

LIKE AN ANGEL

By Bonnie Adams

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Published by The Fiction Works
Corvallis • Omaha • Lake Tahoe
www.fictionworks.com

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ISBN 1-58124-726-5
Printed in the
United States of America

Dedication:

For my parents, Jim and Jean
(How I wish you were here)

For Ted, Bev and Kelly

and

My Co-Queens, Barb and Judy

**Cassandra Phillippa Morrison
is on the run—again.**

Her Porsche is dead at the side of a dirt road, she's lost, her feet hurt, and she's still dressed in the silk gown in which she'd escaped New York. Feeling betrayed and used, she wants nothing more than to hide out at her grandfather's ranch for a while. Hopefully, her father, millionaire tycoon Richard Andrews Morrison, won't retrieve her as easily as he has in the past.

Brice Logan has never run away from a problem in his life and just because he's inherited a foster family of three kids is no reason to start now. He's perfectly capable of fostering the kids alone, but since two of them are girls, the Ministry of Social Services will close the home unless he finds a suitable female care giver. He knows he needs a woman to stay for the long haul, not flit off whenever circumstances get tough. And women like that don't just drop into the middle of a Saskatchewan prairie with every other dawn.

Chapter One

“I need a woman bad, Joe. Real bad.”

“When you find one, can we share?” Joe asked, his hazel eyes wide and solemn. But that was to be expected, considering.

“Sure, but how’m I going to find one out here?” Brice Logan’s aching whisper arched across the dawn-pink prairie. He wrapped his hands around his oversized coffee mug. The warmth in his palms was a comfort and Lord knew, he needed it. He stared into the dust of the front yard and cursed softly. There were no answers in the whorls and footprints he saw. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Enough. The boy needed him. He glanced at Joe and found him deep in thought. Surprised, Brice settled on the porch swing and held it still for Joe to climb up. The boy wasn’t usually so quiet. Not like he used to be.

“Maybe one’ll just come,” Joe announced suddenly in a clear, decisive voice. “You know, sorta like a’ angel?”

Brice couldn’t help but grin. He slanted a look at him, but Joe was staring off into the distance. He ruffled the boy’s hair quickly, so Joe wouldn’t notice or mind being touched.

“Sure,” he agreed, “like an angel. Don’t worry,

Joe, we'll find one. We'll start to look first thing tomorrow."

Joe jumped down, as solemn as ever he'd been. "We don't have to." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Can't you see her? The angel, just like I said." He moved out of Brice's way, pointing down the driveway.

Brice saw her then, too.

An angel.

An angel in a silvery, shimmery long dress. Tall and slinky. Long, white-gold hair loose in the breeze, the rosy dawn behind her like a cloak she'd just let fly in the wind. Like an angel.

No, not an angel. Angels didn't hobble on bare feet or dangle little sandals from elegant hands.

A woman.

A woman in trouble, he thought, and ran for her.

He got close enough to see the bottom half of her gown was covered in dust. Her hair, probably not used to wild prairie winds, was more tangled than gently combed. She was a mess and angry as spit. Or at least she was trying to be. She looked too tired to do much more than let her eyes burn indignantly. She stopped hobbling when she saw them running toward her.

In spite of her obvious exhaustion, she squared her shoulders and tilted her head in an expectant, haughty set. Her eyes, wide, startled and clear blue, looked straight at him, caught, as if trying to recognize him. Her parted lips were full and trembling.

He was prepared to catch her if she fell, but from the determination in her stance, her legs would know

better than to give out on her now. He slowed to a walk and grinned as reassuringly as he could.

She stared back, not smiling. Her chest rose and fell as she took deep, even breaths. Her low-cut gown clung and outlined her full breasts with each breath. Her nipples stood out fully against the dawn's chill. He swallowed once and looked back up at her face.

"Hello?" she said, her voice a little foggy. "I'm so glad you're already awake." She waved a slim arm gracefully out and around, staggering slightly from the movement. "I can't believe I'm walking around out here at dawn. May I please use your phone to call the auto club?"

Her voice was soft, the tone cultured, educated, the accent foreign. Probably American, he decided. At least she wasn't some hooker left at the side of the road at midnight.

"No," he answered briefly.

First, he saw disbelief, then shock, and finally, outrage, in her perfect patrician features. Her chin tilted, eyes flashed and hair seemed to move and sway with an angry will of its own. If looks could harm, he'd be nothing but roadkill.

"I'll pay," she announced, her husky tones clear now. She dropped her gaze a little too quickly, then pressed her teeth into her lower lip.

If life had taught him anything at all, it was that lip chewing meant a lie. Quite often, the person also wanted to take the lie back. Was it possible his angel was dead broke?

All the better for him.

He smiled again, not wanting her to run screaming down the road. "We don't have a phone in the house."

The woman glanced around quickly, nervously, until her gaze settled on the wires overhead. She looked straight up at them, waiting until he stared at them as well. "You don't?" she asked in a clear, firm tone.

Cassandra Phillipa Morrison waited, unflinching, even though every sinew, every ligament, protested her correct, disciplined posture. She kept on waiting while the man stared up at the telephone wires as if he'd never seen them before. The little boy with him scuffed his sneakers in the dust and kept his head down.

"I had it disconnected last month," he finally said and blinked. "I had to stop the phone abuse somehow," he added, as if anyone could see the wisdom of his decision. All Andi could see was six feet of solid, muscular man standing between her and the luxury of a very cheap motel room. If she were less tired, he wouldn't appear so intimidating. If she were less tired, he wouldn't be swaying in front of her and the world wouldn't look so fuzzy

"Here," he said, bending in front of her. "I'll carry you." He scooped her into his arms and staggered once before he set off.

Warm, strong, steel bands for arms held her high and close to his chest. She took a moment to comprehend that he'd even picked her up.

This sort of thing simply didn't happen to a Morrison.

"Let go of me, you big, dumb farmer," she demanded, flailing her arms and legs. She was too weak, or too lightweight to set him off balance. "You can't just carry me off like this!" She bucked harder but all she heard for her efforts was a quiet grunt.

She saw the little boy's eyes go wide as he saw what his father had done. At least someone in this family understood decorum. Then he turned on his heels and raced ahead of them shouting as he ran. Andi couldn't hear what he shouted because he was moving away too quickly.

She gave a stronger kick and buck and heard a whoosh of breath from the man holding her, but he continued his steady pace toward the house and away from the road.

The little boy was far ahead. "Help!" she called, certain her only rescuer was barely three feet tall. Her sandals would make great weapons if she could only swing them up and around. "Help me!"

When she checked where the farmer's attention was, she found it on her. His deep brown eyes watched hers steadily. Intrigued, she stopped flailing and looked every bit as steadily back at him, and waited. Surely he didn't intend to carry her the full length of this driveway?

"Look around here lady, do you see the cavalry? Do you see anybody or any thing?" His lip lifted in a half grin she found fascinating. He wasn't even breath-

ing heavily, in spite of her best efforts to exhaust him.

She'd used the last of her strength along three or so miles of totally empty gravel road. That explained why wriggling in his arms soon became more work than it was worth. It had nothing to do with the underlying warmth and amusement she read behind his gaze and his grin.

Let him wear himself out, she thought, settling into the crook of his strong arms. She hung onto his neck with one arm, aware of the steady, rising beat of his heart under the palm of her other hand. It wasn't the worst place she'd been in the last few days. In fact, it was quite comfortable. He smelled of soap and warmth and woodsy things and not at all like a big, dumb farmer. Weren't they supposed to do sweaty chores at dawn?

The house he was taking her to was old, big and rambling. She saw two stories with six evenly spaced windows on each. A deep veranda stretched across the whole front. It was white with green shutters and very, very still. The little boy had gone inside and not come out again. Heaven knew what he was telling his mother.

When they reached the front of the house, the man carried her up three steps to the porch. His heart was racing. Startled, she looked up at him. His eyes, still watching her, said heated things. He was obviously as aware of her closeness as she was of his. She should have kept up the fight, but even now, even with his warm interest, the strength in his arms didn't threaten,

but reassured.

The hitch in his lips didn't bloom into anything more and Andi was vaguely disappointed.

He allowed her to slide slowly down the length of his body to her feet, trailing his hands along her spine to rest on her lower waist.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Can you stand?" He kept his hands on her, holding her pressed against him as if he didn't want to let her go.

Was her weakness from her long, hard days on the road, or the man's nearness and support? All she knew was he was easy to lean against. What would his wife think if she came upon them like this?

His eyes flashed with sudden humor, effectively denying the heat she'd seen in them. "You'd best stand on your own two feet. It's been a long time since I've had more than a soft bath towel against me. A warm woman might go right to my head."

The humor in his eyes only served to underscore the warning in his voice.

She stepped back a pace, but was still too sluggish to put any more distance between them. She might fall over before long without his help. "What are you going to do with me?" she whispered, confused and caught in his mesmerizing look.

Her mind must be fried with fatigue, she thought, to ask such a question. She took another, stronger step backward.

"I'm going to use you until I don't need you any more," he said bluntly.

She gasped, trying to absorb his words. They were beyond comprehension, almost incoherent. Except for one. Use.

A high, eerie, keening sound filled the silence between them. It shocked her, but not enough to quell the chill his words had brought on.

“What the hell . . .” he opened the door and looked inside. “What’s all the screaming about?” he hollered.

Andi flinched, afraid for whoever was wailing. What could have happened to make someone cry out like that? She held on to the porch railing, refusing to give in to panic.

The farmer looked back at her over his shoulder, his eyes hard and cold. He assessed her a moment longer, cocked an ear for the crying and headed inside the farmhouse.

Suddenly alone on the porch in the still quiet of dawn she felt . . . deflated. Anti-climactic. She’d been so filled with him, every sense alive and tingling because he held her. And now . . . nothing. Just waiting. She’d heard exhaustion caused all manner of strange reactions. This was proof.

She watched him through the screen door, standing, dusty boots and all, on the burnished wood floor. Some woman would have his head for that. Maybe not. Not if the woman of the house was the person wailing upstairs. What in the world was going on?

“Marianne!” he called from the bottom of a long straight staircase that rose up the side of the wall. He took them two at a time, his leg and buttock muscles

bunching powerfully under his well-worn jeans.

If she had any strength or sense left she'd set off down the driveway and keep on going until she reached civilization. Or the next farm, whichever came first. She searched the horizon, but now that the sun was completely up she couldn't make out any other lights or buildings.

There was no cavalry to rescue her, just as the man had said. There was nothing here but miles and miles of Saskatchewan. Canada was a much bigger country than she'd thought and these prairies went on forever.

She heard more crying from inside the house and peered through the screen again.

The farmer was at the top of the stairs. He was deceptively built. Tall and sinewy, without the bulk she'd expect to see in a man who carried her a full quarter mile without losing breath. He rattled a door at the top of the stairs, his other hand splayed against the painted door. It was a strong hand, long-fingered and gentle. Warm.

He'd said something about needing her.

No.

It was using her. He planned to use her until he didn't need her any more. She straightened, deliberately closing off the sound of the sobs.

She should be getting as far away from here as she could, not gawking through the door like a nosy neighbor. These people and their problems had nothing to do with her. The farmer could handle this emergency, whatever it was. He was more than capa-

ble, especially if he'd been the cause of it all.

She pulled herself away and took two painful steps across the porch. With any luck, she'd find the next farmhouse by noon.

The man suddenly burst onto the porch, wild-eyed. He looked up the driveway toward the road, then swept his gaze across the rest of the yard.

He was far too distracted and plain disorganized to pose any real threat to her. Use her? He didn't know the meaning of the word. She'd been used by the best all her life; bred for it, in fact. This farmer didn't have a hope in Hades of using her, even for a little while.

"I'll just go," she said softly. "You seem caught up in something and I'm sure I'll find another farmhouse around here somewhere." She edged toward the stairs, smiling encouragement.

"Did you see a teen-aged girl come out this way?" The desperation in his eyes caught at her befuddled sense of relief.

"Another captive?" she asked.

"You have to help me," he said, obviously too upset to rise to the bait of her silly question. That was good, because she could never follow it up. "Marianne won't let me into her room and Jayne's gone off somewhere, so I can't ask her."

"Marianne's the one who's crying," Andi guessed, hoping for confirmation, "and Jayne's the teenager I should have seen out here."

He nodded twice.

"Get your wife to handle it," she suggested sharply.

“If I had a wife I wouldn’t need your help,” he snapped back.

If he had a wife he wouldn’t have mentioned that warm woman thing earlier. “I must be as crazy as you are,” she said, and shook her head. “Okay. You win.” Maybe she should put her sandals back on. No, her feet were probably too swollen to get into them. “But you owe me.” She watched him, waiting for his acknowledgement of the deal she offered.

He nodded once, curtly. “Deal.” He touched her on the elbow to help her turn toward the door. His hands were warm and gentle, exactly as she recalled. She winced and groaned with each step. He sighed impatiently next to her ear as she leaned on him. “Can you make it, or do you want me to carry you again?”

“No,” she said quickly. If he held her the way he had before, she’d fall to pieces. She’d never forgive herself if he saw how close she was to collapse.

She managed, by clutching at his arm, to hobble up the longest, steepest staircase she’d ever climbed. When she made it to just outside the bedroom door she waited for him to knock quietly.

“May I please come in?” she called softly through the door, while looking directly at her companion. “My name is Andi.” She used the nickname she preferred over her father’s use of the formal Cassandra. It was a name even the press wasn’t aware she used.

The man quirked an eyebrow saucily and nodded. “Brice,” he said.

Brice. A name she’d never heard before. Brice. It

rolled smoothly into her mind and clicked into place. She'd never forget it. Or him, she admitted. He'd be one of the stories she'd tell her friends when she got back to New York where she belonged.

She heard a key in the lock and the door slowly opened inward. A girl of about ten or eleven peered out at them. Midnight curls framed the girl's pretty tear-streaked face. A child. She'd never even spoken to a girl this young. What was she supposed to do now?

The girl stood back to let Andi enter. If this was the little boy's sister, then they had completely different coloring. The boy was golden-hued and sturdy. The girl had pale, translucent skin and was long-limbed and graceful. White as a sheet, the poor child hugged herself in her thin nightie.

She choked in a heavy sob. "I'm scared and I . . . I . . . don't know what to do." She glanced over her shoulder at her bed. Andi followed her gaze and saw the simple evidence of Marianne's puberty.

Andi reached out hesitantly to touch the girl's wayward black curls.

Marianne stepped back away from her, crimson with embarrassment.

