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By Karen Harper



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Lodge owner Mitch Braxton knows something is terribly wrong when Lisa fails to turn up for a private meeting to clear the air and close the book on their broken engagement. Embarking on a heroic search that takes him miles downriver, he saves Lisa from the deadly water, but not before they've been swept deep into the wilderness.

Far from civilization, the former lovers must put aside their hurt feelings and find the will to survive against nature. There's a killer on the loose and, for now, they must measure their future together in days rather than years.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review When Lisa Vaughn is eight years old, her mother jumps from a ship, clutching Lisa's baby sister in a successful suicide attempt after Lisa manages to break free just before her mother goes over the rails. Years later, Lisa's firm has a team-building event in Alaska in a lodge by a treacherous, white-rapids river. Someone pushes her into the water, and her former lover, Mitch Braxton, risks his life to save her as they are swept through the turbulent water at breakneck speed. As Lisa and Mitch struggle to survive in the wilderness, they start to grow close again. But once she returns to "civilization," Lisa needs to figure out who's trying to kill her and why. Harper's descriptions of Lisa and Mitch fighting the river and braving the elements are so realistic the reader can almost feel the icy winds. A tale guaranteed to bring shivers to the spine, *Down River* will delight Harper's current fans and earn her many more. --Shelley Mosley

About the Author

Karen Harper is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of romantic suspense. A former Ohio State University English instructor, she now writes full time. Harper is the winner of The Mary Higgins Clark Award for her novel, *DARK ANGEL*. She also writes historical novels set in Tudor England. Please visit or write her at her website at www.KarenHarperAuthor.com

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Duck Lake Lodge

Near Bear Bones, Alaska

August 20, 2008

Despite the calm beauty of Duck Lake ten feet below the pine-tree-lined path, Lisa Vaughn felt compelled to watch the Wild River on the other side of the low ridge where she stood. Because the summer sun had warmed the snow-tipped Talkeetna Mountains for hours, the snowmelt river roared. When the temperature dropped at night, despite the fact the skies barely darkened, the river rumbled like distant thunder. She was amazed by the reddish-colored salmon as they battled the fierce current on their long journey upriver to their breeding grounds. It almost looked as if the river was bleeding.

But mostly the river awed Lisa because, exactly twenty-six years ago, she'd seen her mother and baby sister drown in the turbulent, foaming wake of a cruise ship. Since then, roiling water mesmerized her. And she had never seen anything like the rapids of the Wild River.

She pulled her gaze away and hurried along the ridge toward the cutoff to the lake landing where she and Mitch had agreed to paddle a kayak to a picnic spot. "I know you've never been in a kayak," he'd said when he suggested it, "but we'll be fine as long as you match your strokes to mine, so we don't slam our paddles together."

Match your strokes to mine. His words echoed in her head. Was it just she who was still furious about the

death of their passion? Although their romance and future together had ended when they'd slammed their different goals into each other, the man still got to her in a dangerous way. This trip had to be all business for her, all about getting a promotion, not rehashing the wreck of their relationship. She'd been dreading this whole slippery situation, but maybe talking it out could help her to finally write the obituary for what she'd thought was mutual love. She let out a breath, then inhaled deeply, not to savor the fresh, pine-scented air, but to calm herself.

Mitch Braxton seemed a different man from a year ago when they'd broken their engagement and he'd left her and Fort Lauderdale for the heart of Alaska. He'd broken her heart, but she'd been so angry with him that she'd quickly patched herself back together, at least on the surface. She'd gone on with a vengeance, not looking back until her boss set up this command performance at Mitch's lodge.

Lisa had worked hard to pretend to get over her resentment of his shattering her prettily planned-out life. She had expected to be a skilled attorney, a wife, a working mother to their future children. Though she knew better, sometimes she felt that, at age thirty-four, her marital and biological clocks were not only ticking but clanging. Just when she'd thought never to see Mitch again, Graham Bonner, the managing partner of Carlisle, Bonner & Associates, had been adamant that he had a unique plan for screening the three candidates for the next senior partner of the prestigious law firm.

Graham and his wife, Ellie, insisted they were taking the three junior partners to participate in the family/corporate bonding program Mitch offered at the lodge he'd inherited in Alaska. Since they'd only arrived yesterday, all they'd done so far was walk blindfolded through an obstacle course by following vocal directions—but so much more was in store. Scheduled during the week were ziplining and white-water rafting, all the while being observed by the Bonners to decide who would get the coveted senior partner position Mitch had abandoned.

