

## Jogging with the Pack

At six o'clock Kasey got herself up and moving. It still surprised her to find out how much she actually appreciated mornings now that she had joined Josh and his friends in their running club. Almost every morning they got up and went for a run along one of the nearby national park trails. A few of them even ran in bad weather. Kasey wasn't that dedicated but she did enjoy the exercise and the camaraderie.

The group consisted of over twenty members of which Kasey was the newest. Some were a few years younger than her twenty, some were much older. In their sixties, Emery and Martha Reins were the oldest. But despite the age difference, they kept up with the younger folks quite well. In fact, the entire group was in remarkably good health and physical condition. Within the group, Kasey found herself on the trailing end of the condition scale which had surprised her greatly. She had almost always been one of the healthier and most physically fit people of any group she had hung out with. But that turned out not to be the case with Josh and his friends. She saw that as a challenge. And Kasey was not one to back down from a good challenge.

By six thirty the dark-haired young woman was out the door and driving the ten miles to Josh's house. After a not-so-brief kiss, the couple drove together to the national park where they'd meet the others.

"Kasey Wells," Emery called when she stepped out of Josh's truck. "Glad you could make it. Looks like it's going to be a glorious day." He gave her and then Josh a brief, one-armed hug as the four of them started across the parking lot together. While they walked, Martha gave them quick embraces as well before returning to Emery's side.

"I'm glad I could be here," the small woman replied with a smile. "Any day that starts off with friends is likely to be a good day."

"I couldn't agree more," the grandmotherly Martha declared with a quiet smile of her own.

"Speaking of friends, we're hosting a little get together this evening," Emery informed her as the four of them strolled into the park. "It's going to be out at our lake house. Food, drinks... swimming for the younger folks. Maybe a little dancing as the evening wears on. If you can make it, we'd love for you to join us."

Kasey threw a quick look at Josh to gauge from his expression his thoughts on the subject. Seeing his smile, she followed her own first inclination and accepted the invitation.

"Good, good. Josh knows the way," Emery stated, sounding pleased. "Hmm. Looks like we're just about the last to arrive." Indeed, at the head of the Carver Trail most of the rest of their group milled about, talking or stretching or both.

As Emery and Martha waded into the larger group, shaking hands and giving hugs, a tall, thin fellow with a smiling face group walked over to Kasey and Josh. "Josh, Short Stuff, glad you could finally make it."

"Morning Sticks," Kasey returned with a grin. "How you doin' today?"

"So far, so good," he replied with a grin. "How 'bout you buddy?" he asked Josh.

"Every day you wake up is a good day," Josh replied with a smile. "So, who are we missing?"

"Dana's the last one. I thought I heard her car pull up a few seconds ago. She really

needs to get that thing she calls a car tuned up.”

“Yeah, right,” Josh said as his eyes seemed to communicate something serious to his friend. “Like you can hear her car from here.”

“Sound does some funny things in the woods,” Sticks replied easily. “You’d be surprised what all you can hear when you shut up and listen.” He threw Kasey a wicked grin, “Not that you’re likely to have a chance to do any talking with her around.”

“Was that a comment on me?” Kasey demanded with fake scowl. “Is mister talks-nigh-constantly suggesting that *I* talk too much? Is that what you’re saying?” Her fake scowl slewed into a grin despite her best efforts.

“Well *I’m* saying,” Josh declared before Sticks could reply, “That with you two around it’s hard to get a word in edgewise. You could both talk the ears off corn.”

“Ooh!” Sticks declared, clutching his heart. “Dissed by my friend the jock. Pretty sad when the athlete of the bunch starts making funny comments. Kasey, are you going to let him talk to me that way?” he asked as Dana came running up to join the group.

“I sure am,” she replied with an even wider grin. “I think he’s even sexier than usual when he’s funny,” she said, standing on her tiptoes to kiss Josh who eagerly returned the kiss.

“What? No kiss for me?” He turned a leering smile from Kasey to the passing Dana. She just rolled her eyes and kept on walking.

“Sorry, Sticks. I’m a one guy sort of girl.”

“And I’m the jealous type,” Josh declared as he smiled down at his girlfriend. They’d been going out regularly for a month now, Kasey realized with some surprise. My how time flew.

The three of them continued discussing the morning for a while longer. When Emery announced it was time to get started, everyone immediately started off down the path. The Carver Trail had several pathways which intersected it and looped back around to the entrance or some other point within the park. This allowed those on the trail to choose just how far they wanted to walk or run. If one stuck to the main Carver Trail all the way through, it ran for eight miles. Because this was a Saturday run and they had the time, they would be running the full length of the trail today.