Andi tried a smile. "Don't worry, I'll help you. There's nothing to be frightened of or embarrassed about." Her smile never wavered. It must have encouraged the girl because she smiled weakly in return.

"I'm not really scared. I mean, I know what this is, I just . . . don't know what to do about it."

There seemed to be only one thing to do. Andi pulled the girl close and hugged her until the sobs eased. An explanation as old as time came as easily to her as if she'd made it a dozen times before.

What a position to find herself in, Andi thought. A surrogate parent on an occasion that should have been a special time between mother and daughter.

An hour later, Andi sat in a warm, large country kitchen that smacked of being affronted at the condition in which it found itself. The dishrags draped on the handles of the gleaming appliances didn't belong there. The floor had sticky spots and hard bits that crunched under her tender feet and something that looked like tomato sauce was liberally sprayed over the backsplash behind the sink.

With her feet propped on a chair Brice had placed in front of her, Andi stared levelly at him. She toyed with the spoons that filled an old jelly jar in the middle of the longest kitchen table she'd ever seen. The wood gleamed dully from years of wiping, nicks rubbed so smooth they were almost unnoticeable. Andi circled one with the tip of her finger. Exhaustion threatened to pull her into sleep, right where she sat.

Brice looked at the floor, then the stove, the refrigerator and finally at the ceiling. "How is Marianne?"

"Relieved. Embarrassed." When Marianne had slipped her thin arms around Andi's neck and thanked her, Andi's breath had caught. She'd never been hugged by a child before. She liked the honesty. She

liked Marianne.

He shifted in his chair and stared hard at the clock, as if willing it to stop.

Andi wanted only to speed it up. "How can I get my car towed to the nearest town?" She'd already wasted enough time here. She could have been in Alberta by now.

He shrugged. Maybe Barney could tow it in to his garage.

She nodded, fully expecting him to take his assistance to the obvious conclusion. When he didn't, she sighed. "Then could you drive me to the nearest town so I can call the auto club and check into a motel?"

"No."

There it was again. His unequivocal denial of a simple request for no apparent reason. What was it with this man? Didn't he have a friendly bone in his body?

"Hey, you owe me, remember?" Familiar anger, swift and sure started to rise. "If I hadn't been nice and explained the simple rules of womanhood to your precious Marianne, you'd be blundering through your own convoluted explanation right now."

She'd hit the mark with that one. His face flushed deep red and he looked straight at his boots. "You can't check into a motel. We don't have one in Ibbotsville."

He must be a marvelous dancer, he could sidestep so well.

"Oh." She should have known there was some hidden reason for his stone cold no. She was learning, quickly, that this Brice was full of hidden reasons for

things he did and said. So what else was he hiding?

She looked around the kitchen. A designer evening gown was definitely not in step with the surroundings. Especially one that had been hand washed for the past two nights before last.

“Andi?” The little boy who’d been with Brice out on the driveway spoke up and demanded her attention. Until now, all he’d done was stare at her as if she’d disappear like a leprechaun if he blinked.

She looked over the mountain-high pile of cookies he was apparently having for breakfast and smiled at him. “Yes, unh, what was your name again?” For the life of her she couldn’t remember. Maybe they hadn’t been introduced.

He poked his chest with his thumb and sucked in a big breath. “I’m Joe, don’t call me Joey, ’cause I’m too big for baby names. Are you ours, now?”

It all came out in such a rush, Andi wasn’t sure she heard right. “Ours?” She swung her gaze to Brice’s.

He grinned back. “He means are you staying for awhile?”

She looked back at Joe who gazed at her expectantly. Great, first she’d played mama with a girl she didn’t know and now she had to try to converse with this pint-sized version of a man. What a morning! “Staying? Only until I can get myself and my car to town.”

Joe looked around at Brice and nodded several times. “See, I told’ja we wouldn’t get split up.”

Brice nodded and suspicion drifted through Andi’s

mind like thick fog. Something was going on. Whatever it was, she probably wouldn't like it.

"Joe," Brice said, "go out to the shed and get Jayne. I've got to talk to Andi."

Andi waited until Joe had closed the door behind him so he wouldn't hear her. "What's going on here? Why is Jayne locked in a shed in the yard?" Her voice rose along with her suspicions. "And how many of you are there?" She was one level below a shout. What had Joe meant when he'd said they wouldn't be split up?

"Four altogether. You've met everyone but Jayne, who is not locked in the shed. I've got no idea what she's doing out there." He ran his long fingers through his sand-colored hair. His eyes looked a little desperate. He sighed, as if he was as confused as Andi. "Jayne began going out to the shed right after the funeral. She spends most of her time there now."

Andi focused on one word. "Funeral?" she squeaked. Brice nodded, apparently trying to reassure her. "This is a foster home, Andi. Nothing sinister, nothing to hide. Emily was the other foster parent and she's gone"

"Dead, you mean," she said, nodding her head for confirmation, to clear her own confusion.

He grimaced at the word she'd used. A rawness filled his eyes. Then he flicked his gaze to the wall and kept it there. His jaw clenched once. Twice.

She'd give anything to take the words back.

"Yes, dead," he said, with a final hollow ring in his voice.

She shivered with the intensity of his grief. What could she possibly say to him?

He rose from his chair and stood so close she had to crane her neck to look into his face. “Now that Emily’s dead . . .” Desperation glinted deep in his eyes, beneath the civil surface. “. . . you have to stay for awhile.”

Chapter Two

Brice's pain was so fresh, Andi felt enveloped by it. By him. He was so blatantly male and so blatantly in need of comfort she couldn't think straight. "I'm sorry," she whispered, fighting desperately to resist the pull of the man. "I didn't mean to remind you of your wife"

He leaned over her even more closely, tugging at her emotions, drawing her very heart from her chest. Did all women respond so readily to a man in trouble?

"Wife? Emily wasn't my wife." He stared at her, his deep brown eyes mere inches away, apparently baffled for a moment. "But that doesn't matter now." He blinked and waved his hand as if to dismiss the thought. "What does matter is that you're staying. You have to."

She may be swamped by conflicting emotions, but she wasn't that confused. "No, I don't," she said succinctly.

She tried to rise, but he placed both his hands on her shoulders and held her lightly. The desperation in his eyes held her much more firmly. Watching him, she silently demanded an explanation, still fighting her desire to touch his cheek in comfort. She kept her hands to herself.

He took a deep breath, held it, glanced once more at the rooster-shaped clock over the sink and sighed. "I

know I can't force you." He smiled a short, dazzling grin that warned her of how engaging he could probably be when he wanted to convince a woman her wishes were the same as his.

Andi heeded the warning and closed her mind against the image of his grief-stricken eyes. "This story had better be good. And sane," she said. She shrugged lightly to test if he'd let her go.

He removed his warm palms from her shoulders immediately and stepped back. She breathed deeply for the first time in what seemed like ages, but he'd taken his warmth and his woodsy manscent with him.

"Coffee? Cereal?" he asked, as if the intensity between them hadn't existed. "You must be starved." He went to the cupboard next to the refrigerator and got three different cereals. All of them were sugar-coated and had artificial flavoring. He crossed his arms and looked at her dubiously. "I could make toast."

She nodded yes gratefully, biting back a request for him to get on with his explanation. The smell of the bread toasting reminded her that her world had not gone awry, it was simply tilted a little. And not for very long, she reminded herself.

Brice watched her as if she might make a run for the back door. She shifted uneasily. He poured her coffee. "Emily Matthews was my foster mother." He leaned on the counter beside the stove, ankles crossed negligently, but eyes as wary as a hunter's. "I came back to foster with her when Bart, her husband, died. I need to find a woman to replace her, or lose the

kids.” His voice grated over every word. “I won’t lose the kids.”

“Lose the children?” she whispered, as if to herself. She thought of the trust she’d seen in Marianne’s face, the confidence she’d heard in Joey’s—no Joe’s—tone when he’d announced they wouldn’t be split up. Brice’s situation was becoming more clear and more impossible, by the second.

“Oh, no, buster, not me.” She raised her hands, palms out. Her silver gown winked in the bright kitchen light, giving her a way out. “Look at this dress! Look at my hands!” She displayed a three-day old manicure as if it would ward off evil spirits. “A woman in a kitchen like this should be in denim, not satin or lace.” That much was obvious, even to him, surely.

When he continued to watch her without so much as a blink, she got nervous, on top of her shock. “I,” she emphasized the word, “can’t stay here.”

“Not with a big, dumb farmer you mean?” His voice was soft, coaxing. He looked at the clock again.

“I can’t stay here!” Maybe if she said it often enough and loudly enough, he’d listen. “And what are you waiting for?” she demanded, long past the point of polite inquiry.

“Is someone waiting for you?” His gaze flicked over her unlikely mode of dress for a long car trip and she felt her cheeks heat. The gown was very slinky, very revealing and she filled it out very well.

“No,” she hesitated, “not exactly.” This Brice would never understand why she was deliberately dis-

appearing. He had probably never run away from a problem in his life. He probably never would.

Andi always did. It was her way.

Brice set a plate of toast in front of her. He went to the doorway leading to the hall and hollered through the house for Marianne to come down for breakfast. Then he called out the back door for Joe and Jayne. He swung back to her, still holding the door wide open. "Look, you don't have to stay long. A social worker's coming over this afternoon, after the kids get home from their picnic."

She didn't like the direction the conversation was taking at all.

He frowned. "We'll have to talk with her and she'll decide whether or not to remove the kids from my care. I don't think she wants to." His worried expression disappeared, replaced by hopeful decisiveness. "I figure if I have a woman here to . . . you know, help out with the chores, the cooking, washing, that kind of thing, it would be harder for her to take them." He stared at her earnestly. "Harder for her to decide to take them." He walked across the broad kitchen, splayed strong fingers on the table as he leaned on it and looked her in the eye.

The look sent a shiver through to her very core.

"I won't let these kids go, Andi."

He couldn't be serious! "Are you blind? Or just deaf?" she demanded. "Have you heard nothing I've said?"

"Sure, I have. No one's waiting for you." He

shrugged as if to say 'no problem'.

Her legs ached.

Her feet were swollen and bruised.

Her stomach rumbled at the smell of the cinnamon sprinkled on her toast. "I refuse to decide right now." It was all too much. She was so tired she couldn't think straight any more.

He must have realized how she felt because he smiled, easing up a little.

She thought of good cop, bad cop scenes she'd seen on television detective shows.

"You look exhausted," he said gently. "Why don't you eat, then have a nap. You'll feel better."

She grasped at the chance to sleep in a real bed. Her Porsche was meant to be driven not slept in. "Yes," she nodded. "I'll rest and we'll discuss it later." She no longer cared which cop she was dealing with, the good or the bad.

He nodded once, curtly, and looked past her shoulder into the hallway behind her. Andi turned to see what he was looking at. Marianne, her expression clearly embarrassed, moved into the room with a shy glance toward Brice.

As confusing as the morning had been so far, Andi was certain the girl just needed a little attention and reassurance. "Marianne, I need more cream for my coffee and my feet are very sore. Could you . . .?" With Marianne able to return a simple favor, her awkwardness vanished. Andi noticed all too well how close the girl sat to her and how she stared in fascination at

her totally inappropriate gown. For the first time in her life, she wasn't dressed for the occasion.

Andi woke from her nap determined to convince Brice to take her to the nearest town and let her use the telephone. One call to Red Deer and Granddad would come for her. She could trust him not to call New York, especially after she explained the situation. Andi had tried so hard, this time, to do everything right, to be more than just a beautiful face with a powerful name. But her father had still managed to outwit her. Richard Andrews Morrison had still managed to use her.

Even if she did stay to talk to this social worker person, it wouldn't take long for the woman to realize how wrong Andi was for this place. For these people. She'd been bred for the correct corporate image, not making certain children had grape jelly with their peanut butter sandwiches.

She stretched under the thin sheet and sat up. On a small chair by the door she spied a pair of blue jeans, a checkered shirt and a pair of scruffy, fluffy slippers. Farm clothes. Better than nothing, she thought and climbed out of bed.

The jeans must be Brice's, she realized as she discovered at least four inches of extra waistband. The shirt, too, she thought as she folded the sleeves precisely four times before they settled at her forearms. She'd have to ask for a belt or the pants would fall down. She clasped the waistband with one hand, stead-

ied herself against the wall with the other as she settled her aching feet into the fuzzy slippers. Then she took a step and winced.

The house was very quiet as Andi hobbled downstairs to the kitchen. Too quiet. She knew for certain she was alone when she saw the breakfast dishes stacked in the sink and the coffee maker turned off. Brice was gone.

Earlier, she'd heard a stampede as the children had rushed out the door to a friend's waiting car, so she supposed they were gone on the picnic Brice had mentioned. But Brice's whereabouts were a mystery.

Moving slowly, gently, she went to the back door and looked out across the Saskatchewan prairie. The earth was split into two perfectly even parts: A top and a bottom, one blue and still, the other golden and rippling. Sky and wheat with nothing in between.

Did Red Deer look like this? She thought hard to remember what Granddad had told her about his own grandparents' ranch. He'd said there were mountains in the distance. And cattle. No, Alberta probably didn't look like this. No place on earth could look like this. She had to find Brice. He had to get her out of here. Her feet protested, but she managed to convince them a stroll around the outside of the house wouldn't be too arduous.

She was wrong. She saw a barn, a woodpile, a shed but no Brice. There was a big ginger cat lying in the sun atop the wood pile, but he was intent on watching birds in the eaves of the barn. He must be pretending

to be the next log for the fire, she thought. She knew the type. They waited for one trusting move by their prey then chewed them up and spat them out just for the pleasure of the hunt.

“Brice!” she called out firmly. Surely he wasn’t gone so far that he couldn’t hear her. She thought she heard an answering call from deep inside the barn so she started a painful journey toward the building.

The small door beside the big double ones opened and Brice stepped out, carefully closing it behind him. He hurried to her.

“You shouldn’t be up and walking, yet, Andi.” His loud sigh was full of impatience. “You’ll never be able to convince Laura Jones you’re here to stay if you can’t stand up when she gets here.”

“That’s a rather large assumption to make, Brice.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I still haven’t said I’ll stay,” she said, determined to leave before Laura Jones appeared on the horizon. “Could I see your copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, please?”

“No.” He stood right in front of her, his expression dead blank.

The cat slanted a disgusted look their way. The ruckus had spoiled his hunt. She took a small pleasure from the thought.

This time, she knew exactly what Brice was doing. She stood her ground and waited for his explanation.

