# Lost in the Woods Ch. 02

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*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*

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Lost in the Woods Ch. 2

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Willow woke the next morning and was disoriented by the blue-gray ceiling. Then Ivy snored and Willow looked over at her friend, wrapped in her sleeping bag, and remembered. *The park. Earth Day. Lost in the woods.*

No, she hadn't been lost, she corrected herself. She'd been less than a hundred feet away from a dozen people and could have called for help. When she'd stepped out of the portable bathroom, she'd been stunned to find herself alone. She had her flashlight, but even so, the surprise had disoriented her. As usual, Willow sighed, she'd let her fear of being lost overrun her common sense, and had frozen, unable to get her bearings or call out.

Luckily Ivy had come to find her, and had had some choice words to say about Holly while they walked back. Willow had agreed, but was glad Ivy had finished before they got back. Having Ivy and Holly at each other's throats would not have made for a good group dynamic.

"Good morning." Willow reached over and poked Ivy's side. "Happy Earth Day."

"What? What!" Ivy tried to sit up, but was hampered by the bag.

Willow couldn't hold back a laugh as Ivy twisted and turned, looking for all the world as though she was struggling with an alien worm made of nylon.

"Hey, no fair." Ivy narrowed her eyes. "No laughing at me before coffee."

"Not sure we'll get coffee. We're in the park, remember?"

"Oh, there will be coffee, or there will be blood."

Willow pretended concern. "Easy now, Ivy. You're off your meds. Don’t worry, it'll all be fine."

Ivy tried to throw a pillow at her, got tangled again, and then they both fell back laughing.

"Okay, I can manage without coffee for one day. Grudgingly." Ivy stretched. "Well, guess we'd better see what the great outdoors looks like in the morning, huh?"

They dressed as quickly as they could, threw on their jackets, and stepped outside. Willow couldn't resist laughing at herself a little. Everything looked so different in the day time, and she wondered why it was that night often made things so ominous. From her spot she could even see the porta-johns through the trees. *God, I'm such a wuss.*

"Good morning!" Clay called. "We have coffee!"

"You are a god!" Ivy dove into the tent to dig out her cup and all but ran over. "Dibs!"

"You'll have to excuse her." Willow rolled her eyes as she followed. "She's addicted to the stuff."

"So am I." The younger girl, whose name was Fern, took some as well, thanking Clay. "I can't tell you how much of this stuff I drank to get through finals last year. I probably ruined my stomach lining."

Willow waited until the rush was over and held out her cup to get some for herself. "Thanks. This seems like a real treat, you know."

"No problem." Clay raised his cup to hers in a toast and she reciprocated. "Trust me, I need the coffee as much as anyone."

Willow took a sip and closed her eyes as she let the hot liquid roll over her tongue and down her throat. "I probably sound like Ivy, but I do think this may be the best coffee I ever tasted."

"I'm flattered. You should try my lasagna." Clay grinned. "It's my mom's recipe, but I do okay."

"I'd love that." Willow blushed as she realized what she'd said. "I mean, I bet it's great."

Clay was about to take the opening and ask her our when a voice sounded in his ears and made him grind his teeth.

"Clay, is that coffee?" Holly come over and stepped in front of Willow, just missing her foot. "Oh, my goodness, that's wonderful. I'd never make it through the day without it." She stepped back and hit Willow's arm, sloshing the coffee onto the ground. "Oh, I'm sorry, Willow."

*No, you're not* . "That's okay. I was done anyway." Willow wondered if she could dump the rest on Holly's head, but decided against it.

Clay turned to the group and called for their attention. "When you're ready, let's fix up the site before we go out on cleanup detail. Happy Earth Day, everybody."

x-x-x-x

Willow hummed to herself as she cleaned up a vacant camp site. With the sun shining, the breeze whispering by, and the smell of the grass and trees, she almost forgot about the previous night's anxiety.

It had also helped, she thought, that Clay had talked to her quite a bit. She found herself hoping he'd ask her out, then berating herself for expecting him to do it when she was perfectly capable of doing it herself. But why, she wondered, would he want to go out with a woman who couldn’t seem to stand up straight around him?

"How's it going?" Clay came up.

"Oh, fine, thanks." She turned and smiled, ignoring the twist in her stomach. "Just about done here and then I can do whatever you want." She blushed to her roots when she realized what she said. "I mean, whatever the next project is."

Clay took a minute to make sure he didn't actually tell her what he wanted her to do, or more accurately what *he* wanted to do to *her*and nodded. "A couple more sites here, then we can break for lunch."

"Sounds great." Willow took a breath. "Um, Clay. I wanted to ask—"

"Oh, Clay, there you are." Holly came traipsing through, her red t-shirt tied tightly at her waist to emphasize her chest. Willow didn't know whether to laugh or scream in frustration. "I was looking all over for you. Could you please come back to my site? I've found something and I'm just not sure what to do about it." She didn't even look at Willow.

Clay gave Willow an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I'd better go see what this is. Just come on over when

you're finished here." He started away and turned back, ignoring Holly's impatient glare. "Sorry, you started to ask me something?"

"It's all right." Willow shook her head. "It'll keep for a while."