After the first mile, the pace picked up a bit as everyone got their wind. As usual, Kasey began dropping back as those with longer legs outpaced her. Josh stayed with her but with a joyous grin Sticks loped off ahead. Running was one of the few times when Owen “Sticks” Cook looked graceful. It was hard not to like the lanky fellow with his strange sense of humor.

Ronny Jones rudely pushing past them, wiped the smile right off their faces.

“Hey, watch it!” Josh growled.

“Sorry,” Ronny called back over his shoulder. “She’s so short I didn’t see her.” He then picked up his pace passing several of those ahead of them.

“Asshole,” Kasey muttered.

“You got that right,” Josh agreed with a frown as they entered a series of twists and turns where the trail wound around several large trees.

“Don’t let him bother you,” Dana told her as the taller, blonde woman settled in and kept pace with them. “He’s just jealous. Wishes he had a woman he didn’t have to pay for.” That startled a laugh out of Kasey which did nothing to help keep her breathing even.

“Ronny’s frustrated,” Josh told them as they crossed a meadow and passed a couple of walking park-goers. “He’s got a lousy job and a big mortgage. He hates his boss and doesn’t blow off steam very well. It gives him a crappy outlook and a worse attitude.”

“Go mister student shrink!” Dana called with a laugh. The blonde woman turned her attention to the short, dark haired woman jogging beside her. “You’ve now heard our opinions on why Ronny’s such an ass. What does the history major think?”

“The history major,” Kasey began, “thinks he just enjoys picking on people smaller than himself. From a historical standpoint, namely her own, she knows a person with personal shortcomings trying to make up for them when she sees it. These people try to show their strength, especially to themselves, by going after someone they think they can physically dominate. My grandmother and mother were both small women, too. That’s why I’ve been learning martial arts since I was four. Historically speaking, not many people go after me a second time believing me weak. Ronny had better watch himself.”

“Oh my, in addition to being smart and in good physical condition, she’s a feisty one too.” Dana declared with a smile. With a wink to the man across from her, she said, “Josh, I’m beginning to think she’s a keeper.”

As they ran along, Josh gave Kasey a thoughtful look that caused her to blush. “You know, I’m beginning to think so, too.”

Sex with Josh tended to be more like an athletic event than a romantic one. Not that they didn’t have their tender moments, but the vigorous lovemaking sessions were much more common than their romantic moments together. And sex with Josh continued to become a more and more common event in her life. Looking across the bed at his sweat-covered body, she couldn’t help but consider this a huge improvement over the self-induced celibacy she taken on after leaving Miles. And the fact that thinking of Miles didn’t depress her increased the size of her smile. She’d dwelled on him much too long and for all the wrong reasons.

“So,” Josh began after a while. “Why is it that Owen can call you ‘Short Stuff’ but I can’t?”

“It’s the whole tall person/short person interaction thing,” Kasey replied, rolling over to half lay on top of him. “Sticks and I have both gotten crap for our respective heights. You haven’t, so you’re not part of the club. Also, it sounds a bit condescending coming from you. Not that you mean it that way,” she said hurriedly, seeing the objection on his face. “It’s just that some words should not come from some people.”

“Sorta like white people using race-related names for black folks and vice versa?” he asked.

“I suppose. I’ll admit that it’s mostly just that as a general rule I don’t like being reminded that I’m barely five foot tall. I’m well aware of it without being constantly notified. And it is barely possible that I might be a tad sensitive about it. That’s why it tends to sound condescending to me when I hear it, no matter who I hear it from. If there’s going to be a man in my life, he’s going to treat me as an equal or there won’t be a man in my life.”

“Good self-analysis,” he replied quietly. “Most people don’t know themselves that well. You know what I think?”

“No, what?”

“I think, that there should be a man in your life. And I think that man should be me. If you ever suspect that I’m not treating you like an equal, let me know,” he asked as he began kissing her arm.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied a bit distractedly as her heart started beating faster.

She gave a quick glance at the clock on the dresser. “Do we have time for another round before we need to head towards the Emery and Martha’s place?”

“There’s *always* time for another round,” Josh told her with a grin in between kisses. With a please smile, she replied, “I do like the way you think Mister Dougherty.”

“We’re an hour late,” Kasey despaired aloud as Josh parked along the road within sight of Emery and Martha’s lake house. His truck was just one of many vehicles lining this little section of road.

“These little get-togethers are extremely casual,” Josh replied with a smile. “Whenever people get here is the right time. Relax. Trust me.”