“I don’t get the *Wall Street Journal*,” he said blandly.

“What? That’s ridiculous!” she heard her control

break and the words come like grapeshot. “First, no telephone,” she held up her hand and counted off her fingers, “then no motel for miles and now no Journal? This is simply more than I can take.” She glared at him, determined to have something go her way today. “Everyone gets the *Journal*,” she stated indignantly.

Thunder crossed his features and she felt a moment of doubt. Maybe she’d gone too far.

“Nobody gets the *Journal*,” he snapped. “You’re in Saskatchewan, Andi, not New York. Why in hell would I want to read the *Wall Street Journal*?” He swung away from her, his whole body vibrating controlled rage. “Damn,” he said in barely more than a growl.

She considered him a moment. He had reason to be angry she supposed. He wasn’t asking all that much. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. This air was fresh, rich with the smell of wheat fields and topsoil. It was not familiar but it was certainly heady.

She wasn’t in New York and it was wonderful to finally acknowledge the fact. She opened her eyes and was startled to see that he’d turned to her again. Now, he studied her with bitterness. It couldn’t be easy for a man like him to ask for help. And she’d almost made him beg. She felt herself give way, unable to push him that extra distance, unwilling to see him humble himself, aware again of the filled up feeling being near him brought. “Brice . . .?” she asked in invitation.

“Logan. Brice Logan.”

She nodded. “Well, Brice Logan, since you’re obvi-

ously not going to drive me into town until after this welfare person visits, I might as well accept my position gracefully and help you out.”

He snorted.

She ignored it, acknowledging to herself how little grace she was displaying. “After all, you have loaned me some clothes and a bed. I suspect a few more hours won’t make any difference.” Besides, this whole episode would make wonderfully funny dinner conversation for months.

Everyone would scream with laughter at her descriptions of the rugged old barn, the lean-to where the wood was piled and the magnificence of the prairie. And the sky, she must remember to tell them all about the unending sky. They wouldn’t laugh at that. No one could, she thought, sweeping her gaze across the expanse of prairie. No one could laugh at this sky.

The preparations for Laura Jones’s visit went like clockwork, except, of course, for everything of importance. Brice thought the kitchen should smell like muffins baking, but Andi couldn’t bake. He made spaghetti sauce instead. Andi couldn’t stand long enough to wash the dishes so Brice took care of them. Andi’s jeans kept threatening to go south until Brice dug a belt out of Jayne’s closet for her. Brice Logan didn’t need Andi Morrison, Andi thought, he needed Cassandra Morrison’s maid, Tilda.

Andi sat on the living room sofa and waited while

Brice vacuumed under the coffee table. The front door slammed and Marianne skidded to a halt in the hallway outside the living room. She beamed beautifully when she saw Andi, giving her the impression the living room was used only for special occasions and special visitors.

“Hi, how are your feet?” Marianne asked.

“A little better,” Andi replied, holding up her feet in the fuzzy slippers. They hardly hurt at all now. She and Brice had decided she wouldn’t chance standing until Mrs. Jones arrived.

“How was the picnic? Was Tommy there?” Brice asked, over the roar of the vacuum.

Marianne grimaced at Andi, rolled her eyes and shrugged. “Okay, I guess. And yes, Tommy was there.”

He nodded and moved, vacuum and all, into the dining room. When his back was turned, Marianne mouthed the words, who cares.

Andi mouthed back, not me. They shared a secret smile that took Andi’s breath away. What was wrong with her? She had no lack of friends and far too many acquaintances. Why should a smile with a little girl mean so much?

“Here she comes!” Joe barrelled into the room and dove onto the sofa to look out the front window behind it. “She’s only got a little car!”

“What’s the size of her car got to do with anything?” Marianne asked, going to stand beside him.

“She can’t take us all away, ’cause we won’t fit! Yeh, yeh, yeh!” he hollered, zooming out of the living

room, imaginary tires squealing.

Andi could only accept his logic. After all, he was right, she saw, when she looked through the gauzy curtains to see Laura Jones's little import. She drew in a fortifying breath and told herself not to take this so seriously. It shouldn't matter to her one way or the other if Brice Logan got to keep his foster children or not. But it did matter, she knew, as she looked at Marianne's anxious face. She gave the girl's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before going to open the front door.

When Andi opened the door she saw Laura Jones had her hand raised to knock. Her mouth dropped open at sight of Andi. It was no wonder, Andi thought, she must look a fright. Her nails hadn't been done in days and her make-up was practically non-existent. Swallowing an unfamiliar self-consciousness, she smiled.

"Please come in." She extended a hand in formal welcome and decided to use Granddad's name. She couldn't afford for a connection to her father to be made. "I'm Andi Goodson. And you are Laura Jones?"

"Yes, yes I am." The caseworker smiled tightly, showing small teeth and large gums. She accepted Andi's hand with a brisk shake and entered the front hallway.

"Brice? Laura Jones is here." Andi called over her shoulder as if Brice had no idea who was at the door.

He came up behind her and nodded. "Laura. How's Dave?"

"He's fine, Brice. He got back from El Salvador two

weeks ago. Now he's catching up on everything."

"Good, good." Brice nodded.

Andi's mind screamed with curiosity, but she said nothing. The less she added to any conversation, she decided, the less likely she'd be to mess things up. Brice and Laura sat on the sofa and she took the wing chair nearest the door. She didn't want to walk across the room in front of Laura in case the other woman noticed something wrong with her gait. Explaining her slight limp and how she got here were the last things she wanted to do.

And that meant she couldn't ask for a ride into town. Her heart sank as she realized she was still at the mercy of Brice Logan's neighborliness.

She heard Marianne's name come up and tried to fall into step with the conversation.

Brice cleared his throat. "Yes, well, Andi helped her first thing this morning."

"I see." Laura flashed a look of thoughtful curiosity toward her and Andi smiled back, hoping to look the picture of warmth and efficiency. "Tell me, Miss Goodson, how is it that you came to be here?"

She flashed a quick glance at Brice and just had time to register his shock at the bluntness of the question, before looking straight into Mrs. Jones's eyes. "I'm Emily's niece," she lied smoothly. Her stomach clenched lightly but she ignored it.

"I had no idea Emily had a niece," Laura said as smoothly. "I do know, however, that she had no sisters or brothers." She waited two beats before adding,

“Emily Matthews was an only child.” Her eyebrows rose in question, as if to say, get yourself out of that one, missy.

Andi’s heart skipped a beat, while her mind screamed that none of this concerned her anyway. “Well, you see, I’m actually only related to Aunt Emily by marriage.” She inclined her head regally. “My mother’s side, you know.” If her smile were any more false it would crack and fall off, taking the rest of her face with it.

“Uh huh, so that would make you . . . ?” The gleam in the social worker’s eyes was diamond hard.

Andi blinked. Yes, what would that make me? She pulled up a mental image of the names she’d seen carved into the porch swing’s arm. Emily and . . . Brice had mentioned the husband’s name earlier . . . “That would make me Bart’s sister’s daughter,” she said, the breath whooshing out of her on a sigh of incredible relief.

“Of course.” Laura said, a maple sugar smile making it patently clear she didn’t believe Andi for a minute. Then she turned to a shocked-looking Brice. “Dave will be giving a slide presentation of his trip at the library soon. I’ll let you know the date.”

Brice hoped he managed to get through the next half hour without sounding desperate or crazy. The two younger kids trooped in on cue and chatted for a few minutes each. Now, it was Jayne’s turn. She was the only one he was concerned about. She’d avoided everyone all day, starting at dawn with her trip out to

the shed. She'd ignored Andi completely and now she sauntered in as if nothing was wrong. Maybe she was cracking up and he'd been too distraught to see it.

"I've been fine, just fine," Jayne said before she was even asked. She darted a quick glance at him then shifted on her feet nervously before she lurched into a chair. Sitting heavily, she continued to grin idiotically.

If he could only reassure her. At her next glance Brice nodded slowly. She was nervous, grieving and fifteen. One helluva load.

Andi, on the other hand, listened politely, interjecting murmured sounds of sympathy and understanding. She played her part well, had a quick mind and made his blood race. But was she a good enough actress to stave off disaster?

"I'm working at Dot's Diner on Thursdays and Fridays," Jayne explained, straightening in her seat.

"Yes," Brice broke in, "Jayne's saving for college already." He sounded like a snake oil salesman.

Laura smiled. The first real smile she'd given any of them. She leaned over to Jayne and patted her knee. "That's fine, Jayne, but I wouldn't want your school work to suffer. You're doing so well and we're all so proud of you. Emily would want you to keep at it."

Jayne's false brightness finally died its deserved death. She blinked a couple of times, lifted her hand and made to swipe at her eyes but didn't. "I won't let her down," she said quietly.

Brice could have spit nails at the reference to Emily—hadn't the kids suffered enough without this

reminder?—but he squeezed the arm of the chair instead and cleared his throat. “Andi? Maybe Mrs. Jones would like some coffee?”

Andi flashed stricken eyes in his direction and his stomach did a little nervous jig. What was wrong with asking for coffee? She looked as if she’d been thrown to the lions.

“No, no thank you,” Laura declined the offer. “I must get back to the office. This was my last visit for the day.” She rose from her chair and looked down at Brice. “Could you please walk me to the car?”

Brice stood and followed Laura out, glancing back at Andi before he left the room. She was sitting stone still as if moving would make her crack like fine china. “Who is she, Brice?” Laura asked when they reached her little car.

“Bart’s niece, Andi Goodson.”

“Right.” Laura rolled her eyes. “How did she come to be here?”

Good question. What could he say? She came like an angel in the pink light of dawn? “When Emily got sick she called her in New York. Andi was three days too late. She feels awful about it.” He kept his voice even and unemotional, but he couldn’t slow it down. “I think the kids are glad she’s here. Seems to give things a sense of normalcy.”

“How long will she stay?”

“She says for as long as we need her.” Funny how lying got easier with practice. And necessity, he thought.

“It’s very generous of Ms. Goodson to give her time like that.”

The charade of this whole conversation was beginning to feel like a chokechain on his neck. He’d never finagled his way around so many women in his life. And the craziest part of it was, they both knew they were being finagled all along.

“Yeah, well, I guess some people are givers, Laura. Like your Dave for instance.” Laura hadn’t wanted Dave to go to El Salvador, hadn’t wanted him to care so much for people so far away. But he’d gone in spite of her and taught them what he could.

Her eyes widened in shock. “Yes, of course,” she said with a tight little smile. She started the car. “I’ll keep an open mind, Brice. But remember, those children need to have a woman around who’s going to stay. Even a housekeeper would make my recommendation more positive. All I can do is tell my Regional Director you’re doing everything you can to find a suitable woman to come live here. Then, of course, there will have to be a reassessment.” She looked up at him seriously. “The woman will have to be approved, her references checked and there may even be some training required.” She waited. “If she doesn’t satisfy Social Services policy, I’ll have no choice. The children will have to be placed elsewhere.”

And that was that, she was saying. No more finagling allowed.

She held up her hand to silence him. “Please let me

do my job, Brice. I really am on your side, but the children must come first. I realize you don't want to let Emily down, but sometimes there's not much we can do."

Brice nodded, a sick emptiness filling him up. "Do what you can, Laura."

She started to reverse and stopped. "Two weeks, Brice. I'll be back in two weeks. I'll need to see some proof you're doing whatever you can to find a permanent caregiver."

He nodded and watched as she maneuvered her import around to the driveway and left.

"Well? What's the verdict?" Andi called from the front porch, his shirt blowing against her body, emphasizing her femininity rather than hiding it. Damn, why the hell did he notice all this when he didn't have time for it?

"She's given me two weeks to find a permanent replacement for Emily." He didn't want to talk, and staring at her like a hungry wolf wouldn't solve anything, so he headed for the barn. Solace was there. Solace in the wood that he wanted—no needed—to feel in his hands.

"Where are you going? You can't leave me here!" Her voice rose with each word. "I've got to get to town! Brice!"

He heard her calling, the desperation in her voice a mirror of his own, but he couldn't help her. Wouldn't help her with her pitifully small troubles. Big city woman. Big city whining.

He wrenched the door open and strode quickly through the barn to his workshop. When the door slammed shut behind him, it cut off the righteous sound of the betrayed he heard in Andi's voice.

Heartsore, he leaned against the wall and took several deep, even breaths reaching for the comfort the workshop always offered. The peace and smells of the barn overtook him and he rested.

His lathe stood in a corner of the room, his table saw in the middle. He reached for his broom and swept wood chips and sawdust. Keeping the place neat enough to work in was almost a fulltime job. The scritch the broom made was rhythmic and he absorbed the pattern of the sound.

"Brice Logan, you come here right now and tell me why you won't let me out of here!"

Lord but that woman could yell.

She stood silhouetted by the open door, but he knew she couldn't see him standing in his workshop. The blood rushed through him at sight of her, angry and bristling. This tight wanting must be grief, he thought. Simply the need to affirm life itself by burying himself inside her. He imagined the pull of her soft inner muscles working him. He clenched the broom handle and willed the painful rush of desire away. When he leaned the broom against the wall, his hand was shaking.

He smoothed his jeans and stepped through the workshop door back into the larger barn where Andi would be able to see him. When she did, she placed

her elegant hands on her slim hips and stared at him. Hard.

“Well?” she called.

Guess she wouldn't be in the mood for a quick tumble in the hay.

“Well what?” He walked closer, determined not to look at her angry eyes, determined not to see the lustre of her fairy-blond hair or the fullness of her lower lip.

“Why won't you drive me into town? I did what you wanted.” Her eyes blazed her fury. “I stayed here and talked nicely to that social worker. I even pretended I cared!” Her voice dropped to a menace. “Now take me into town,” she demanded with all the force of a woman used to getting her own way.

Damn woman, he thought. He stormed past her, glad she jumped aside when their shoulders touched. But he was sorry, too, sorry he wasn't the kind of man to grab her and stroke her and take what he wanted until she was willing to give it.

“Get in the truck,” he snapped, pushing the door open and stepping into the brilliant sunshine. If he hadn't been able to ask Laura for a break, he'd be damned if he'd beg this woman for anything. Even if he did ask, Andi Goodson would say no.

He yanked open the truck door and jumped into the seat. The door of the barn was still closed. If she didn't come out soon he'd haul her out by the seat of his jeans. Then the door opened and she came out slowly, blinking as her eyes adjusted. She shaded her

face and stared at him through the dusty wind shield.

“Just like that?” she asked, walking warily closer.