Clay nodded and resumed following Holly, turning around once to mouth *Help me!* and forcing Willow to clamp down on a laugh. She was still giggling when Ivy found her, and her friend joined in after Willow told her what had happened.

"Holly's one of a kind, thank God." Ivy drank some bottle water, then held it out for Willow. "Poor Clay. I saw him earlier and he looked like he was getting a root canal."

"Oh, stop." Willow laughed again. "Clay will have to hold his own, and give her credit for going after what she wants."

"Please." Ivy scoffed. "You have to take away her credit for not realizing that the man isn't interested. Which is the way it should be, since he likes you, and you're tons better for him than she is."

"I was about to ask him out," Willow confessed.

"What? That's great!" Ivy beamed. "Way to take charge of the situation!"

"I was *about* to. Then Holly came in and Clay went to help her. I'm not sure I can do that again."

"Of course you can." Ivy was firm. "Just think of that as a dress rehearsal. A bad dress rehearsal means a good performance. And I'll bet Clay is a great performer."

"Ivy!" Willow blushed and shook her head. "You're—"

"Insatiable," they finished together with a laugh.

"No, I'm really not." Ivy helped her finish up and they started walking to the next site. "I just know when two people are good for each other, and you and Clay are good for each other. So is that guy Adam, for me."

"Adam?"

"Adam Fossey, the other ranger. Clay introduced us and hoo boy." Ivy fanned herself with her hand. "That man is hot stuff. I am not leaving this place without a phone number."

"Go get 'im, tiger."

x-x-x-x

Clay was dying to know what Willow had been about to ask him, and he felt like someone up there was having fun at his expense. No matter what he did, he was unable to break free even for a few minutes to find out her question. The best he could do was steal the occasional glance and give her a smile; the smiles in return made him feel better, but he wanted more.

He had determined that he would ask her out, and was just waiting for the right time. No matter how he planned it, Holly seemed to have a sixth sense and was right there with a question, or request for help, and he couldn’t get away. He thought Willow noticed, and her friend Ivy, since they both shot sympathetic looks his way.

A question—this time from Fern—provided a welcome distraction. As he'd been doing for much of the excursion, he told her the names of the nearby plants and trees. After a bit, he guided them along the trail and they collected more litter as they walked along.

"It's such a shame."

Clay looked over, saw Willow talking to Ivy, and broke away before Holly could snag him again.

"What's a shame?"

The two women looked up and Willow answered. "Just how people drop things here without even thinking of it. I mean, just because a paper cup is biodegradable doesn't mean they should leave it any old where. It's not like it's going to degrade in the next day."

"True, which is why we appreciate you all helping out this weekend." Clay couldn't resist reaching out to touch her arm, and she blushed. He saw Ivy fail to hide a knowing grin.

"If you two will excuse me," Ivy said, "I'm going back to the group. I need some water." She waved and walked away.

"Now she is a perceptive woman." Clay turned to Willow.

"Why's that?"

"Because she knew I wanted to be alone with you."

"Ivy can be kind of…loud, but she's great." Willow gave him a shy look.

"So, I've been wondering, what is it you wanted to ask me earlier? When we had coffee?" Clay studied her, taking in her eyes, green like English grass in the spring, and the rest of her, which looked soft and round and…He cleared his throat before his thoughts went any further.

"Oh, I, um…." Willow took a deep breath and let out a nervous laugh. "Well, okay. I was going to ask if you wanted to get together. Later. After the weekend, I mean. But not if you don't want to. I mean, you don't have to…." It was her turn to clear her throat. "Wow, I'm really bad at this."

"You're doing fine. And I'm glad you asked, because I didn't think I'd ever get a chance." He took her hand in his. "I'd like that a lot. I like *you* a lot."

"You…um, hardly know me." She blushed.

"Well, that would be the point of going out, wouldn't it?"

Willow nodded, lost for words now that she'd managed to ask him.

"I think we'd better…seal the deal." Clay's sea-blue eyes were mischievous.

"Seal the deal?" Willow was puzzled. "How?"

"Like this." He stepped to her, leaned down, and kissed her.

Willow jumped slightly but then sighed. He had one hand on her shoulder, and his free hand still held hers. His fingers tightened on hers and she responded in kind, otherwise afraid to move and break the spell. She didn't know how long they would have stayed there had not a shrill cry cut the air.

*"Claaaaaaay!"*

He pulled back with a sigh and they shared a rueful smile. Clay kept her hand in his as they started toward the group.

x-x-x-x

Willow saw Ivy's none-too-subtle thumbs-up when she and Clay joined the group again. He'd held her

hand until just before they were in view of the others, then had given her a quick squeeze before stepping away. He moved to address the group, and she walked over to Ivy. Willow shushed her when her friend began demanding details.

"I'd like to thank you all for all the work you've been doing," Clay began. "I know you must be beat, and you'll be glad to know we're nearly back at the campsite. I suggest we take a rest, have some water, and then we'll move on."

"So what happened!" Ivy bumped Willow's shoulder with her own, causing the blonde-haired woman to bobble her water bottle as she tried to take a drink. "Come on, come on, spill!"