“I’ll try. But if I get a tardy slip, I’m coming after you,” she warned.

Josh’s laughter was music to her heart. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he replied, grinning broadly.

And that was Kasey’s last solid memory for several days.

“Kasey?” a quiet, woman’s voice called gently. “Kasey? Are you awake?”

She suddenly snapped upright, surprised to find herself in a bed. The plain room she was in appeared to belong to a hospital. As she flopped back down to her pillow, she was equally surprised to discover that she felt weak as a kitten. And then the dizziness and nausea hit together and she barely leaned over the side of the bed before throwing up.

Soft fingers held her head as well as a trashcan. It appeared that her sickness had not been unexpected.

“What happened?” Kasey managed to ask after rolling back into the bed. Somewhere along the way she realized that she hurt all over and that her shoulders were particularly sore.

“One thing at a time,” the woman told her in a quiet, reassuring voice.

“What?”

“First, I want you to know that you’re going to make a full recovery,” the woman explained. Kasey blinked a few times and realized for the first time that the woman at her bedside was none other than her jogging partner, Dana.

“Dana? What the hell happened? How did I get here? Just where is ‘here’? And where’s Josh?”

“Do you remember the party at the lake?” Dana asked.

“I... I remember getting there. Josh and I showed up late,” Kasey replied slowly as her confusion faded and she goaded her reluctant memory into action.

“Yes, that’s right,” the blonde woman agreed encouragingly with a quiet smile. “Do you remember what happened after that?”

“We... Josh and I walked over to the cabin.” There followed a long pause. “There were a bunch of the jogging club crowd there. We stopped and said hello to Emery and Martha.” She lay there for a moment looking puzzled as she tried to remember.

“You’re doing well,” Dana encouraged her.

“What happened Dana?” Kasey demanded as firmly as she could. She didn’t like at all the pleading tone that came through with the words.

“You tell me,” Dana replied gently.

With a frown the dark-haired woman closed her eyes and again tried to remember. “Emery had been grilling. There was a huge stack of what Josh laughingly referred to as ‘dead animals’ by that big grill. In this case it was chicken breasts, and steaks, and sausages and stuff. Emery gave me one of his usual one-armed hugs.”

“Yeah,” Dana whispered. Opening her eyes, Kasey saw Dana wipe away a tear.

“He... he’s dead?”

“What do you remember?” Dana asked, trying to sound businesslike and mostly succeeding.

“If he’s dead, tell me,” Kasey demanded, actually sounding demanding this time. To her surprise, Dana’s eyes grew cold.

“Remember Kasey and you’ll know everything. Remember what happened to you and I’ll explain everything else, I promise. But don’t make any more demands of me. I’ve had a very bad last several days and I’m not in the mood to put up with crap from anyone. Including you.” Her eyes softened a bit at the end but they still held a hardness to them. Kasey realized Dana was not going to be altering her position on this.

“Let me at least see Josh,” she tried instead.

“No. I’ll bring you food, water, and medicine but you’re not leaving this room until you remember and no one else is coming in until then.”

“That seems a little extreme doesn’t it?”

Dana sighed. “Remember what happened and you’ll understand.” There followed a period of quiet as the women studied one another. “Did you and Josh get anything off the grill?” Dana finally asked.

“I’m not sure... wait a minute... no. We didn’t. We were going to go down to the lake first. We had our suits on under our clothes and wanted to swim before eating.”

“Did you drive down to the lake?” Dana prompted when nothing further seemed forthcoming.

“Hmm? Oh, no. We walked. There was a big trail leading down to the water. You can drive down to the lake?”

“It’s a comparatively long trip that takes you around to the other side of the lake. Handy for couples who want a little privacy while they play *special* aquatic games.”

“Wait a minute, when we walked to the lake, you were one of the people swimming already!”

“Very good,” Dana nodded seriously.

“You knew we didn’t drive, so why’d you ask?”

“To help your recollection of events. And it worked.”

“You could have just told me,” Kasey said with a certain degree of exasperation.

“Of course I could have,” the blonde woman agreed easily. “But would that have jarred your memories loose? Who knows? So what happened after you got to the water?”

“Why does my remembering matter so much to you?” Kasey asked with a sigh.

“Remember and I believe you will find the answer to be self-evident.” On hearing this, the sore woman in the bed cursed under her breath.

“Save your piss and vinegar for someone else. Someone more deserving. You’ll need it. Trust me.” Dana told her, looking far too truthful for Kasey’s comfort.

Trust me. Josh used that phrase a lot. And Owen had used it that evening.

“Sticks was down in the water too,” Kasey said quietly, almost to herself more than Dana.