“Yeah, just like that.” He started the truck.

She stopped and waited. For what, he didn't know. Maybe a gilt-edged invitation.

He slammed the truck into reverse.

She jumped like she'd been stuck with a cattle prod and climbed in. Then she bounced twice in the seat. “It's so high.” She bounced again. “I've never been in a truck before.”

“I'm not surprised.”

Chapter Three

“Nope, got no parts for no Porsche.”

For a second-long eternity, Andi stared at the town’s only mechanic, Barney Walchyk. “But you have to be able to fix it,” she said, excruciatingly aware of the pleading in her tone. Pleading. Now she was reduced to that.

And in front of Brice Logan, too.

She drew in a breath, trying to ignore the mechanic’s fixed stare at her chest as she did. Outraged propriety would get her nowhere. She glanced along the street, past the three whole blocks this town possessed and knew where nowhere was.

She was right in the center of it.

“Mr. Walchyk,” she said firmly, “if you don’t fix my car I’ll be stuck here indefinitely. I simply can’t afford the time.” Wildly, she thought of her father’s army of employees fanning out across the country on a mission to find her. A mission to search and retrieve. She wiped her forehead, felt the dampness of perspiration and fatigue and sighed. It was her imagination running wild, not her father’s flunkies.

“Porsche is a Volkswagen, isn’t it?”

“Arrgh!” She spun on her heel in frustration and strode several feet away, her patience spent. She’d give anything for some china to throw, no, even better,

some of her father's finest crystal. Yes, that would satisfy the blood lust in her veins.

"The car's out on Miller Road, Barney," Brice said, making her jump, "about three miles from my place," he added, slanting her a hard glance. "I'd appreciate it if you could take a look at it for her."

Barney nodded and smiled, showing his three front teeth in all their glory. He shuffled away toward the back of the cavernous, smelly garage apparently feeling the conversation was concluded.

"Hey—" Andi tried to follow him, but Brice touched her arm, holding her back. She glared at him.

He shook his head no. "He's not much on talking, Andi. You'll just have to trust that Barney knows what he's doing."

"But—"

He gave her a warning glare.

"Oh, all right, I'll leave him alone." She sniffed and clamped down quickly on the panic that threatened. This so-called mechanic had probably never even looked under the hood of a Porsche.

What a mess! She needed a miracle. She also needed some real clothes. There was a sign hanging over a store at the other end of the street that read, 'FOOD, FEED, CLOTHES & OIL.'

If she was lucky she could get some slacks and a couple of blouses. Maybe even be a pair of decent shoes. She turned and started toward the store, a full block and a half away. She refused to wince with each step even though every one was torture.

Brice silently walked his long-legged stride beside her.

“I need clothes,” she said, in no mood for further explanation.

“Our women order from the catalog.”

She stopped in her tracks and stared at him. “Our women? Oh brother!”

He just kept walking.

The selection in the Ibbotsville General Store was limited to blue jeans and cotton shirts. She did find a daffodil colored souvenir T-shirt with a grain elevator pictured on it. On her way to the cash desk at the front of the store, she realized she'd left her beaded evening bag containing the last of her cash at Brice's house. She smiled uneasily at the silent clerk, a balding man with small-rimmed glasses perched on his nose.

“I'll be right back.” She smiled even wider and backed away, hoping she didn't look as foolish as she felt. She pretended she was not still wearing the fuzzy slippers.

She found Brice at the rear of the store, in the section marked HARDWARE & TOOLS. He held a hand tool of some kind. It had a wooden knob on the top and a very flat metal plate on the bottom. She had no idea what it was or what it was used for, but Brice looked fascinated by the smoothness of the metal. He rubbed his thumb across its edges slowly, lovingly. Each short strike of his thumb against the sharp edge twanged a cord deep inside her.

He left the edges to smooth the flat metal face. The soft play of his fingers stroking the plate caught at her, but she shifted to get rid of the feeling.

He was a farmer, saddled with kids that weren't even his own, and he lived twenty miles past nowhere. So what if his inborn sensuality showed through with everything he laid a hand on. She was a grown woman, capable of controlling her reactions, not some flighty teenager, eager to learn the feel of a man's hands.

"Brice, I . . ."

"Yes?" he said, his voice hushed as if he was still locked in reverent appreciation of the tool.

She refused to lower her voice to match. "I've found a few things to wear," she said briskly, "and I left my money at your place."

He quirked his eyebrow at her again. She was beginning to learn he used that eyebrow to express lots of things. Surprise. Irony. Interest. Even humor.

"You rushed me into the truck," she said quickly to hide her embarrassment, "didn't give me time to even think—"

"Let me get this straight." He stared at her, letting his other eyebrow join the first. Twin lines of derision. "You drive a Porsche and you want me to buy your clothes?"

She tilted her chin up. "Just a loan," she said, gathering as much dignity as she could, fuzzy slippers notwithstanding. "Only until we get back to the house."

She never should have cut up her credit card in

Wisconsin, but she couldn't undo that now.

If she told Brice she'd deliberately disappeared, he might watch those television shows that help track down dangerous escaped criminals, to see if her picture flashed on the screen. Cassandra Morrison—no—Andi Goodson, fugitive.

Obviously, she couldn't explain anything.

“Oh, never mind. I'll manage without them,” she said, but it was too late. He'd left her standing there dithering with indecision.

She watched as he pushed several pretty-colored bills into the shopkeeper's hand. “Here you go, Leonard. This ought to cover it.” Then he left, without the funny little tool and without waiting for her.

She followed as quickly as she could, scooping up the clothes in her arms as she went by the desk. The clerk watched her speculatively. Who cared? She'd never see him again.

“Hey, Brice, wait—I—” she called after him.

He looked straight ahead and kept walking. “You'll work it off.” He strode toward the truck, still parked in front of Barney's garage, his long strides making her jog a little to keep apace.

“Work it off?” She almost stumbled as she made a grab for the T-shirt as it slipped out of her arms. “What do you mean, work it off?”

“At the house.” He stopped beside the pickup, opened his door and looked straight back at her, eyes steady, lips holding no hint of a smile.

She felt the cold in his gaze right down to her toes.

He was serious.

“One week as housekeeper,” he said, “equals one pair of jeans, three cotton shirts and a T-shirt.”

“What?” She couldn’t have heard him correctly.

“Get in the truck.” He climbed in and shut the door, obviously unconcerned with her lack of understanding.

She understood all right. She knew a rotten deal when she saw one.

“No, I won’t get in the truck.” She seethed with indignation. “There is no way one full week of work could only equal some measly clothes.” She wanted to stamp her foot, but the icy, determined glare in his eyes stopped her. “Get in the truck.” He said it quietly, but she heard every word.

She got into the truck. There’d be more time to negotiate when they were back at his place, she thought. She settled beside him, huffing and sighing at being treated like some farm hand. Her huffs and sighs had no apparent effect.

He started the truck and drove back along the block before she could catch her breath and snap her seat belt into place. She’d just managed to secure her belt when he stopped the truck in front of the store.

He reached across her breasts to her door handle. His hard arm pressed against her softness. She froze, feeling the pressure of him, strong and steady, as he shoved open her door.

“You’re right,” he said, slowly easing his arm away from her. The door flew wide as he settled against his

own side again.

Had she pushed him too far? Was he dumping her here in Ibbotsville, broke? She waited and watched him, her breath threatening to burst her lungs. His chocolate eyes said nothing.

“Get underwear.”

After her mouth dropped open, no sound came out and she still sat in her seat, he put the truck back into gear.

She unsnapped her seat belt. “All right! All right!” She heaved in a breath. “I’ll go back inside,” she muttered and jumped to the ground, wincing with the shock to her soles.

A pair of cheap running shoes and five pairs of cotton panties later, she climbed back into the truck. “He said he’d add these to your account.”

Brice nodded once. “One week.”

She smiled smugly. One day of her cooking and he’d buy her a first class air ticket to anywhere in the world. It was only a matter of time.

Brice began to whistle a tune Andi didn’t recognize. He was probably happy with the deal he’d forced on her. He had seven days to find a housekeeper and she had clothes to wear. The deal still stunk but she had to appreciate the skill with which he’d negotiated. She’d been blindsided by one of the best.

Even her father had never come as completely out of the blue as Brice Logan had. Yes, indeed, the millionaire tycoon known as “The Shark” could learn a thing or two from this big, not-so-dumb farmer.

She cast him a glance and studied his profile. Could she learn by looking at him what sort of man he was? Where he'd been? What he'd done? He had a strong jaw, nice ears, good cheekbones, and a small scar under his right eye that could have been caused by a solid punch. The brackets at the corners of his mouth showed how often he smiled, even though she hadn't seen much evidence of it.

What kind of man would return to a foster mother and help her when her husband died? What kind of man would push people and manipulate rules to keep children on which he had no real claim? The only things she knew for certain were that he was the most intriguing man she'd ever met and just watching his fingers stroke that tool had turned her insides to jelly.

If she was honest, giving him the seven days would not be terribly inconvenient. She smiled to herself in anticipation. All he had to do was survive her cooking.

He looked at her and smiled back. "What's so funny?"

"You'll find out," she promised with a grin. She studied the landscape. Crossing the mid-west she'd seen plenty of fields planted with corn or hay or something, but these unbroken waves of wheat were incredible. In the distance, almost at the horizon, she saw a machine, and then another and another came into view. Blue sky, golden fields and men in machines.

"What are those big red things in the field?" she asked.

“Trucks.”

“Very funny. I mean the other things.”

“Combines.”

“What are they doing?”

“Harvesting the wheat.”

“Oh.” Soon the waving heads of grain would be sliced off, leaving the fields full of nothing but stubble. At least the rich, golden color would remain.

“Where are the fences?”

“Don’t need fences.”

“Why not?” Her curiosity mounted because the damn man wouldn’t offer any information.

“Don’t see any wheat lying dead at the side of the road, do you?”

She cast him a sidelong look and caught a twitch at the corner of his mouth. “If you’re going to laugh at me, I won’t ask any more questions.” She sat back. All right. She’d ignore him.

“Fine by me,” he muttered.

She smoothed her windblown hair and stared out her side of the truck.

“And you made me forget to use the telephone at the store,” she said, condemnation dripping from every word.

“How the hell did I do that?”

“You distracted, aggravated and irritated me,” she rattled off her list, neglecting to mention the other, rather unseemly reactions he’d aroused.

The moment the truck stopped in the yard, Marianne stepped off the front porch and ran for her.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were leaving?” The questions were rapid-fire. “What did you get? New clothes?”

“Jeans and blouses. New sneakers and—“ She cast Brice a baleful glance, remembering her embarrassment at the store clerk’s sly smirk, “—underwear. Come and see and I’ll explain how I got shanghaied into staying.”

Marianne’s face lit up like Times Square. “Staying?” She stretched the word for emphasis.

Andi explained the facts as she recalled them. She led Marianne to the room she’d used for her nap. She piled the clothes on the bed and tried on the jeans. “Ow, these are so stiff. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Marianne grinned. “Really? You have to wash them a couple of times. They’ll soften up.”

“Oh,” Andi said doubtfully. “I guess I’m used to jeans that are meant to look good, not work in.”

Marianne sighed deeply. “That’s the kind I’ve always wanted. But I never get them. Brice says it’s silly to spend that much money on something that won’t last half as long as good work jeans.”

Andi stopped tugging at the stiff seat of the pants and smiled. “Yes, I guess it is.”

Andi changed back into Brice’s jeans, topped them with the grain elevator T-shirt and showed Marianne the rest of the clothes.

“Where’s the washer?” she asked, hoping she hid her nervousness. It would never do to have the child realize how little she knew about household chores.

“In the basement. The stairs down are off the pantry in the kitchen,” Marianne explained.

Brice was in the kitchen having a glass of juice when Andi walked in. “I’ve been told I’ll need to wash these before I wear them,” she explained, holding up her jeans.

He nodded, his gaze flicking down her new T-shirt. “The yellow makes you golden.” The chocolate in his eyes went from milk to dark. She heard her own heart slow in response to the deepening color.

She felt heat rise from somewhere in her chest and settle in her cheeks. “Thank you,” she said gently, just as Grandmother had taught her.

She turned on legs that suddenly felt like wooden stumps and went to the head of the basement stairs. She pulled a dangling chain to turn on a bare light bulb overhead and went downstairs to the cool shadows of the basement. Brice followed close behind, heating the air at her back, pushing her silently onward into the private world of stolen desire.

The poor lighting only served to make the corners appear even darker. The ceiling was low, but Andi refused to look at it in case she saw things she didn’t want to know about lurking overhead.

It was dangerous, going down into this shadow-world with him. They’d be alone with nothing between them but their own inhibitions. She was too much woman not to know he wanted her. And he was simply too much man.

“Where’s the washer?” she asked, determined to

keep the atmosphere light.

“There.” He pointed to a round tub with a handle on the side and a set of rollers on the top.

“That’s not a washer,” she said, denying her growing suspicion that it was, indeed, a machine that washed clothes. She walked closer to the hulking thing.

“It’s a wringer,” he said from behind her.

“Is it electric?” Images of washboards and red, scaly hands rose in her mind.

“Of course it is. You have to fill it like this.” Brice turned on the water faucets full and added some detergent. “After it washes for a while, you put the jeans through the rollers to squeeze the water out.”

“Okay, but won’t they still have suds in them?”

“I guess I forgot that part.” He peered into the tub to watch the gushing water fill it.

She joined him, clutching her blue jeans to her chest. His shoulder brushed hers, sending an emergency alert to her brain. She glanced at him and got caught in his gaze. The shadows hollowed his cheeks and made him look hungry. Made him look needy. Made him appear to be leaning closer.

He watched her lips.

She parted them.

It wasn’t a trick of the light and shadows, he was moving closer.

Inevitable, she thought.

“This has to happen, Andi,” he murmured.

Chapter Four

Andi nodded once, the cool of the basement replaced by the heat of Brice and the promise in his eyes.

He drew his knuckles ever so gently across her cheek, letting his fingers rest in her hair behind her ear. He settled his lips easily over hers.

He coaxed and teased and tasted, taking her mouth as if it had never been anyone's but his. Slowly, gently he parted her lips, as if no one else had ever parted them before, giving her the respect the granting of this kiss deserved.

Temptation blazed through her veins. The thought that he'd care so much and be so gentle aroused her faster than any rough and ready kiss would. She savored the taste of him on her lips, the light rasp of his whiskers on her chin, the smell of him, up close.