"I just did." Willow pushed back and wiped at her mouth. "Calm down, Ivy. It's not like I've never been on a date or anything."

"I know, but this is so great! He's cute, you're cute, and it'll annoy the hell out of Holly."

Willow rolled her eyes. "Yes, that's always one of my considerations when asking a guy out: Will Holly be pissed off?"

"You asked him?" Ivy beamed and gave Willow a high-five. "That's my girl!"

Willow chuckled. "Well, it didn’t seem fair to leave it all up to him. It's the twenty-first century, right? Women can do that kind of thing."

"Amen, sister." Ivy grinned again, then took a long drink from her own water bottle. "So, I wonder if I'll have to ask Adam, or if he's the kind of guy that likes to make the first move."

"Should be fun to find out. I'll just stand to the side and watch the fireworks." Willow winked at her friend.

"Oh, there will be fireworks." Ivy wiggled her eyebrows. "You just wait."

They looked up when Fern came over to chat. It turned out that Fern was attending Ivy's alma mater, and the two had fun comparing notes on professors and classes. Willow listened with half an ear, but was still buzzing with excitement inside about her impending date with Clay.

"Okay, everyone! Let's grab our stuff and move on. We have less than a mile to go, then we can just hang out for the rest of the night." Clay stood and put on his pack.

"I like it." Fern grabbed her own back pack. "Tonight, I want s'mores!"

"A girl after my own heart," Ivy said with approval.

They traipsed through the woods, keeping up a good pace despite everyone being tired, and reached the camp site in about an hour.

"I think we made it just in time." Ivy nudged Willow and they both looked up at the sky. "Looks like it might rain."

"They did call for some light rain," Clay broke in. "That's why we suggested everyone bring ponchos. Still, it shouldn't be too bad, according to our last report."

"It might be nice," Willow said. "I mean, a little rain never hurt anyone, and on Earth Day, we can't begrudge the plants some water, right?"

"Stop it, Willow. You're scaring me. You're…giddy," Ivy murmured.

"Maybe a little. So what?" Willow grinned.

x-x-x-x

Everyone stretched and sat down to relax for a bit with more water or snacks.

Clay pulled out his walkie-talkie and checked in with his other rangers. No one reported any problems, which was a relief. After the checks were completed, Clay tried to get over to talk to Willow, but ended up talking with Ash, Adam, and a few other men.

"Oh, no!" Holly's dismayed tone caused more than one person to roll their eyes. "I lost my cell phone! I must have dropped it on my way back here. I really need it!"

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Ivy asked. "I mean, it's not likely someone will steal it, right?"

"I'd rather not have it ruined by the weather or the animals." Holly glared at her, then seemed to recover herself. "Could someone go with me to find it? Willow? Fern?"

"Um, sure." Willow and Fern both agreed.

"I'll come, too." Clay stepped up, remembering Willow's reaction the first night. "We should keep an

eye on everyone. Besides, more eyes are always better. Adam, you okay if I go with them?"

"You bet." He nodded.

"I can come." Ivy stepped up.

"Thanks, Ivy, but I'd feel better if you stayed with Adam. You're an experienced camper and it'd help to have you here."

"All right." It was grudging, but she agreed.

"Okay, ladies, let's go. We can't go too far, Holly, since it's getting dark, but we'll give it a shot." Clay grabbed his flashlight and the four of them left.

x-x-x-x

Willow picked up her own light and saw Ivy engrossed in conversation with Adam. She smiled to herself and followed Clay, Holly and Fern back along the trail they'd taken.

"Willow, thank you so much!" Holly gushed and Willow fought not to react. "I know it must seem silly but I just got it and you know how warranties are. They cover everything except what actually happens. It was a gift from my mom, you know, so my brother and I can keep in touch and I just hate to tell her that I lost it already."

Willow nodded. "It's okay, Holly. I'm sure we'll find it."

They walked in a mostly single file line, sweeping their flashlights along the ground. Willow looked up and was surprised at how quickly the sky was darkening, and had to force herself not to swing her light too fast in case she missed the phone. She was hoping Clay would call a halt to their search when suddenly there was a yelp and a cry from Fern.

"Oh, ow! Oh, shit." Fern squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced. "Sorry, guys. Pardon my French but my ankle hurts like a son of a bitch."

"Hold on, now." Clay was calm and soothing. "Here, I'm going to move your leg, but just a little and slowly, okay?"

Fern nodded and hissed out a breath. Willow knelt next to her and took her hand. "Squeeze if you need to." The younger woman nodded her thanks.

"All right. I don’t think it's too bad but it is swollen." Clay patted Fern on the shoulder. "We need to get you back to camp, and we'll put an icepack on it. Think you can lean on me?"

"Sure." Fern was still a bit breathless, but her face wasn't as pale. "It doesn't hurt quite so much now. Damn, I'm sorry, guys."

"I'm sorry, too. Holly, we'll have to go back. I'll get up early and look again tomorrow." Clay stood and with Willow's help, got Fern to her feet. He slid an arm behind her and pulled her arm over his shoulders.