“He told me to trust him. Said he was going to do a trick.” She looked up at the other woman and smirked, “I had visions of him making my bikini top disappear as his trick and told him ‘no’”.

“It was a dumb trick that would have gotten you a face full of lake water,” Dana replied softly.

“Oh? Okay.” She was quiet a long while. “We swam around for a while. Talked to various people. You and Sticks mostly. I don’t remember us talking about anything in particular.”

“Sticks kept making snide remarks about my car needing a tuneup,” Dana told her with a sad smile.

“Yeah. That’s right, he did. He tends to keep making his points over and over until you snap at him or point out something similar about him,” Kasey said with a grin. She lay quietly for a while. “We walked back to the cabin in our swimsuits and carried our clothes. Josh insisted that neither of us get them wet.”

“Yes,” Dana said into the silence. “Sticks and I joined the two of you as did Ray, Earl, and Steffi.”

“Yeah,” Kasey agreed quietly. “They’d been further out in the water. Ray had been showing off or something. Together, we formed a regular dripping parade. A hungry, dripping parade. The lot of us stopped in front of the grill and Emery just grinned.”

“Then what happened? Did you get any food?”

“No. One of the big guys, I think his name is August or something....”

“Augustus,” Dana corrected.

“Yeah. That’s the guy. I was about to get some food when he shoved me out of the way. Said something sexist like he was of higher rank than me and he’d eat before me or something weird like that. Josh laid into him and then that asshole Ronny went after Josh and Sticks joined in. Things were getting pretty intense and Emery started leading me away despite my objections. I really didn’t want to go but he put an arm around my waist and picked me up. I could see the four of them fighting behind us. I think someone had pulled a knife because there was a lot of blood and several of them had cuts.”

“Where did Emery take you?”

“Into the cabin. It’s more of a log home than a cabin. As I’m sure you well know.”

“Yes,” Dana agreed. “Was there anyone else in the cabin?”

“Crap. I’m burning up. Do I have a fever?”

Dana picked up a damp cloth off a table and began dabbing Kasey’s forehead. “Yes, you have a fever. Don’t worry though. It’s under control. So, was there anyone else in the cabin?”

“Yeah, Martha was there. And she was cussin’ up a blue streak. I never would have guessed she knew half the words or phrases she used. Musta been real upset about her party being ruined.”

“Oh, she was upset alright,” Dana muttered.

“‘Let’s keep you out of the melee,’ Emery told me. Then he set me down on the big rug. I... I looked through the glass door....”

“What did you see?”

“I saw...I ... I’d like a glass of water, please,” Kasey asked, looking confused. Without comment, Dana poured her a cup and helped her drink it.

“Tell me what you saw,” Dana pressed gently. “No matter how strange or weird it seemed to be. I won’t make fun of you. I promise.”

“They weren’t fighting normally,” the smaller woman whispered. “It almost looked like they were knife fighting or something. There were a few punches thrown and a few judo-type moves in the mix but mostly it looked like they were... and then...”

“And what?” Dana prompted gently.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “A bear... a bear came charging out of the woods and attacked them all. It was huge. I’ve never seen a bear that big before and I’ve visited a lot of zoos...” But Kasey remembered something else. Something that confused her even more.

“What is it?” Dana asked, seeing her expression. “That. I saw it cross your face. What did you remember? Tell me Kasey.”

“Martha said something. Something really strange. She said, ‘What the hell is he doing here?’ Like the bear was more of a person than an animal.”

“I see. Then what happened?”

“Sticks had been hurt in the bear’s first rush. Augustus was too, I think. The bear seemed to really go after Ronny though. Focused on him. It bit him. Bad. Got it’s mouth on his body around his belly and picked him up like a doll. Started shaking him around...”

“Yes....”

“Other... other things were happening though,” Kasey whispered, shaking her head as though to dislodge the images within.

“Tell me about them,” Dana gently told her. But Kasey remained quiet for the moment. From the distressed look on her face, it was apparent that wasn’t liking what she was remembering.

One of the monitors began beeping more and more quickly as the wide-eyed woman’s breathing sped up to match her now racing heart.

“That’s quite enough of that,” Dana stated very calmly as she stuck a needle into Kasey’s IV and pushed the plunger down. Kasey didn’t seem to notice but twenty seconds later, the beeping slowed. In fact, Kasey’s eyes began fluttering. As though she was having trouble keeping them open. Soon they closed and the smaller woman slept.

“Rest my sister,” the blonde woman whispered as she smoothed the injured woman’s hair. “We’ll extract the rest of those memories later.”