Reluctantly, she drew back, bringing the slow boil down to a simmer. It had been far too long since a first kiss had been given such gentlemanly attention. Such things seemed so easily taken for granted.

She sighed and looked up at him. There was a sparkle of delight deep in his eyes, a gleam of triumph.

"Guess it's time to put these in," he said, taking her jeans out of her hands. He stuffed them into the soap suds and water while she pulled herself together.

The tub was full enough so he turned off the water and set the timer. The machine bucked and started chugging, sloshing water dangerously close to the top.

She watched the jeans being drawn inexorably down into the suds and knew she couldn't let Brice suck her down into the whirlpool of desire with him. "We can't," she whispered sorrowfully. "I . . . can't"

He shrugged, the shadows making him look like the devil incarnate. "It was worth a shot. You're here, I'm here. We're both adults." He clasped her lightly by the chin, forcing her to look into his disappointment. "We both know it would be dynamite."

"You bastard! You kissed me as if it was something special," she said, letting her anger at her own foolish vulnerability control her tongue.

He put his hands up, palms out. "It was." He quirked his eyebrow. "Like I said, it was worth a shot." He turned and left her there, gawping in amazement, nerves singing with outrage and damn it, desire.

Seven days and nights ahead of them. Yes, Andi supposed, to Brice it would be worth a shot. For her, it was downright foolish to begin something that had no hope of being anything more than just seven days.

The kiss had been nice, though, reminding her that life was meant to be fulsomely enjoyed and not just dragged through one lonely day at a time.

A basket of clothing sat against the wall under what appeared to be a laundry chute. She checked the clothes. Joe's jeans were covered with grass stains. She

saw girls' things in the basket as well: white shorts, tank tops and underwear. With the tub already filled, it would be a shame to wash only one item. She'd do everything at once.

This was easier than she thought, she realized, as she watched the machine chug and shimmy with the load of clothes. Not bad at all. She called Marianne once to find out how to empty the tub. Confident, she filled it again, rinsing the clothes completely. She found, through trial and error, the best way to get the clothes to go through the rollers. For the first few minutes it was kind of fun to catch the flattened clothes on the other side.

She snapped out a T-shirt, a tank top and panties. They were all unevenly streaked with blue dye.

The dye in her new blue jeans had ruined Jayne's panties and tank tops!

She thought quickly. Maybe heat would dissipate the run dye and make everything as bright as it was before. She stuffed the clothes into the old dryer beside the washer.

They would have to be Jayne's things. The only person in the house who seemed to actively dislike her. Joe was too young to mind her being here and Marianne was still grateful for the help Andi had given her this morning. Was it only this morning? It felt as if she'd been here a week already.

She heard the trample of children's feet overhead and checked her watch. It must be close to dinner hour. Her stomach protested rather loudly

in confirmation.

“Andi? Are you still down there?” Brice called down to her, impatience ringing through his words.

“Yes!” she called up to him from the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve been trying to figure out these ancient machines you’ve given me to work with.” Let him come down and do the laundry if he was so impatient.

“The kids and I are starving.” He walked down three steps and sat down. “Haven’t you started cooking the noodles yet?”

“What noodles?” She looked up the length of the staircase, past his forever-long legs and into his impatient brown eyes.

“The spaghetti noodles for supper. Remember? I made the sauce at noon? You were supposed to cook the noodles tonight.”

“I was . . .?” Good Lord! He was right. When she’d promised to cook, she’d thought she’d be miles away from here by dinner time. If she’d known then that she’d be stuck in the basement with ruined laundry and hungry children waiting for her she’d have laughed herself into hysterics. “I was,” she repeated in acceptance. “Could you . . .?” she asked, trying a wide smile, knowing it probably wouldn’t work.

It didn’t.

“No.” He shook his head. “I need to shower and change. I’ll be working on the books all night if I stop to cook, too.”

“I see.” She sighed. “Well, I guess there’s nothing for it, then.” Would she get life imprisonment for

poisoning three innocent kids and a belligerent man? This was Canada. What did she know about Canadian justice. Only that the Mounties always get their man, or woman, as it were.

She turned back to pick up the laundry. No. It would be best to show Jayne later, after everyone had been fed. She set the basket down again. The meal would be embarrassing enough without adding the ruined clothes to her list of shortcomings. One disaster at a time was all she could handle.

By the time she got to the kitchen, Brice's shower was running upstairs. Joe was peering through the side of a large jar he had on the table.

She smiled coaxingly. "Well, spaghetti, right?"

"Right," Joe said seriously. "You gonna cook it? 'Cause I really like s'ghetti." He tapped his dirty fingers on the jar as he studied the bits of grass he had inside.

"Sure, as soon as you show me where it is." She'd have to remind him to wash his hands thoroughly before he sat down to eat. "Joe, do you know how to use a nail brush by yourself?"

"Aaah, do I hafta?"

"You must." She nodded firmly, hiding a smile.

Joe pointed to the pantry door and she went inside to investigate. She found still more evidence that Emily was the mistress of her kitchen and this home. Jars and jars of preserves and jams and relishes lined the pantry shelves.

Emily Mathews was one tough act to follow. This

next week would be even rougher than her character-building “Wilderness Experience Weekend” had been.

She found an open bag of spaghetti noodles and brought it back into the kitchen.

She walked toward the table.

Joe opened his glass jar and looked inside the top.

She patted his head when she got close to him. He jerked in surprise.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw the bits of grass move inside the jar.

Something jumped out onto the table.

Something slimy. Ugly.

It was right by her arm.

Andi screamed and dropped the bag of spaghetti. The noodles hit the floor in a million different places and slid higgledy piggledy across the linoleum.

The scream scared Joe so much he knocked the jar and the creature off the table. The jar broke with a dull thud as it hit the floor.

A brown, mottled toad tried to get traction on the still-rolling spaghetti and flailed ridiculously as it tried to escape the madness.

“Catch it!” Andi shrieked.

“He’s getting away!” shouted Joe. “I can’t lose Freddie! I’ve had him all summer!” he wailed.

Andi put her hand on his arm to soothe him. The toad managed to hop as far as the corner by the outside door. Through the window, she caught sight of Jayne crossing the backyard and making for the same door. Jayne would either open the door and step on

poor Freddie, or he'd escape being squashed and head for freedom.

Either way, Joe would be devastated by his loss. His tear-filled eyes pleaded with her to do something and she thought quickly.

Jayne came closer. "Jayne, Jayne!" Andi hollered through the door. "Stay right there! It's the toad!" At the same time she grabbed for the jelly jar cutlery keeper on the massive table. She caught a glance of Brice, half dressed, as he careened to a halt in the kitchen doorway. She up-ended the jar, sending teaspoons, forks and knives spilling across the table. Some joined the shattered glass and spaghetti noodles on the floor.

Freddie leaped in futile frustration against the door as Andi crept up on him in stealthy silence.

"Now!" Brice yelled behind her.

Andi brought the open end of the jar down on Freddie, foiling his escape.

Joe rushed to her. He flung his arms around her neck, his wet cheeks tacky against her own. Jayne stared through the door's window in horror at the messy kitchen. Brice picked up spilled cutlery as he came into the room.

"That was a close one, Andi," Joe whispered as he blessed her cheek with a featherlight kiss. "Thanks." He pulled the jelly jar and Freddie out of her tight grip.

She sank back onto her heels and sighed in relief.

Jayne opened the door and stepped inside. "Don't

expect me to help you clean this up!” she snapped as she stormed by Andi and Brice.

Joe ran through the open door and out into the backyard.

The bitterness in Jayne’s voice hung in the air of the devastated kitchen, choking off anything Andi might have said. She snapped her gaze to Brice’s and locked on it.

“What did I do?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have any idea.”

Drops of water still on his chest were caught by the light from the window, making his golden skin glisten. His smooth, muscular arms were completely dry; rosy where he’d rubbed the towel briskly. One drop of water trailed from his right nipple down the flat plain of his belly. It came to rest at a small V of exposed white flesh where the top tab of his jeans hung open. There, his hair was a shade or two darker than that on his head. His fly was zipped closed, ending the droplet’s journey of discovery.

Andi caught her breath. She imagined the water traveling lower, beneath the barrier of denim. Caught in the rough curls. Making them damp so they’d flatten against his flesh. Or had he had time to dry himself there? Was his skin as rosy beneath his jeans as his arms were?

She let her imagination carry her farther down his legs, past the faded denim at his knees. His feet were as bare as his chest. His toes were long and straight; his arches high. The light sprinkling of hair on the top of

his feet was still wet and stuck to his skin.

“Your feet are naked,” she whispered, looking back up into his face. With a small thrill of discovery, she realized he’d watched her stare at him. He’d read every thought, every image she’d conjured. A thrill of desire raced through her veins.

He didn’t move. Didn’t react any more than to blink and focus on her mouth. He stared at her lips, tracing them with his gaze. First the top, starting from her right side. Then the bottom, slowly, as if he could taste her with his eyes.

No, this couldn’t be happening, she thought, shouldn’t be happening. She closed her eyes to shut out the hunger in his. It had to stop, but Lord help her, it felt wonderful to be so alive. So in tune with a man.

But it’s the wrong man in the wrong place. The savage thought ripped through her desire, shaking her.

She opened her eyes.

Brice leaned toward her. His fingers flexed. If he touched her, she’d explode with need in his arms.

Wrong man! Wrong place!

She tore her gaze from his and looked down, afraid she was too weak to fight her own need. She stared at his feet. They were still bare. Bare!

“Brice, there’s glass on the floor.”

He balanced on his toes immediately. “Where?”

She stood and pointed to the glass beneath the table. “Don’t move!”

He waited while she picked up the large pieces.

Luckily, she found all of them in one small area. The glass had been too thick to explode into tiny, dangerous shards. She set the collected glass on the counter.

When it was safe for him to walk around again, he began to pick up the spilled cutlery. Fluidly, he stretched and reached under the table to get at the escaped forks and knives. The smooth play of muscles across his back captivated her again. But it was safe this time, because he couldn't see her watching him.

She could avoid the fire in his eyes and the answering flame in her heart.

She swallowed and sighed.

He must have heard her, because he suddenly rose to his full height again and slid the spoons onto the table. He stared straight into her face.

A little half-smile played with the brackets around his mouth. His eyes shone with a deep light all their own.

Anticipation.

"I'm in big trouble, aren't I?" she whispered.

Brice's full smile, when it finally came, almost stole her breath. "Me too," he whispered hoarsely.

"Holy cow!" Marianne exclaimed, breaking into the swirl of tension between Brice and Andi in the kitchen. She walked carefully into the explosion of spaghetti and cutlery. "What happened?"

Andi blinked. She looked from Brice to Marianne, uncertain how to reply to her. What had happened? What was going to happen? Nothing, she told herself

firmly. Nothing at all.

“Freddie happened,” she said, relieved for the interruption. She quickly explained the toad’s bid for freedom and its subsequent capture, while Brice looked around for more fallen cutlery.

She tried to get her mind off Brice’s half-naked torso and back where it belonged: on supper. “Are there any more noodles?”

“There may be some elbow macaroni in the pantry,” he replied evenly. He looked at her then, his eyes warm, kind and helpful. Different from any way she’d seen them so far. She went to look for the macaroni and took an extra moment in the pantry to collect herself. This was a dangerous house, lived in by a dangerous man. She had behaved in a dangerous way. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Joe!” Brice called. “Now you’ve got that toad collected, come back in and get the broom out. You’ve got some sweeping up to do.”

“Aaah!” Joe stretched his pitiful reply.

Andi lifted the plastic tub of macaroni and walked back into the kitchen. “That’s okay, Brice, I can sweep the mess.”

“No.” His voice was firm, the warmth in his eyes gone like the heat from a winter fire. “Joe knows he shouldn’t bring his creatures into the house. If Emily was here . . .” When his voice trailed off, Andi knew the thought that had killed it: Emily wasn’t here. Even worse, he would have to put up with Andi’s ineptitude for a full week.

He dumped the collected cutlery into the sink with a harsh clatter jarring her already stretched nerves. She winced, hurt that he could turn so cold so quickly.

He ran steaming water into the sink, added dish soap and let everything soak. Then he sauntered out of the kitchen leaving her to figure out how much macaroni would feed two adults, a teenager and two growing children.

In the end, her calculations were wrong, because it was obvious she'd completely misjudged and hadn't cooked enough. She and Brice would have to wait for more noodles to cook before they could eat.

The children scrambled into their seats when Andi called them. She served them one at a time and waited for their reactions.

Joe looked at the macaroni noodles on his plate. "How come they got so much water on them?"

"I think Andi forgot to drain them," Marianne explained. She smiled gently at Andi.

"Oh," Andi said and collected the plates. She blotted as much water as a paper towel could hold from each plate. Then she ladled on the sauce Brice had made earlier.

She set the plates in front of the children again. Jayne tasted a forkful. "This sauce tastes burnt," she said disgustedly.

"No, it doesn't, Andi. Really," Marianne said, before she'd even tasted it. She kicked Joe under the table.

"Ow!" Joe looked at Andi. "Yeah, it's okay," he said

and tried some. He grimaced, but kept eating.

Embarrassed, Andi's appetite disappeared as she collected the children's half-empty plates and stacked them by the sink.

When Brice came back into the kitchen, he gauged the amount of noodles for two. She watched carefully when he pulled out the strainer and dumped the noodles into it. He raised an eyebrow at her and shook his head disbelievingly.

"What?" she asked, pretending not to understand why he was shaking his head. So she hadn't drained the noodles. Did it make that much difference?

"Nothing," he replied. The corner of his mouth lifted. He ladled sauce over the noodles and served them.

She settled across from him. So much food all in one lump. She'd never seen a meal quite like it.

Her father's chef always cooked meals that looked— well, sparse—in comparison. Three asparagus spears, one small potato and, if he decided against vegetarianism this month, three ounces of lean beef.

"Don't sweat it, Andi," Brice said between mouthfuls. "This isn't the worst I've had." He grinned. "And the kids ate it without pretending to puke." He washed his meal down with a large glass of milk.

Something told her this was supposed to be a compliment, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why. So she smiled back at him. Let the fool think it was edible.

She tried a bite. He was right, it wasn't the worst

food she'd ever tasted. Not great, but reasonable for a first effort. Next time, she'd use a recipe and really show them.

She ate for another moment. It would be foolish to miss an opportunity to talk while she had his undivided attention. "Brice?" she said between increasingly smaller forkfuls. "Tell me what you're doing here. Why you insist on carrying on?"