"Oh, no!" Holly wrung her hands. "Please, Willow, could we look a little longer? Just a few minutes? I know it can't be far."

"Hey." Fern looked up. "I have an idea. Duh; why doesn't someone call Holly's phone? Maybe we'll hear it ring." She gave Willow a rueful smile. "Some college student, huh? Overlooking the obvious."

"It's a good idea, no matter when you thought of it," Willow assured her.

"It is, but I set the phone to vibrate."

Willow almost bit off her tongue in her effort not to respond. *Of course you did.*

"Please, Willow?"

She sighed. "All right, just a few minutes. It's getting dark, Holly. We need to get back soon."

Clay's eyes darted between the other two women. "All right, but *just* a few minutes, Holly. I don't care where the phone came from or how much it cost; it is not worth getting lost or hurt over."

Holly gave him a grateful smile. "I promise, Clay. We'll practically be right behind you."

Clay and Fern walked back towards the group, and Willow watched for a moment. Then she turned and ran her flashlight over the ground again. Holly did the same and then began walking forward. Willow stayed to Holly's side, trying to help cover as much ground as possible.

She got so involved in her search that she didn't realize Holly had gone until she turned to say something.

*Oh, shit. I'm lost.* Willow's blood went cold and her chest tightened as she tried to figure out what to do next.

"First off, relax. You're not that far away from anyone," she told herself. She spoke out loud in hopes of calming herself done, but it only emphasized the fact that there was no one else around. A few drops of water hit her arm and she fought back the urge to panic."

*Okay, okay, think. You're not that far. You followed the trail. You still have your flashlight, just turn around and follow the trail. After a little bit, give a yell. Clay said sound will carry.*

After a few deep breaths, she turned around, aimed her flashlight at the ground and tried to ignore the dread she felt when she realized she couldn’t see the trail. The rain wasn't heavy, but it was enough to dampen her clothes. Her hands were shaking and she forced them to be steady as she held the flashlight and walked.

Willow checked her watch, realized she'd been walking less than five minutes, even though it felt like at least fifteen. *Walk some more, and if you don’t see the trail, stop and try calling out.* Having a plan, even a small one, made her feel a little better, and she felt her heart rate return to closer to normal.

After another five minutes, Willow felt even more lost than before and still didn’t see the trail. Deciding it was time to try calling out, she took a breath. Her first tries weren't much more than whispers, and it took an effort to get a shouted "Hello?" No answer.

The rain sounded loud, although she was sure that was just her imagination. *This is a little more time with the earth than I wanted today.* She tried again.

*"Ivy! Clay!"* No response. *"Ivy!*

A noise like a snapping twig startled her. She whirled around, slipped on the wet grass and lost her flashlight when she went down. She saw the circle of light and started to move toward it, but it rolled away and she was left in the damp dark.

A lump of panic rose in her throat and Willow was afraid she'd hyperventilate. She forced herself to breathe slowly, counting the inhales and exhales. Next she stood, trying to see if she'd injured herself but aside from an ache on her rear end, which even in this situation was more embarrassing than anything else, she decided she was fine.

The rain let up and a small shaft of moonlight came through as the clouds passed by. Willow saw a tree, went over and sat down. She hugged her knees to her chest and rocked, resigning herself to

waiting until morning.

x-x-x-x

When Clay and Fern arrived back at the campsite, Ivy hurried over to help the young girl sit down. At Clay's request, she dug in his bag for the first aid kit. Others gathered around to help, providing bags to prop up the girl's ankle. One man said he was an EMT, so Ivy stepped back to let him attend to Fern. Soon the younger woman was comfortable and everyone moved back to their tents and food.

It started to rain but no one seemed to mind. Ivy dug out her poncho and resumed her talking and flirting with Adam, who was talking and flirting right back. She found herself thinking she couldn’t wait to tell Willow about it and reflexively looked around for her friend. When she didn't see her, Ivy stopped and took careful count of the people around the campsite. No Willow.

"Ivy? Ivy, is something wrong?"

She stared at Adam and realized she hadn't heard anything he'd said in the last couple of minutes. "No, I…I mean, I'm fine, but I don't see Willow anywhere. She went with Clay and Fern and Holly but…." Her eyes narrowed as she saw Holly return and stand next to Clay, then Ivy stalked over.

"Oh, Clay, she's so lucky you were here to help." Holly looked appropriately concerned. "Fern, I'm so sorry. If you hadn't been out looking for my phone…."

"It's okay, Holly." Fern's voice was strained. "Just an accident. Could have happened any time. I'll be fine."

Ivy saw Clay scan the group and then get to his feet.

"Where's Willow?" Clay and Ivy ended up speaking at the same time.

"Willow?" Holly blinked. "Why, I'm not sure. She was right behind me."

"Well she's not now!" Ivy glared at her.

"Holly, how long ago did you leave Willow?" Clay stepped in, his voice serious.

"Oh, I don't know." Holly waved a hand. "It couldn't have been that long ago. I didn’t come back too much after you and Fern did."

"Why did you leave her alone?" Ivy demanded.

"She'll probably be here in a few minutes." Holly rolled her eyes. "I don't know what you're so worried about. We didn’t go that far."

