alright. Next week then at the same time. Oh, and it might help if you start keeping a journal.”

“What should I write?”

“Anything. Dreams, memories, the day’s events.”

“Sure,” Carol was already half planning to cancel next week’s appointment. She gathered her purse and walked out of the office.