"I made a promise." He stared levelly back at her, holding his full fork only an inch from his mouth.

"Oh," she said, not entirely convinced. Perhaps there was nothing else he was qualified for? Perhaps he'd never even left this farm? "Have you ever tried something else?"

"I worked with street kids in Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary." He pushed his empty plate to the side and poured himself another glass of milk. "Mostly runaways."

"Oh?"

"Most of those kids really had no home to go back to."

"That's appalling!"

"Yeah, it is. Sometimes they came from single parent homes where there were younger kids to raise. Their leaving had actually eased a burden, so they felt, rightly or wrongly, that they couldn't go back. Other times a stepparent had ruined any hope of reconciliation with the natural parent." He cast her a glance. "Not that some of these kids weren't tough little S.O.B.'s, because they were." He took a long swallow.

“At least they were by the time I got ’em.”

Sympathy welled inside her, for the children, the parents and the counsellors whose job it was to help these splintered families cope.

“Anyway, when Emily called and told me Bart was gone, I got to thinking.” He stared into his milk as if to find an answer there. “Maybe I was burning out, I don’t know. I got to thinking that if I came back here and helped foster some of these little kids, then maybe I could make a difference before the trouble started.” He topped off his glass with even more milk. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m doing it right, if anybody’s doing it right.”

He stood and opened an upper cupboard.

She studied his strong back and arms as he moved boxes of cereal around, looking for something. “You are, you know. Doing it right.” She swallowed hard. “I know I don’t have any experience with children, but I’ve got a heck of a lot with running away. You’re right in thinking it would be easier to stop it before it starts.”

He glanced quizzically at her over his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said, leaving her further comments alone.

It was just as well, she wasn’t ready to share herself yet. Maybe she never would be.

“Aha,” he said, when his hand made contact with what he’d been seeking. He took out a bag of chocolate chip cookies. “Don’t tell the kids I’ve got these,” he warned her, still barefoot.

His chest was covered by a dark blue denim shirt tucked into his waistband. His zipper tab was closed now, she noticed.

He sauntered out of the kitchen.

She heard him open and close a door down the hall.

Suddenly alone in the silent room, she felt the same sense of anti-climax she'd felt at dawn when he'd left her on the veranda.

She looked around the room. Dirty pots, pans, dishes and cutlery were everywhere. She groaned.

Should she walk back to her car and sleep on the seat again? The Porsche was probably still at the side of the road. In spite of what Brice had said, she had no faith in Barney Walchyk.

No, she couldn't leave. She had an obligation to stay. One pair of jeans, three blouses, a T-shirt, running shoes and five pairs of panties worth of obligation.

Not to mention the faces of Marianne and Joe when she'd saved what each of them had needed most. For Marianne, it had been her pride and for Joe, his beloved Freddie.

She'd have to keep her end of the bargain and stay for the week. She looked around the disaster that used to be a gleaming, well-ordered kitchen and sighed. Then she set to work.

Next morning, Brice reached for the pot of coffee Andi had ready. He could see her through the kitchen

window over the sink. She was in the back yard, entertaining the cat by stretching sinuously every rounded, smooth set of muscles she possessed. Even the tom, peerless champion of stretching that he was, looked impressed.

Maybe she'd had a lousy night's sleep. He leaned against the kitchen counter and watched her raise her arms carefully toward the sky. So lithe. Graceful.

She must have been cramped as hell driving in a sports car for days. Not any sports car, either. A Porsche, for crying out loud.

It was obvious she came from money, but that much? He shook his head. Forget it, Logan, he told himself, she's way out of your league.

Then he heard Jayne holler about something upstairs. Must every morning start with a girl wailing? He tried to hear what she was saying without leaving his spot by the window. He didn't want to miss one inch of Andi's stretching.

"What's happened to my clothes?" Jayne screamed. "Marianne!" she shrieked. "Do you know anything about this?"

Brice heard someone stomp along the upstairs hall.

He opened the back door. Andi was bent over at the waist, hands firmly gripping her ankles. Her blond hair hung in billows to the ground. Even upside down her face registered embarrassment at being caught at such an inviting angle.

"Andi," he said. "I think Jayne's looking for you. Something about her clothes?" he asked. He wasn't in

any hurry at all to have her straighten up. In fact, he could probably watch her like this all day. Except his jeans might give out after awhile.

She blinked rapidly several times, then unfolded herself slowly. He could hear Jayne holler even more belligerently at Marianne. Doors slammed.

Andi winced, apparently able to hear their racket as well as he could.

“If you messed up Jayne’s clothes you might as well face the music,” he said.

She grimaced. “Wouldn’t want to cover for me, would you?”

“Not on your life.” He held up his palms in denial.

She still reminded him of an angel sometimes, especially when her white-blond hair was lifted gently by an errant breeze or she flicked it off her neck. She squared her shoulders and glided regally toward and past him into the house. A drift of lemon scent caught him. He’d never known dishwashing liquid could be so alluring. “It might be easier to retreat and fight another day!” he called after her. He half-wished she’d come back and talk to him. It didn’t much matter what about.

He caught himself grinning and stopped. Then he returned to the kitchen for his coffee and his sense. Think of the woman she was, he told himself, not the woman he wanted her to be.

Think of the Porsche.

Chapter Five

Brice took his first sip of coffee, ready for the first bite of caffeine. It bit him all right.

He swung wildly for the kitchen sink. What in hell had she done to the coffee? He spat out a mixture of murky water and grounds.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Ugh," he muttered and cursed softly.

He dumped the rest of the pot down the sink.

No wonder she'd looked like a wild thing when he'd asked her to make coffee for Laura Jones yesterday afternoon.

Andi didn't know the difference between coffee and dishwater.

He opened the coffee maker. She'd filled the basket with coffee without using a paper filter. The grounds had simply run through the hole in the bottom of the basket. He held back a shudder and reached for the tub of coffee.

Why hadn't she asked for help? Damn woman was more trouble than she was worth. Ruined laundry, burnt food, hellish coffee and a sashay that could make a man ramrod stiff.

He turned on the water to rinse the coffee grounds down the sink. If he wanted to be honest, which he didn't, he'd have to admit Andi wasn't half-bad with

the kids, either. As much as she'd messed up around the house, Andi had understood instinctively how to handle Marianne and Joe.

No one could figure Jayne.

Jayne's voice rose upstairs, screaming even louder than when Joe had used her toothbrush. Brice pictured Andi standing straight, head held high, listening silently to the angry ranting of a bitter fifteen-year-old. He pushed away the image and with it, any sympathy he might have felt. Any woman who'd lived to over twenty-five without learning to wash clothes or make a simple pot of coffee deserved her baptism by fire. What the hell had she been doing with her life?

He laid out the paper filter, the coffee measure and instructions for using them. She should be able to manage this much. Surely.

As he opened the back door to leave, someone stomped across the bedroom floor above his head. A door closed with a vicious slam as he stepped outside. If he hurried, he could get to the workshop before he had to see Andi's stricken face. Because if he saw her, he'd be tempted to give her a hug or kiss her—or worse—let her leave.

If the coffee and laundry were an indication of how much she knew about running a house, Andi was definitely in for more of Jayne's ridicule. Humiliated or not, Andi Goodson had to stay here. She had to give him the time he needed.

He crossed the yard to the barn. He'd have to place an advertisement for a caregiver in the Regina and

Saskatoon newspapers. If he didn't get any replies he might even have to call Toronto or Vancouver to advertise. Damn! This place was a hard sell.

Andi listened without saying a word as Jayne exploded into a torrent of angry words.

"Why did you have to come here?" Jayne heaved a deep sigh, her voice lurching with unrepentant rage. "Why did you have to ruin everything?"

"I'm sorry about your clothes, Jayne." Andi kept her tone calm and her words steady. Reacting to the girl's anger wouldn't get either of them anywhere. "I didn't mean—"

Jayne cut her off by storming into the hall. "I'm not talking about my stupid clothes!" she yelled. She slammed the bedroom door and Andi heard her stomp away.

Andi swayed as the tension and rage in the room swirled around her, seeking an outlet. She clasped her shaking hands together and closed her eyes. The girl didn't mean to be so hateful.

A flash of her own teen years opened up in her mind. She'd flaunted her developing body, her power and her stylish clothes to her personal maids shamelessly. None of them had ever had the nerve to deny her spiteful comments. None of them had ever stayed longer than a month, either.

Andi had hated every one of them for not being her mother. Or at least her friend. She missed her mother dreadfully during her teens, even if she had, finally,

forgiven her for dying so young.

She opened her eyes and saw Jayne's room again, not her old Hampton house bedroom with the pretty yellow sheers and the lonely rocking chair. She had to make some kind of peace with Jayne or the rest of the week would be unbearable.

Brice had left by the time she returned to the kitchen. She could still feel the hum of vibrant energy he left behind. She sighed. He was too much for her. Too alive. Too masculine. Too real.

Too efficient, she thought, as she spied the neatly arranged coffee makings. She'd suspected something was wrong when the grounds had flowed through to the coffee carafe, but she hadn't known what to do about it.

She picked up a bright yellow cereal box to read the vivid red scrawl across the back. How to make the perfect pot of coffee.

That did it!

Brice Logan wasn't only too much; he was too pig-headed to make a fresh pot after he'd tasted hers. How could he be so kind and thoughtful with the children and so intolerant of her? One moment he was terse and difficult. The next, he was teasing her with his dry sense of humor. Then, he was demanding as hell. She never knew what to expect.

She'd had enough of this place; enough of this man. She'd find a way out of here if it killed her!

She grabbed a plastic grocery bag from the stash under the sink, and ran upstairs to her room. She

gathered her clothes quickly, stuffing them in the bag as she hurried back downstairs to the hall. Then she marched out the front door without a backward glance.

Let's see him do laundry, get meals, make beds, clean the kitchen and deal with a whiny teenager!

She walked straight down the driveway, kicking up whorls of dry dust. Halfway through the quarter mile, she knew her feet couldn't take her very far. Even with her new sneakers.

Especially with her new sneakers. They rubbed every sore spot her feet possessed.

Walking to town was definitely out.

"Then I'll hitchhike," she said loudly to the ginger cat sitting on a fencepost.

He ignored her, as usual.

She'd managed to elude her father so far. Surely she could get away from a big, dumb farmer!

She thought of Marianne and Joe.

Her step faltered.

No. She wouldn't go back. Not even for them. Her heart seemed to grow in her chest as she fought back the images of their happy, expectant faces as she'd served them their cereal this morning. They liked her. She knew they liked her. So what? That didn't mean she had to like them back.

She quickened her pace, as if by hurrying she could escape the warmth she'd felt when each of them had hugged her. She touched her cheek where Joe had kissed her for saving his toad.

What about Brice? Did he like her? She doubted it. If he did, he'd have made the coffee for her, or at least shown her what to do instead of scrawling instructions in crayon on a cereal box.

No, he didn't like her. He just wanted to sleep with her and that wasn't nearly the same thing. She should know, because she wanted to make love with him, too. Every logical part of her admonished against a physical relationship with Brice.

If she stayed, she was terribly afraid logic would lose the battle against desire. That was probably the best reason of all for leaving.

When she got to the end of the driveway, she crossed the road. She set her plastic bag at her feet to wait for the first car to appear. If she had proper luggage she could sit on it. As it was, she only had the shoulder of the road to sit on and it looked so hard-baked it might as well be concrete.

She checked her watch. Diamonds surrounding the face glittered in the brilliant sunshine. She might be able to get cash for the watch in Ibbotsville.

"Brice, Brice!"

He heard Joe calling him from outside.

"I'm in the workshop!" he hollered back. He set the cellular telephone back in the cupboard. Maybe he should allow Andi to make her phone call after all. He heard Joe's urgent cries again. No. He shut the cupboard door firmly. She'd have to stick it out. It was only a week.

He walked through his workshop door into the barn. He saw Joe peer inside from the yard. "Brice, she's gone! Andi's mistappeared!"

"She must be around somewhere."

He started to run through the barn toward the boy. She could be gone, he thought, his heart sinking to his gut. But how? Where? He fumbled in his jean's pocket for his truck keys and sighed in relief when he found them. At least she hadn't stolen his pickup.

"Did you check the basement?"

Joe nodded yes. He looked miserably unhappy.

Brice smiled, hoping to cheer him up. "We'll look all through the house for her." He patted Joe on the shoulder to reassure him. "She's probably upstairs having a nap or cleaning," he said, hoping to cheer up the poor kid. "She may be reading a book and got so involved she didn't hear you call."

He knew he was wrong as soon as he saw the sprawling mess in the kitchen. Last night, she'd been up past midnight tidying the kitchen after the toad incident and supper. Even if it took all morning to clean this up, she'd have done it.

He picked up the cereal box with the coffee instructions on it. She'd crushed it. Damn, he should have spent a couple of minutes showing her how to make coffee instead of going to the workshop.

He searched the upper floor. No sign of her.

Her room was dark and lonely. Lifeless.

Where the hell was she? He crossed to the window and raised the blind with a snap. He looked out

toward the road.

“Joe!” he called. “I found her!”

Joe ran into the room, panting for breath. Brice pointed out the window. “She’s trying to hitchhike, I guess.” He bit back a smile. There were only three families on this stretch of road. They didn’t account for much traffic.

“You told us hitchhiking was dangerous, Brice.” Joe’s eyes went wide. “Real dangerous!” He ran toward the door. “We gotta stop her, Brice! We gotta save her!” His little-boy legs scurried down the stairs.

Brice heard the front screen door bounce on its frame. Joe’s rapid footsteps barrelled across the veranda.

Brice wrenched open the window. “Joe! Stop!” he called.

Joe slid to a stop three steps off the veranda. He looked up to the window.

“You collect Jayne and Marianne and tell ’em to clean up the kitchen. Pronto!” He smiled at the boy to reassure him. “It’s for me to get Andi back.” He only hoped he could do it. He’d about run out of tricks. If she didn’t want to stay of her own accord he didn’t see how he could stop her from leaving.

Joe waved once, grinned and headed around back of the house to find Jayne.

Perhaps he was worried for no reason, he thought. He’d seen the way her eyes softened when she looked at Joe and Marianne. She was hooked. She just didn’t realize it yet, was all.

He smiled. With ammunition like Joe and Marianne, he was sure he could convince her to stay for the seven days she'd agreed to in the first place.

He left the house and started to walk down the driveway toward Andi. Seven days wasn't nearly long enough to tire of a woman like Andi. Wasn't much point in pursuing a woman who was only here for a short time when he'd always been a long term man. So, it was decided. He'd get through the week without touching her again.