"Adam." Clay looked over and gestured to his coworker. "I'm going to find Willow. She probably isn't far, like Holly said, but she's likely scared and she might have tripped or something."

"Want me to come?" Ivy asked.

"No, thank you, Ivy." Clay shook his head. "The rain will make things slippery and we don't need anyone else hurt. Look, I'm going to take my tent; if she *is* hurt, or the rain picks up, it might be better for us to wait until morning. I'll radio to Adam to let you all know, okay?"

"All right." Ivy wasn’t happy but she knew Clay was trained for this. "Here's a dry shirt for her, and her poncho." She handed them to Clay and he took them with a nod.

"Adam, you good?"

"I'm good." He nodded and put a hand on Ivy's shoulder. "Go on, we'll be fine."

Clay shot an icy glare at Holly before grabbing his equipment and heading back along the trail.

x-x-x-x

Willow took a deep breath and tried calling again. "Clay? Ivy?" Still no answer. She wasn't even sure she was loud enough, but she couldn't seem to raise her voice any more.

*It'll be better in the morning,* she consoled herself. *You'll wonder why you were even worried. You'll find out you were practically on top of the campsite, just from another direction.*

It didn't help, much.

She sat with her back to the tree and rested her head on her knees. Despite the rain and the chill she felt, exhaustion had her drifting off. She jerked when she thought she heard something, then tried to shake her head to clear it. Willow listened intently, but then sighed. *Must have been dreaming*, she decided. She lowered her head again, then frowned.

"Willow? Willow!" It was Clay.

For a moment, she was too startled to speak, then when she did try, relief and nerves made her voice little more than a croak. She swallowed and took a breath. "Clay? I'm over here."

"Willow? Can you hear me?"

"Clay! I'm over here!" This time her voice carried and a moment later, Clay came into view with his flashlight. She looked up and hoped she wasn't crying. "Hi."

He smiled and knelt down. "Hi there. You okay?"

She nodded once before launching herself at him and almost knocking them both over. Her arms tightened around his neck and she buried her face against his shoulder.

x-x-x-x

Clay chuckled and steadied them both before wrapping his arms around her and stroking her hair. "Guess you're glad to see me?"

Willow nodded against his shirt. She took a few shuddering breaths, and huddled against him. Clay decided he didn't mind and continued stroking her hair. "It's okay, Willow. It's okay. Relax."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Clay nudged her back so he could look at her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah." She wiped at her eyes and he saw her fighting for control. "Um, aside from being a little hysterical, I guess, I'm fine. Sorry."

"It's okay. Being alone is scary, especially when you're lost." He ran a finger along her face. "Ivy said you had a thing about being lost. What happened?"

"Oh. You know…silly childhood trauma." She tried to shrug it off.

"It's okay, Willow. You can tell me."

"It's…it's nothing, or it seems like it should be nothing, but…." She swallowed. "When I was little, about nine, we had just moved. They were still building the neighborhood, you know? There were lots of wooded areas around. And I met these kids and they took me into the woods, said they wanted to

show me something and then they…." She swallowed again. "They left me there. They ran away and I wasn’t fast enough and…So I looked around and I couldn't see Holly and I tried to call someone and…." This time she couldn't stop the tears.

"It's all right, I've got you. You'll be fine." Clay held her close. "Wet, but fine."

Willow gave a small laugh. "Yeah, well. I don't mind being wet now." She blushed as Clay laughed out loud. "I say and do the dumbest things around you." She dropped her head against him again and the rain began to pick up.

"I like the things you say." He lifted her face to his, stared at her for a moment, then kissed her.

She was soft in his arms. He rubbed his hands over her shoulders and back to calm her, sliding his lips against hers. He knew she'd just been through a shock, but couldn't help but tease her lips with his tongue. When she parted her lips, he groaned and stomped on the urge to roll her over on the grass.

Willow sighed and leaned into him, her tongue meeting his and savoring his taste. He smelled like she imagined he would, of the earth and outdoors. His arms were strong and warm around her, and despite the wet and her fear, she didn't want to be anywhere else. She shivered, half from the cold and half from the sudden desire that rose up at Clay's touch.

Clay felt the shiver and forced himself back a little. "Willow, I should put up the tent. We'll get soaked."

"Hmmm? Oh, right." She pulled back as well. "Here, I can help."

Clay realized he should call Adam first and pulled out his radio; Adam answered immediately.

"Adam, I found her. Yes, she's fine. Just scared and cold. I think we'll stay here. I have my tent and it's dark and wet enough I don’t want to risk either of us slipping on the way back. Yes, tell Ivy she's fine. Thanks, Adam."

Clay pulled the tent out and started setting it up, handing Willow a bottle of water and waving off her offer to help. The rain was letting up after the brief increase, but he figured they'd both be better off inside it. Nothing like a night in the rain to make a person sick, and he reminded himself to make sure Willow got warm and dry so she didn’t get sick. Her clothes were already wet through and he tried not to think about how her shirt clung to her shoulders, her breasts, outlined her waist and hips and…

Willow felt Clay's eyes on her and looked down at herself. *Oh, my God. I can't believe this. I'm*

*soaked, I look like I'm in a wet t-shirt contest, my hair probably looks like a bunch of seaweed…* The rest was forgotten when Clay snaked an arm around her and kissed her again.