Some of Lisa's friends had argued it was a crazy way to vet a lawyer, though it sounded like a great, free vacation. But Graham was clever and convincing. He'd learned the law-firm ropes from Ellie's father and her brother Merritt, who used to run the firm and had used it as a stepping stone to his fast-rising political career.

Come hell or high water, Lisa intended to be the new senior partner, but she knew her competitors Jonas and Vanessa were just as tenacious and ambitious. Maybe that was what the Bonners were judging them by anyway. She couldn't help but wonder if, as upset and betrayed as the Bonners had also felt by Mitch's defection, they hadn't still enlisted him to help them make the important decision. He'd always been the Bonners' golden boy. Once Lisa had even thought they were grooming him not only to take over the firm but to partner—in more ways than one—with their twenty-four-year-old only child, Claire, who was now in law school at Duke University, and would soon join the firm as its third-generation lawyer.

Stopping above another clearing where she could see the river, Lisa brushed several mosquitoes away, then put down the small plastic cooler she carried. The cooler had been beautifully packed, down to bright cloth napkins and a tablecloth by Mitch's lodge manager and chef, Christine. Like the lodge, Christine Tanaka seemed both down to earth, yet frontier elegant. Lisa had sensed something between Mitch and the striking, ebony-haired, high-cheek-boned woman, and was annoyed that it bothered her.

While Christine knew where they were going, Lisa hoped they wouldn't be missed by the others during this three-to-five afternoon break, when everyone had some private time before gathering for pre-dinner appetizers and wine.

She sprayed herself lightly with the bug repellent she'd brought along. Close to the lodge they fogged the

area and the brisk breeze today kept most of the mosquitoes away. She was used to them, being from South Florida, but the Alaska version seemed especially voracious. At least, in his introduction to them yesterday, Mitch had mentioned the bug season was waning.

She forced her gaze away from the river rapids and stuffed the small spray can back in the top of her sock, then rolled her jeans back down. She wore her running shoes and a life preserver over a light jacket and T-shirt, but the day seemed warm—too warm, if she kept thinking about Mitch.

Turning back to the river, Lisa fastened the Velcro straps of her orange PFD jacket. Mitch had warned them, "No one, not even Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, if he shows up here, goes out on the lake or the river without a PFD!"

She and her colleagues had joked that an attorney, on the losing end of a lawsuit, must have named it a Personal Flotation Device, but then it wasn't a plain old life preserver. PFDs were made of sleek, contoured neoprene, a far cry from those old bulbous, canvas jackets the cruise ships had passengers wear during lifeboat drills. For all she knew, that drill had given her mother the idea to jump overboard.

If Lisa was getting in a kayak for the first time, she was going prepared. She could swim like a fish, but since her family tragedy—though she tried not to let people know—churning water not only horrified her but lured her.

She picked up the cooler and glanced back down the path toward the sprawling two-story log lodge with its four rustic cabins huddled nearby like chicks around a mother hen. No sign of Mitch yet; he was busy here, king of his realm. But then, he'd seemed to be master of his fate in Florida, too, before the dam broke and their mutual future was swept away.

She heaved a huge sigh, staring down into the river. Mitch said he'd bring the drinks, and she wondered if it would be wine. Last year, the night they had broken up, she'd snapped her wine goblet off at the stem when he'd told her he had to get out of the rat race and leave Fort Lauderdale. Her hand had bled from a puncture wound; she still bore the scar—that and too many others as she went on with her high-flying career. That terrible night, she had tossed her engagement ring at him, and would have thrown the gold bracelet with the flying seagulls he'd bought her as well, except the clasp had stuck.

But now, when she looked back on that night, she knew she'd done things to upset him, too. She recalled Mitch's explosion when she'd told him she had volunteered both of them to testify at a state senate committee hearing. They were both under pressure then, working day and night on a high-profile money-laundering case. They'd been harassed, even stalked by someone, until Graham had suddenly taken them off the case for their safety. She was trying to find another way to keep them in what she thought of as "the local lawyer limelight." They were having drinks on the patio of her condo with its view of a golf course she'd never played.

"No way!" he'd shouted, shocking her. "I just can't take time to testify at some senate hearing! Leave that political stuff to Ellie's beloved brother, who will probably be our next senator or even president, for all I know!"

"Listen, I realize it will take time from your other cases, but it's great PR, and your name carries clout now," she'd insisted.

"I may be successful, but I'm so stressed I'm getting distracted—careless—when people's futures are in my

hands. I'm scared I'll not only ruin someone else's life, but my own. Carelessness can lead to self-destruction. Sometimes I don't give a damn about things I need to care for, to control. Half the time, all I've worked for seems pointless."

