

Tanya Stowe

*Tender
Touch*

Excerpt: Tender Touch

by Tanya Stowe

Pain. Sharp, shooting pain in his head brought Royce to consciousness. He winced and tried to reach for the throbbing area when he realized he was sliding over the ground. He was still falling down the incline!

He jerked his eyes open and willed his muscles to respond as he grabbed for a branch to stop himself. He clutched it. His body jerked to a stop. Sharp pains shot up his arm, but he'd stopped his fall.

Mercifully, he closed his eyes again, only to open them as something pounded on his hand. He forced his eyes open and stared into the face of a man with a hat and a muffler wrapped around his mouth.

"Let go!" The man bellowed over the wind. Royce blinked against the snow dropping into his face.

"...falling..." The skin of his lips cracked and tore as he tried to talk.

"You weren't falling! I was dragging you."

Royce could barely hear the man over the wind.

"You have to walk. I can't do this anymore."

The man shoved Royce to his side. He thought he knew what the man wanted. But he couldn't seem to make his muscles work. Everything was numb, as if his body was asleep.

The man pushed and pulled Royce to his feet before he tugged Royce's arm over his shoulder. Groggily, Royce tried to focus on his feet. He had to keep them beneath him. He knew that. Survival was important. He had a job to do.

He'd been following a trail, following the boots, the small boots. As his eyes focused on his feet, he saw the shoes beside his. They were small.

Small boots.

Something clicked in Royce's mind and sank deep into his thoughts. But before he could react, they came to a cabin. The little man pushed him through the door. Sudden warmth rushed over Royce, making his skin tingle and his brain flash red hot with anguish. He groaned.

"Don't pass out on me yet," the little man commanded through the muffler. He slid a chair behind Royce and eased him into it. Royce flopped backwards and his head lolled.

"Wake up." He grasped Royce's coat and slapped his cheeks. "I can't do this myself."

Royce's eyes flew open.

"Lift your arm."

Royce obeyed, but all the while, his mind focused on one thing. This man, with the hat and muffler wrapped around his face, was his man, his midnight intruder. He knew that as surely as he knew his head

hurt.

Slowly, he leaned to the side and his eyes closed.

His rescuer jerked him forward. "These have to come off."

Royce nodded as he shoved at his pants and long johns. When they were off, the cabin's owner threw a blanket over his body.

"Now you can lie down." Royce half slid out of the chair onto a pile of pelts and blankets beside him.

The sudden comfort overwhelmed him. He wanted to close his eyes and slip away.

But his blurry gaze focused on his rescuer as he unwrapped the muffler. He wanted ... needed to see this man's face, the man who had saved his life. He forced himself to watch as he pulled off the floppy gray hat.

Royce blinked. His foggy mind had to be playing tricks on him. A long, golden braid fell from beneath the hat and lay across the man's shoulder. He slipped off the coat and beneath was the slender shape of a woman.

His man ... his midnight visitor, was a woman! Shock filled Royce's mind, and his head flopped senselessly sideways.