"You have no idea how gorgeous you look," he told her.

She gave a shaky laugh. "You like women who look like drowned rats?"

He chuckled. "You don't look like a drowned rat. Trust me. I see a beautiful woman with clothes that hug her very delicious curves." He ran the tip of his tongue along the line of her neck and she gasped. "A woman who doesn't mind being outdoors, who doesn't mind the rain." He nipped at her earlobe and she jumped in his arms, then shivered again. When she kept shivering, Clay realized she was cold.

"I'm sorry, Willow. God, how stupid. Come on, let's get in the tent and get you out of those clothes." She gaped for a minute before smiling and he was speechless for a moment as the words replayed in his mind.

"I did not…mean that…the way it sounded and oh, man, there is no good way out of this." Clay ran a hand through his hair as Willow failed to stop a laugh.

"Well, at least the rain let up. It's not so bad," she managed between giggles.

"What? Oh yeah. It did. Well, that's helpful. I hope it stays that way."

"Me, too." Willow bit her lip. "It's nice being here with you, even with the rain."

He smiled. "And you. Come on, I was serious about getting you into the tent. And you should change. Ivy sent a shirt with me. And a poncho."

"Okay. You wouldn't have a towel, or something, would you? My hair, I mean." Willow dragged her fingers through the wet locks. "I wouldn’t want to get the inside of the tent all wet."

"Here." Clay handed her a couple of bandanas. "Sorry, it's all I've got. Oh, wait." He rummaged and handed her two shirts. One was the one Ivy had sent, the other one of his extras. "That might help."

"It'll be fine, thanks." Willow tried to keep her teeth from chattering, but the cold felt like it had seeped inside her skin. She took the shirts and leaned her head forward, then wrapped one around her hair and squeezed, trying to sop up the water.

*I'm a lunatic,* Clay thought. S*he's wet and freezing and trying to get dry and all I can think of is how her skin would taste, wet like that from the rain, the drops running down her shoulders to her…* He tried to cut the line of thought off, but it was difficult. He'd never wanted to touch someone the way he wanted to touch her.

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"Clay?"

"Hmmm?" He blinked and focused on her.

"You, um…you were kind of staring at me. Is something wrong?" Willow balled the t-shirt in her hands and held it against her chest.

"No, nothing's wrong." He turned back to the tent and busied himself with checking to make sure it was set up properly.

*What is wrong with me that I want to jump him?* Willow wondered. *I mean I was just sitting here in the rain, my clothes are soaked, I was scared to death and now…* Now all she could think of was his arms around her body and his lips locked on hers.

"Okay, there's one thing wrong." Clay's words brought her out of her thoughts.

"What? What is it?"

He smiled at the concern in her voice and came over to her. "It's not exactly wrong, I don't think. It's just that it's all I can do to control myself right now." His voice was low and she swallowed at the sensations it caused in her body. "I would like nothing better than to lay you down right here, under the trees, and make love to you. Rain and all."

"Oh." Willow blinked. "Oh."

"It's all right." He skimmed his knuckles over her cheek. "I've got enough sense to realize now is probably not the best time."

She was silent for a moment, gathering courage. "Well, you did say I should get out of these wet clothes…."

It was Clay's turn to be stunned. "Willow, you don't…I mean, we don't have to…I mean, I *want* to,

but—"

"Clay, we're out here, at night, on Earth Day, surrounded by nature…so maybe that's a sign we should do what comes naturally?" She gave him a nervous smile.

"Well, how can I argue with that? Come here, nature girl."

Willow laughed as he took her in his arms and kissed her, then sighed as the warmth of his body hit hers. She was still cold from the rain, and her clothes were still wet, making her colder yet. As his tongue slid against hers, she tightened her arms around him and pressed closer, seeking more heat.

"You really should get out of those clothes," he murmured, his lips moving restlessly against her neck.

"Well, why don't you help me?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Clay reached for the hem of her shirt, then stopped. She gave him a puzzled look. "Hold on, forgot something." He went into his pack and unrolled the sleeping bag, then came back to her.

"Nature's great except when it gets into awkward places on your body. So I say we compromise. Outside, but on the sleeping bag."

"Such a considerate man."

"Oh, there's a whole lot of you I intend to consider." He gave her a wicked grin, captured her lips and found the edge of her t-shirt. He broke the kiss only long enough to remove the shirt, then resumed while he worked on unclasping her bra.

He slid the straps down her shoulders and off, nuzzling her neck and shoulders while he did. The feel of her breasts against his shirt was good, but not enough. Willow had the same feeling as she went to remove his shirt as well. They both sighed when skin met skin.

Clay leaned forward, pressing her back until they both lay on the sleeping bag. "You still cold?"

"No, I'm warming up." Willow twined her fingers in his hair and half-pulled him down, half-lifted herself up for a kiss.