"Including a future with me? Our love, our plans, both professional and personal?" she'd demanded in her best litigator's voice. "Mitch, we can have everything together, including our careers, helping people, not wasting time on something pointless!"

That was when he'd dropped the bomb that he'd inherited his uncle's land and lodge and wanted to move to Alaska. He'd been meaning to find the right time to tell her. Would she change her plans to go with him?

Shocked and angry, she'd refused, accused him of being self-centered. But she saw now she had been, too. Why couldn't he understand that no urban career woman who loved luscious, lively Fort Lauderdale needed a dropout who preferred the lonely wilds of Alaska? No, she couldn't risk loving someone who suddenly claimed to be nearly suicidal, not after all she'd been through.

Now, lost in her regrets, trembling again at the memory, she frowned at the raging river. Then something happened. Somehow, it was as if her rage at her past, at her mother, at Mitch, pushed her over some psychic edge. She tumbled headlong off the path, off her feet. The cooler went flying, hit her knee. She screamed, lost her balance, then rolled sideways down the ridge.

She landed on a spruce sapling, but before she could grab it, it bent under her weight to fling her forward. In the clearing, nothing else stopped her fall. Over, over she rolled, until she slammed into the rushing river, going under. The frigid water shocked her. She gasped and sucked some in. Choked. Her sinuses burned while her skin froze.

The PFD lifted and righted her, head up, but foam crested over her. Mother with Jani in her arms fell over the rail again. The boiling foam devoured them, devoured Lisa. Had Mommy pulled her in with them? How did this happen? She was horrified for her family, for herself. Terror screamed at her, in her, echoing the smashing water, clawing at her courage.

She was swept around, past jutting rocks. She pulled her hands and feet in close. She had to get out but found nothing to hold as she was tossed, whirled, pulled and yanked, bumped by boulders, cold and drowning, dragged downriver.

Though the two glasses Mitch had thrown in his backpack with the cans of ginger ale were plastic, they clanked as he walked the ridge path, their dissonant sound nearly drowned by the river's roar. If Lisa thought he'd cart wine out here for some sort of a lovey-dovey reunion, she was wrong. This was strictly a business meeting, he told himself.

So what if he still felt he wanted her? It was a pure physical reaction from hot memories. His body's reaction to being near Lisa again was something he could absolutely handle—had to.

When he moved to Alaska, he'd needed to cleanse himself of the dirty feeling of defending clients he knew damn well were guilty. He felt guilt-ridden by his own obscenely high fees and the busy schedule that left no time for pro bono work. Pressure, pressure, pressure—and for what? Prestige? Cruising Lauderdale's canals in his boat, chasing women or raising a future family he didn't have time for? Unlike Ellie Bonner's brother, Merritt Carlisle, he didn't want the power that came from a place in national or even state politics. Back home—though this was home now—he'd been fed up with convoluted power connections in the fast-fleeting

fame lane. Thank God, Alaska had helped to heal him. It was said people who came to Alaska from outside were either running from something or to something. He guessed, in his case, it was both.

He knew he had let a lot of people down when he'd come north, but helping other people's families, friends and coworkers to connect with each other was far more fulfilling than his old life. He'd continued his uncle's work here through his adventure-bonding program. At least Graham and Ellie bringing their three candidates here to decide who should fill Mitch's vacant position showed they still trusted his judgment and had forgiven him for leaving.

But golden-skinned, blonde, beach-baby Lisa Vaughn had never understood why he had to change his life, leave Florida for Alaska to keep his sanity, even if it meant changing the plans they'd made. They needed to just talk it out, this time briefly, unemotionally, objectively, then they could get back to the business at hand.

He wished Lisa well in her quest to make senior partner, but he wasn't playing favorites. He owed Graham that—Ellie, too, because her father had founded the firm, and the old man had eventually made his son-in-law Graham a full partner before he died. Graham had been Mitch's mentor, just as Mitch had tried to mentor Jonas, the candidate he actually favored, although both Lisa and Vanessa were excellent lawyers. No one worked at Carlisle, Bonner & Associates of Fort Lauderdale, Miami and Palm Beach, if they weren't. Though Mitch didn't especially trust politicians, Merritt, who had still been a lawyer at the firm when Mitch first worked there, was someone who had managed to keep his nose clean.

Just before he cut off the ridge path onto the downward spur toward the lake landing where he'd told Lisa he'd meet her, he spotted the small, white cooler Christine had said she'd given to Lisa. It was open, with wrapped appetizers, bright plates and napkins, strewn down the ridge toward the river like a hand pointing toward the water. Had Lisa seen a bear and run? No, the bear wouldn't have left the food.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Erica Clark:

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Megan Rivera:

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Curtis Waters:

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