He kept walking, framing his argument, practising the best way to remind her of the children and the danger they were in, when he heard the sound of a truck on the road.

Closer! The truck was coming closer. He hurried so he could see better.

It was a truck. A faded blue pickup.

Bill and Sally Buntz. They must be going to town. Too bad they hadn't waited another half hour.

The pickup slowed down on the shoulder of the road a few feet ahead of Andi.

He could see her brilliant yellow T-shirt through the wheat. She bent to pick something up. A plastic grocery store bag.

The truck stopped.

Andi walked quickly toward the pickup.

His stomach clenched in fear.

Damn!

Brice began to run.

Andi saw a plume of dust racing toward her. She couldn't tell what kind of vehicle made the dust billow, and she didn't care. It was heading in the direction of Ibbotsville.

The pickup truck she finally saw was so old the blue had faded to a shade of slate. She dutifully held out her thumb, smiling in as friendly a manner as she could muster.

The truck slowed and she could see inside. A man was driving. A woman with brown hair and a wide, friendly face sat beside him.

The truck stopped a bit up the road and Andi made for it, relieved. These people looked kind and helpful. They'd understand her need to get out of here.

They wouldn't be like Brice Logan.

"Hi," she said, smiling widely.

"Hi, yourself," said the woman, still sitting in the truck. She studied Andi with friendly, curious eyes.

Andi pulled her tourist T-shirt away from her overheated skin. The day was so hot, the cotton clung to her. "I . . . I . . . need a lift."

Both the man and the woman looked at her with unblinking stares. Neither spoke.

"Into town?" Andi tried again. "To use a phone?"

The man spat out his window then turned toward her. "You Brice Logan's woman?" he asked. His voice crackled like dry leaves.

Too stunned to speak, Andi stared at him.

The woman reached out of the window and patted her on the shoulder.

“Don’t look so surprised, honey,” she said. “News travels fast around here.”

Andi pulled away from the woman’s touch. “I’m not Brice Logan’s woman.” She kept her words clipped and her tone firm. “I want to get out of here.”

The other woman’s face closed and became wary. “You’re here until he can find a woman to help with those kids, aren’t you?” Suspicion filled every word.

“That’s what he thinks, but—“

The woman started to close the window. Andi touched the glass before it was completely rolled up. “Please,” she said. “I need to use a phone.”

The woman’s expression changed again. She looked almost conciliatory. “No one’s goin’ to help you abandon those kids,” she said gently. “We take care of our own around here.” She rolled the window right up to the top.

“Abandon?” Andi whispered. Is that what she was doing? Leaving Jayne, Marianne and Joe to a cold, bloodless bureaucracy?

Brice had said it himself. Laura Jones would take the children if Brice couldn’t find a replacement for Emily.

The truck pulled away with a spray of gravel. The woman stared back at her through the rear window. The sting of small pebbles and grit was nothing compared to the sting of the word “abandon”.

She had made a deal with Brice. If she was totally honest with herself, she’d admit that being needed for the first time in her life had a certain attraction. Who

was she kidding? She loved the fact that the kids needed her. Not just that, they also liked her. And she admitted wryly, she liked them, even Jayne. Maybe particularly Jayne. She saw so much of herself in Jayne's bitterness and rebellion.

The dust kicked up by the truck filled her nose. She pinched it to prevent a sneeze and failed.

She opened her eyes again as the dust began to settle. Brice was standing, still and quiet, across the road. She hadn't seen or heard him arrive.

The hum and buzz of insects flourished around them.

She watched him warily. His head was cocked as he studied her with intense concentration. His feet were braced apart as if he were ready to chase her down if she made a run for it.

She considered the idea and dismissed it again. What was the point? He'd only catch her. She crossed her arms under her breasts in direct imitation of him. She let her gaze slowly trail up from his dust-covered cowboy boots, past his sawdust-strewn jeans and across his broad, heaving chest.

He swallowed twice while she made her inspection. His nostrils flared. There was a faint sheen of sweat on his brow.

He was trying to hide it, she realized, but he'd been running. Hard.

So, she'd frightened him.

"Running out on us?" he asked, in spite of the obvious answer.

“No,” she lied. “Just trying to sell my watch.”

He snorted.

She waved away the last of the billowing dust and coughed. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s hot. I came down to see if you wanted a drink of water.” His gaze kept hers rivetted. Lights danced deep in his eyes.

Careful, she told herself, don’t get caught in the dancing lights. “Yeah, right,” she drawled.

One side of his lips tilted upward. Very slightly. He walked toward her with his long slow-measured stride.

She backed up a step.

He came closer.

She backed up again. Too late. She’d fallen right into his eyes and they held her.

He came closer.

She was locked in the depths of his gaze.

Her private war between logic and desire heated up inside. She flicked one glance down the road to see if the truck was turning around for her. It wasn’t.

Too late. He stood directly in front of her. His chest was inches from hers. His eyes, his lips were mere millimetres away.

She was frozen, caught between the warring sides of her. Reason or passion? Which would she choose?

She couldn’t think with him so near. Reason lost.

His scent filled her. His heat touched her, even through her clothes.

He trailed his warm fingers down from her shoulder to her elbow leaving little tracks of heat along the

way. She waited for him to lean a little closer, to complete the caress.

She waited to be pulled into his arms and kissed, unable to move the breath of space needed to kiss him herself. His tongue flicked out to lick his lips, almost touching her, he was so close.

His fingers slid slowly, exquisitely down to her hand.

He lifted her plastic bag full of clothes from her unprotesting fingers.

He turned and crossed the road.

"I'll carry this," he said over his shoulder, walking away from her, toward the house.

She swayed in silence for a long moment. Her senses whirled and her emotions fought to come down to normal levels. When she could think clearly again, her logical side wanted to drizzle honey all over him and stake him out over an anthill.

Her passionate side wanted to kick his butt.

Both sides of her wanted to run as far away from Brice Logan as she could get.

She had to run to catch up to him.

He shortened his stride to match hers.

She smiled, thinking about what to cook for dinner. Let's see. How would he feel about rotten potatoes? Raw chicken? Garlic in his vanilla pudding?

"It's kind of hot to be standing at the side of a road," he said quietly as he sped up beside her.

"You're right," she admitted, walking double-time to keep up.

He cast her a sidelong look. "You're a stubborn woman, Andi Goodson." He shook his head as if he never knew what to expect from her. "A mighty stubborn woman."

She finally understood how much he needed her to stay. Even his neighbors were aware of his desperate situation. Why hadn't he simply asked her to stay instead of tricking her into it?

"Am I so unapproachable?" she asked, not meaning to speak her thoughts out loud.

He looked at her as if she'd said a mountain had popped up on the prairie.

"I mean." She persevered. "Why can't you ask me to stay like any normal person would?"

"You would never have agreed right off."

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"I know."

There was no point in arguing with him because he was right. She would never have agreed to stay when she'd first arrived. She'd been completely wrapped up in herself and her own problems. Had she changed so much?

When they got back to the house, she headed for the kitchen. She'd walked out on a terrible mess. As soon as she was finished cleaning up, she'd have another look at the instructions on the cereal box. Before this week was over, she'd learn how to make the best coffee Brice Logan had ever tasted.

Chapter Six

Andi stopped dead when she got to the door of the kitchen. Cereal bowls, empty juice containers, tumblers, napkins and dirty cutlery had all been cleared away. The table shone from a recent wiping.

Jayne was up to her elbows in dish water washing dishes. Marianne was drying and putting dishes away. Joe was doing his best to sweep the floor.

No one had touched the tub of coffee, the coffee maker or the cereal box complete with instructions. Clearly, the coffee was still going to be her department.

She walked in slowly and stood behind a chair grasping it with both hands to steady herself.

Brice stood quietly beside her. He slanted a glance at her and whistled softly.

Andi waited for his explanation without looking at him. She squeezed the chair in front of her so hard her knuckles went white.

“The children have been neglecting their chores lately,” he began, “so I thought I’d have them catch up.” He had a little smile dancing on his lips that tried to apologize, but didn’t even come close.

“Their chores?” she demanded. A simmering anger burned through her surprise.

“It’s Marianne’s job to do breakfast cleanup and

Jayne's responsible for supper cleanup."

Andi was livid.

Brice's little smile died as soon as he saw it hadn't worked.

At least she understood why Jayne had been so upset with the toad's foiled escape last night. Andi couldn't blame her for not wanting to clean up someone else's disaster.

She let go the chair and faced him. "Do you have any idea how late I worked on this kitchen last night?" She fumed at him. "I didn't know these children could do any of this."

"You didn't ask."

The children froze and gaped at them. Their surprised expressions only pushed Andi further. "You allowed—no, condoned—their lack of co-operation. Were my attempts at housekeeping so funny? Were you amused, is that it?" How could she be so easily tricked?

"Amused? No. Flabbergasted is more like it," he said blandly, shoving his hands in his pockets and making for the door.

She followed right out after him. He didn't even look back, but crossed the yard toward the barn.

"Brice Logan, you stop right there," she demanded. He checked one pace but must have thought better of it and kept going. "Don't you walk away from me, you . . . you . . . you slavedriver."

He turned around and grinned at her, walking backward all the while. "Walk away from you?" he said

drily. "Honey, this isn't walking away. The day I do that is the last day you'll ever see me."

"That day won't come soon enough!" She wanted to stamp her feet, but it would take too long. He was getting away. She stalked after him.

When he backed into the barn door, he opened it quickly and stepped inside. He shut it again with a bang.

A closed door wouldn't stop her. She wrenched it open and strode through—straight into his hard body.

They collided with a force that made her grunt. Brice steadied her with his large hands.

"Now you can tell me off, angel." He held her gently by the shoulders. "I probably deserve it. I just don't think the kids should hear it."

Angel? It was barely light enough to see him grin. "Might give them ideas," he explained.

The close warmth of his body in the cool gloom, and the soft, intimate tone in his voice unnerved her a little. He looked at her mouth the way he had last night in the kitchen.

She stood perfectly still. Her anger had fled completely, leaving her hollow, ready to be filled with another, unexplored, emotion.

"Ideas?" she asked softly, caught in the play of light and shadow across the angular cut of his strong jaw.

"Sure. Kids are great at playing one adult against the other. If we're arguing they'll use it to their own advantage."

Her eyes adjusted completely to the dim light.

She no longer had a shield from the heat in his gaze. She didn't want to be shielded. Held in the circle of his vibrant body, with his eyes so close, desire flared deep inside.

Was it because he was so different from any other man she'd ever met? Was this wanting simply her jaded curiosity getting the better of her good sense? She hoped not.

He tipped his head closer. His lips plundered hers. This kiss was no soft exploration, no gentleman's request, no gentlewoman's offering. It was a powderkeg.

She lurched backward, scorched by the incredible surge of power she felt.

"Don't!" She touched her lips carefully. Her fingers trembled.

"Damn it, a man can only take so much." He stepped back quickly. "If you didn't want me to kiss you, why did you look at me like that?" His chest heaved with every breath.

"I . . ." Think fast, Cassandra. Her father's voice rattled through her mind. She pulled herself together the way he'd taught her. Never show confusion. "I did not look at you in any way. You assumed incorrectly that I wanted your kiss. You surprised me."

"Shocked the hell out of me, too." His voice was deep and earnest. "You felt it. A downrush of sensation right to the groin." His eyes gleamed with a light of their own.

She held her head as regally as she remembered

Grandmother Morrison ever doing. "I certainly did not. I felt no sensations rushing down to anywhere." As soon as she said the words she realized her mistake. He recognized a lie when he heard one. He hitched a corner of one lip as if to say yeah, right.

She took a step back. The rough grain of the wooden door was at her back.

Brice followed so close his chest brushed against her breasts. Wildfire raced from her nipples to her knees.

"Really? Tell me why I don't believe you, angel," he whispered. "Tell me you don't feel this." He leaned against her, trapping her, holding her with nothing more than his promise. Her heart beat painfully in its usual place. But at the same time, it plummeted again.

She lifted her hands to his chest and felt his heart pounding in time with her own. The sounds blended in her ears, as the scent of him filled her.

He demanded entrance to her mouth and she gave it. His tongue caressed hers, seeking knowledge. She heard a small moan but couldn't be sure which of them owned it.

His hands smoothed along her ribs and settled at the flair of her hips as he tugged her closer still. She went willingly, revelling in the joy of being alive, of feeling like this, of knowing she could feel like this.

She forgot she wasn't supposed to feel anything. She forgot to stand stiffly in his arms. She forgot everything but his firm lips, his questing tongue and the heat that settled low inside her.

He lifted his head and looked down at her.

She looked back, recognizing him, knowing forever it was Brice Logan who made her feel this way.

She tucked her fingers into the living heat of his hair to tug him back to her. She wanted nothing but his mouth on hers. She wanted this wondrous heat to go on and on.

He wouldn't budge, wouldn't come closer. Instead, he grinned. "Didn't feel anything, eh?"

She shuddered with the effort to collect herself. After a moment, she caught her breath. "I felt nothing," she lied hoarsely. Nothing but disaster looming, she thought, still trying desperately to control her raging heartbeat, her shuddering desire.

"Right," he grinned even wider and stepped away from her. The cool barn was suddenly downright chilly and she rubbed her arms. Hard.

He left her and started walking through the barn toward the shadowy back of the building. "Don't let the kids take advantage of you, Andi," he called over his shoulder. "They all have chores to do. Get them to give you a list so you can keep on top of things."

She scrabbled the rest of her wits together. "You could have told me all this last night, before I practically killed myself cleaning up the kitchen all alone."

"That's right," he called back. "I could have. But then I would never have known what a hard worker you can be." He stepped through the shadowed door to his workshop and disappeared.

She left the barn as quickly as he had, slamming the

door viciously behind her.

“Hard worker. Humph!” she muttered to the fat ginger cat asleep on the woodpile. He opened one eye and looked at her. Andi walked closer. She tentatively scratched the top of his head. He trilled in his throat. Encouraged, she scratched him again. He opened both eyes and blinked. “I’ll show him a hard worker,” she whispered. When the cat pressed his head up against her fingers she smiled at her little victory. “And that kiss! Who’d have thought a Saskatchewan farmer could pack such a wallop.”

A wallop she’d have to avoid at all costs.

The next day, Andi enjoyed organizing the household. She had no Executive Vice-President countermanning her decisions. Her father couldn’t watch from behind the scenes, waiting for her to slip up.