Clay tried to think of a clever remark, couldn't, and so concentrated on the kiss. Her lips were soft and supple, and his hands slid up and down her back, reveling in the smooth skin. He left her mouth to

trail kisses down her neck, moving her damp hair aside and tugging a little so that she tilted her head, leaving her neck and shoulder open to him.

Willow gasped out a breath as his teeth grazed her skin and her body moved against his in response. He glided his tongue over the pulse in her neck, then sucked gently on the spot. He savored her shudder, and let his hand drift down until he could cup her breast. When she gasped his name, he smiled to himself and captured her lips again.

He ran his thumb over her nipple. It was already taut and hard, but cold from the rain and so he dipped his head down and took it in his mouth, flicking his tongue over and around it. Willow's soft cry was what he was after, but then he pulled away.

"Better be quiet, sweetheart." He winked at her. "Remember, sound carries." She blushed and he laughed, remembering at the last minute to be quiet himself. "Now, where was I?" he murmured. "Ah, yes."

Willow bit her lip as he resumed teasing her, his mouth and tongue sucking and pulling at her nipple, then she dropped her head back as he moved to the other one. She was torn between wanting to touch him and needing to hold on. For the moment, she held on, waiting her turn to do some touching.

Clay's hand moved further down, along her waist to the curve of her hip where he encountered the jeans she still had on. At first he was frustrated by the obstacle, but then realized it meant more discoveries lay before him. He dragged a finger along her waistline, then unbuttoned her jeans and waited a moment to see what she'd do.

"It's okay." Her voice was a breathless whisper with a hint of teasing. "I should get out of these wet things, right?"

"You are going to drive me crazy," he told her and began tugging at the wet denim, making her giggle until she clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Here, let me." Willow got up on her knees, and half turned away when she remembered she was topless. Clay pulled her back to him as she worked the jeans down, kissing her and moving his hands to help her. The managed to get the jeans down to her knees. At Clay's nudge, she lay back and wiggled out the rest of the way.

"Your turn," she told him.

He nodded and drew in a breath as her hand drifted across the front of his jeans. He was hard and the movement of her hand over the material led to thoughts of her hand moving along his bare skin. His erection jumped as she undid the button and zipper. Her hands went to his waistband but then stopped; he opened his eyes to see her biting her lip.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just…." She took a deep breath. "I don’t usually do things like this."

"I don’t either, if it makes you feel better."

That made her laugh. "In a strange way, I think it does." She paused. "Maybe it's all this fresh air, being out of doors. It must be going to my head."

"Well it's a known fact that outdoor activity does increase one's…appetite." Clay brushed his lips over her forehead.

"Does it?" Willow's voice was breathy again.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Everyone knows that. And I sure have an appetite for you."

She giggled and then kissed him again. "I'm not the only one that says ridiculous things."

"It might be ridiculous, but it's true." He tunneled one hand into her hair and held her still for another kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth as though he'd missed something before. "Now, let's get these off me. Seems terribly unfair for me to still have clothes on."

"It does, doesn't it?" Relaxed now, Willow pushed at his slacks, then laughed again when he took over and kicked them aside.

"Oh, wow." Clay closed his eyes and stretched out along side her, bringing her close so that they touched from knee to chest. "My God, Willow. You feel so good. Why didn't you tell me you felt so good?"

"I didn’t know."

"Oh, well then." He moved against her, groaning as his shaft slid along her leg. "Let me show you just how good you can feel."

"I—" Willow couldn't finish as one of his hands moved down and drifted over her thigh. He held it there a moment, moving back and forth in a languorous rhythm, before he began dragging his hand upwards. It was all she could do not to grab his hand and force it higher, torn as she was between wanting his touch and enjoying the teasing. Then his hand was between her legs and his fingers were stroking her sex.

Clay lowered his head to her chest, his senses reeling from the slick, wet feel of her. He circled and teased her some more with his fingers, every so often nudging the bundle of nerves that made her jump in his arms. She was still except for her hips, rocking in time with his hand. Then she wrapped her hand around his shaft and began to stroke, matching his pace. His hips moved with her and he dragged his head back up so that he could find her lips and take them again.

"There is so much else I'd like to do." Clay's lips brushed hers as he spoke. He stilled his hand and in a moment, Willow followed his example and they both caught their breath. "But I think that will have to wait until next time."

"Oh?" Willow could barely force the syllable out.

"I think I can take time for one thing." Clay smiled before kissing her again and she jumped as his hand resumed its previous rhythm, and soon her hips were rolling to match it.

Willow felt her muscles tensing, the heat building in her body, and didn't know how much more she could take. His hand moved in slow circles, keeping her on the edge of orgasm. Then he moved from her lips to her neck and locked his lips over the pulse point. The pressure was too much and Willow gave over to the flood of heat that poured through her, whispering his name as she clutched at him.

Clay thought he could have done that for hours, held her in his arms as she shook at his touch, but he had other plans. Plans, he recalled through haze, that included avoiding any natural consequences. "Wait right there," he told Willow.

She gave a quick laugh. "Just where did you think I was going?"

Clay sat up and found his pants, then dug out his wallet and a condom. He rolled it on and settled himself over Willow, taking the time to run his eyes and hands over her first.

"You are prepared, aren’t you?" She blushed a little.

"I used to be a Boy Scout. What can I say?" He nuzzled her neck and she clasped her hands around his neck.

He held himself up on his arms, kissing her lips, then her cheek, then tracing a line to her neck. She was so soft, and warm, and he was dying to feel all of that around him, but he refused to hurry. Much.

A few more minutes of it was all he could take; Willow seemed to realize it as she drew her leg up along his and pressed gently, encouraging him. He kissed her, shifted position and thrust inside, stifling a groan as he did. She was as warm and wet as he'd imagined; softer than a summer rain. Her hips lifted to meet his and together they found the pace that was right for them.

*I wish I could do this all night.* Clay closed his eyes, concentrating on making the feeling last. He felt Willow's fingers drag over his chest, the nails combing through his chest hair and over his nipples, making him gasp. His eyes snapped open and he saw that hers were closed, but she wore a small, satisfied smile. *Thinks she's clever, does she?* He lowered his head and played his tongue over her neck, pleased when she bit her lip to hold back a moan.

He maintained his pace, but knew he wouldn't last much longer. Deciding it was worth any future discomfort, he murmured to her to hold on and rolled them over and off the sleeping bag.

"Oh." Willow blinked and then looked down at him. "You…the ground must be cold."

"Don’t care. Kiss me." He tangled his hands in her hair and tugged her down to him. After a long, thorough kiss, he released her. She straddled him, her eyes half-closed as she moved her hips.

*Am I really doing this?* Willow couldn't believe she was, but nothing felt wrong. It felt right. She drew in a breath when Clay's hands came up to cup her breasts. A moment later she felt him tense and his hands went to her hips. He thrust up and kept her in place, close to him, and she leaned down to kiss him so that they muffled each other's cries.

They stayed for a moment on the grass, then Clay rolled them back on the sleeping bag. They both laughed when he turned over and Willow brushed off the grass and leaves that had stuck to him. He removed the condom, put it in the plastic bag he carried for trash, and reminded himself to make sure the bag was closed before they returned to the campsite.

"Come on, we'd better get in the tent." He gathered his clothes and the bag and let Willow go in first. There was more laughing and giggling as the two of them tried to fit themselves and their belongings in the small space. At last the sleeping bag was laid out and they were both inside it.

"I'm so glad you came to find me." Willow snuggled against him, letting the pleasant fatigue wash over her. She covered a yawn.

"I'm sorry you got lost." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I won't let it happen again."

"I know."

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The next morning, they returned to the campsite. Ivy ran over and hugged Willow so hard the latter wondered if she had any cracked ribs.

"Relax, Ivy. I'm fine."

"I'll bet you are." Ivy looked from Willow to Clay, who averted his eyes but couldn’t hide a smile. Ivy grinned. "Nice work."

"Thanks, I think." Willow smiled at Clay as he went over to talk to Adam.

"I want details, lots of details, but it can wait until we go home," Ivy told her. "Come on, there's still coffee if you want some."

"Sound great." Willow stepped over, got some coffee, and then went with Ivy to check on Fern, who seemed in good spirits.

"It's really not so bad," she told them. "The swelling is almost gone and it's not too bad to walk on. I'll have to get to a doctor, just to check it out, but really, it's okay."

Willow was relieved to find it wasn't serious, and promised to lend a hand as they walked out of the park. Ivy also offered to give Fern a ride home. Fern thanked her but said she'd already arranged for her boyfriend to pick her up and would finalize the time later.

Willow noticed that Holly wasn't around, but didn’t get a chance to ask about it as she helped Ivy pack up their gear.

"Hey, you okay?"

She turned and smiled at Clay. "I'm fine, thanks. You okay? Adam's not giving you a hard time?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "He's just jealous." Then he laughed. "No, he's just glad I found you. Any idea how much paperwork is involved in a missing volunteer?"

"Well, I wouldn't want any trees sacrificed on my behalf."

Clay chuckled. "How about we have that date tonight?"

"I don't know." Willow pretended to think. "I wouldn't want you to get tired of me…."

He gave her a mischievous, dark grin. "Like that would happen."

"If you're sure…."

"Willow."

"Kidding." She smiled. "I'd love that."

"We'll work out the details later. Let me get everyone together so we can start back." He gave her hand a quick sqeeze, then began making the rounds of his group, helping everyone pack up and clean up the camp site.

"Where's Holly?" Willow asked Ivy. Before her friend could answer, Holly burst into the campsite.

"I found my phone!" She held it up in triumph.

"That's great, Holly." Clay looked at Willow, then rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you found it."

"It was just over there a ways." She gestured with her hand off to their right. "I don't know how it got there, I must have tossed it out of my bag accidentally. I mean, I looked over there twice. I even got on my knees to look through the leaves."

Willow stared at the ground, nudged Ivy to look as well, and bit her cheek to keep from laughing. Ivy had to turn away to hide her smile.

Holly walked over to her tent and bag, scratching at her arm, then her leg. "I must have been bitten by something. I have been itching like crazy since last night."

Clay came over to Willow and Ivy, who could no longer hide their laughter.

"Holy three-leaf plants, Batman," Clay murmured.