Brice leaned against the kitchen wall, his mouth a thin line of amusement as she doled out chores like party favors. “Joe, you’ll be responsible for keeping the stairway free of toys and you will make your own bed every morning,” Andi said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly, hanging his head. He looked at Marianne. “I hate making my bed, I can’t get the crinkles outta it.”

“Don’t worry Joe, I can’t get ’em out of my bed, either,” Brice said with a look at Andi that scorched her soul. She wished he’d stop doing that, catching her unaware and raising her temperature before she had the good sense to tamp it back down again.

She cleared her throat warningly at Brice and asked who wanted to dust every other day. Marianne volunteered and accepted her chores with no complaint. Jayne huffed and sighed a lot, volunteering for nothing.

“And I,” Andi said, with the air of making a momentous announcement, “will do the laundry!”

“What?” shrieked Jayne. “You’re not touching my clothes again!”

“Fine,” Brice cut in. “You can do your own.” He slanted a look at Andi that said the matter was closed.

“You, Brice,” she said, “will cook supper twice a week and, ah, vacuum as needed.” She folded her list and jammed it into the back pocket of her jeans.

“And what,” Jayne said through a sneer, “are you going to do?”

Andi walked toward the door, stopped and looked back over her shoulder at the four of them. “I,” she said with a self-satisfied grin, “am going for a walk.”

She strolled out the back door and crossed the porch, dismissing the barn and the pond behind it. She walked straight across the yard and right into the wheat. She grinned, enjoying her feeling of accomplishment. The house was organized. She’d found cookbooks that the most inexperienced cook could use. The children were helping, not hindering, her efforts and Brice, well, Brice was still attractive, aggravating and in his own room every night.

For a disquieting moment she wondered if Brice was so aggravating because he stayed in his room

every night.

The heat in the field enveloped and comforted her. Alone on a prairie, her father's treachery couldn't reach her and all her guilt for wasted years couldn't haunt her.

She decided to walk in the wheat every day for as long as she was here. But what, in New York, could ever replace this field?

On Andi's fourth day on the farm, the third of her promised week, she found Joe at the pond he played in behind the barn.

"Why do you call this pond a dugout?" she asked, more to get the boy to talk than for her own enlightenment. She wouldn't need to know any of the things she was learning here when she returned home.

Joe shrugged. "I dunno. It just is. They use the water for eiriegation."

"What do you call that?" She pointed to a large round metal building beside the barn.

"A granary."

"They store the wheat in there?"

"Nah, just seeds." He poked at the mud beside the water with a stick. "Know why you should like the barn swallows?"

"No, why?"

"They eat 'squitos."

She nodded slowly, as if the information he shared was vital to her well-being.

Brice came into view from the other side of the

barn. She watched him walk toward the back porch, his slow stride deceptive. He could cover a lot of ground with each step.

When he reached the porch he stopped as if scenting something on the wind. He turned slowly and caught her looking at him. He looked back.

Yards and yards of dirt separated them. Breeding, social position and money separated them. But mostly, the fact that only a few days together could be all they'd ever have, separated them.

Joe continued to prattle and when she looked down at him and back up at Brice, she saw the door swing shut behind him. Brice had avoided being alone with her ever since he'd kissed her in the barn. It was for the best, but, knowing it, didn't make the long nights go any faster.

The only thing that helped was long walks. She said goodbye to Joe and set out. She mustn't keep thinking of the kiss, she told herself, as she stepped onto the little path she'd begun to wear in the wheat.

It was wrong to want a man this much when she knew her time here was almost over. She walked faster, the usual peacefulness of the wheat eluding her.

Starting tomorrow, she would clean the house from top to bottom, thoroughly and completely. She'd be so tired for the rest of her time here, she'd have nothing but sleep on her mind at bedtime.

"It's Jayne," Brice told Andi on the day before she was to leave. "She's not herself." The children had

finally left them alone in the kitchen after lunch.

“How can you tell?” she asked, smoothing several tendrils of white-blond hair that had escaped the ponytail she’d started to use. “She’s never around.”

“That’s just it.” He gave a frustrated sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. “She used to be. Jayne was around the kitchen constantly: talking to Emily, trying new recipes, getting in the way.” The memories were bittersweet. “She always had her headphones on and sang off key. Emily and I used to laugh all the time.” He sighed. “She’s changed a lot and I’ve been waiting for her to come around, to be her old self. I know it hasn’t been long since Emily died”

“I had no idea Jayne had changed so much so quickly,” she said, concern rounding out her words, making them sound helpful and comforting. “No wonder you’re worried.” Her ice-blue gaze melted and he knew she’d help in any way she could. She wouldn’t even make him ask.

“Fifteen is such a delicate age,” she went on sympathetically. She leaned closer across the table. “Jayne’s dealing with a lot of emotional highs and lows at this point in her life,” Andi said softly. “I can understand. My mother died when I was nine.”

He wanted to reach across the table and touch her, but he was afraid he wouldn’t stop at a simple touch of condolence. He smiled a weak smile of reassurance, instead. “I’m sorry, that’s a tough one for a kid.” She’d be out of here tomorrow, he reminded himself, so keep your hands to yourself.

“It took a long time before I could forgive her for leaving me. I can’t imagine the effect it would have to be fostered out only to lose my foster mother as well.” She reached tentatively across the table and clasped his fingers in hers.

Big mistake, he thought, turning his hand over to trace the fine bones of her fingers. “Jayne needs time and someone to lean on,” she was saying, but he could only respond to the feel of her, the sound of her voice, soft, encouraging, gentle and above all, female with that fine sound of compassion only women had. The kind of compassion that could fool a man into thinking there was something more than just sympathy happening.

He kept his touch light, even though he could feel each line of each knuckle on her hand right through to his soul. He wanted to trace her cheek, her ear, her neck. The days since their last contact had sharpened his awareness of her rather than mellowed it.

“You never told me about your mother,” he murmured. He squeezed her fingers gently sharpening his need deliberately. “Did your father remarry?”

“No. He kept mistresses instead.” There was a deep bitterness in her voice. “It was more economical for him. Besides, before long he began to train me to hostess for him, so he didn’t need a wife.” The bitterness was replaced by a cold flat tone. “I was eager to please, so I learned how to cater his parties, select the correct wines, plan brunches and smile.”

Brice clenched his jaw so hard he thought he’d

crack a tooth. “But you were a kid. Younger than Marianne.”

Andi laughed a short bitter bark. “I was never a kid, Brice, only a liability desperate to be an asset.” She closed her eyes because the horror on his face was too much to bear. Desire, she could accept, anger she could rail against, deception she could deal with. Pity from Brice Logan was unbearable.

She opened her eyes. He had his features under control but his fingers no longer stroked leisurely. They clenched hers in their grasp. She let him hold on, knowing somehow that he needed to.

“So,” she said, “now you know.” His deep brown eyes went even darker with what she suspected was compassion. She ignored it. She didn’t need compassion, she needed to know what to do for Jayne. “If anything,” she said briskly, “in my past can be used to help Jayne, tell me how.” She grinned. “You’re the professional child care worker.” She touched his foot with her own under the table. “I’m just the hired help, remember?” she teased, deliberately keeping her voice airy.

He eased his grip on her hands and leaned back into his chair. He scrubbed his scalp with his fingertips as if massaging the blood vessels in his head could make him think more clearly. His expression lightened. “At least I know why you never learned to make coffee,” he said with an understanding grin. “You were taught to order it.”

“Exactly.” She nodded, at ease again. “Now, that’s

the Brice Logan I know,” she said. “The way your face turned to thunderclouds, I was beginning to think you cared!” She laughed again, enjoying teasing him. She shook her head at an errant thought. “Remind me not to introduce you to Dad. I can’t imagine you two together in the same room at the same time. Wicked,” she said, through a smile. He stared hard at her for a moment. Had she said too much or something wrong? He blinked, apparently discarding his thoughts.

“About Jayne,” he said.

“You’d like me to spend a little time with her?” she offered before he could continue. She had the feeling she was being had, but, for Jayne’s sake, she could pretend Brice wasn’t manipulating her into offering to help.

“I realize it won’t be easy,” he continued, “considering she still hasn’t forgiven you for what you did to her clothes.” He rolled his eyes and she was tempted to kick him under the table.

Instead, she propped her chin in her hand and leaned on the table toward him, feeling as if she could sit like this, with him, forever.

His expression turned more serious. “Jayne may need to be given more responsibility around here.” He considered for a moment. “Maybe she needs less. But, I’ll never find out if she keeps hiding in the shed.”

Andi nodded, unable to speak. He’d done it again. He’d filled her up, every sense, every part of her incredibly aware of him as a man.

He had shared his problems and worry. He needed

her help, even if she hadn't made him admit it. Did this mean she was actually needed? No, she thought, it was more a reflection of Brice's desperation.

"I suppose I should go out to the shed and find out what's going on." If Jayne was sulking, she'd carried it on far too long. If she was grieving, she might need help to move on to the next stage.

She left Brice to do the lunch dishes and crossed the yard for the shed.

Jayne?" she called. She heard no reply, although she hadn't honestly expected one. Jayne had been particularly nasty before leaving for the shed after lunch.

This was going to be a difficult confrontation. She'd hoped to get through the week with as little hassle from Jayne as possible, but Brice had dashed any chance of that. The Jayne he'd described was a far cry from the teenager Andi had been exposed to all week. She didn't want to leave tomorrow without some hope that Jayne's emotional state would improve.

Tomorrow. The week was up tomorrow. Brice would take her into the crossroads—she refused to call it a town—and Barney would have her car in his garage. He would fix whatever was wrong and she'd be on the telephone to Granddad faster than Brice could blink.

Jayne still hadn't answered, but there was nowhere else she could be. Andi smoothed her jeans and tapped lightly on the grey wood door. "Jayne?" she called, clearing any impatience from her voice. "I need to talk to you."

The door flew open suddenly. Andi stepped back just as quickly to avoid being hit in the face. Even so, Jayne crowded her as she came out, slamming the door closed so Andi couldn't see into the dark interior.

"What?" Jayne asked, with disdain so haughty she must have practiced three times a day to perfect it. She stared straight into Andi's eyes, face tilted upward, hands on hips.

Andi refused to rise to the bait, refused to react at all. She simply waited until Jayne's gaze dropped from her own.

"You needed to talk to me?" Jayne asked more reasonably.

"Yes. Can we walk a bit? The fields clear my head and I—"

Jayne sighed impatiently, cutting off Andi's explanation. "Okay." Jayne's small round face looked up into hers, full of suspicion.

They crossed the yard together and started along Andi's little path through the wheat. Jayne walked stiffly, warily. She kept slanting glances at Andi, as if she were afraid of her, or wondering what to expect next.

Andi wondered the same thing.

She cleared her throat. "I'll be gone in the morning," she said unnecessarily. Everyone in the house had been counting down the days of this week, although every one of them had different reasons.

Jayne visibly relaxed. She no longer held her shoulders in the stance of a good fighting man and her

stride became loose and carefree. "We'll miss you," she lied breezily.

"I'm sure you will," Andi replied dryly.

"Why did you bring me out here?"

"I wanted to talk about Joe and Marianne." Andi kept her voice even, matter-of-fact and emotionless. It was difficult to imagine leaving the younger children. Leaving Brice to see to their needs every day. She'd quite enjoyed her time here, apart from the emotional upheaval of meeting Brice Logan.

Finally, Jayne swung back to look at Andi, something other than anger, defiance and plain cussedness piqued. She was simply curious. "What about them?"

Andi had expected to see resentment. At least Jayne's anger was only directed at Andi, and didn't include two innocent kids. "They'll need you, Jayne. They'll need to know someone cares enough to hug them when they cry." She bit her lip to stem the threat of rising tears. She held up a hand to stop Jayne from interrupting. "I know, Brice is great with them. It's not the same."

She sighed and turned back the way they'd come. She wasn't quite sure when she'd decided more responsibility was the answer. "I only want you to be a little more available. In other words, give up some of the time you spend in the shed." Brice had been on the right track, although he hadn't seen it. Jayne needed something important and worthwhile to do. A purpose.

"What if I don't want to?" Jayne's petulance cried

out for a sharp retort, but Andi bit it back.

“I think Brice would like you to spend less time in the shed, Jayne.” Andi hoped Jayne cared enough for her foster father to want to help. “He’s worried about you.”

“He is?” Jayne asked breathlessly. Her chest rose and fell in excitement. “He noticed I’m not around as much?” Her bright eyes spoke of feverish infatuation.

For a moment, Andi couldn’t speak. She nodded. She heard the buzz of insects, felt the warmth of the morning sun and swallowed dryly. The only thing she could see was Jayne in the middle of a full-blown teenage crush. Dear Lord, help us all, Andi thought.

Chapter Seven

The reason for Jayne's behavior since Andi's arrival was clear now. The pouting, the flouncing, the childish demands, the long disappearances into the shed—they were all to get Brice's attention.

Horrified, Andi couldn't think of a worse situation to leave Brice. Jayne's cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone. She was happily oblivious to Andi's reaction. If Andi tried to talk to her about all the implications of an emotional—her mind shied away from the word romantic—entanglement with her foster father, Jayne would see it as interference. Perhaps she'd even see Andi as a rival. What a mess!

Jayne lead the way back toward the house. She hummed a happy little tune, apparently at ease with her world.

Andi chewed her lip. She'd have to warn Brice. Hopefully between them, they could come up with a solution that wouldn't tear Jayne apart. Then at least Andi could leave tomorrow feeling she'd done her best.

The solution would have to be up to Brice. He could handle it. After all it was only a teenage crush! Everybody got them and everybody got over them.

After supper that evening, the air was still so hot Andi didn't want to breathe or maybe it was only that

she was following Brice out onto the veranda. They would be alone.

Soon the cooler night air would slip across the prairie bringing hordes of mosquitoes. It would be impossible to sit outside then and these quiet few moments with him would never come again. It was now or never.

Andi settled on the porch swing and pushed off with one foot. She tucked her other foot tidily beneath her and waited, enjoying the quiet peacefulness of the evening. The cheep of crickets and the creak of the swing were the only sounds to break the stillness. Andi imagined she could hear her own heart beating in time with the seductive push pull of the swing in motion.

Brice stood with his back to her, leaning against a support post at the railing, gazing out across the front yard. She hadn't often seen him so still, the children seemed to make time for reflection an impossible dream.

He was probably happy she was leaving in the morning. She would retreat from his life as quickly as she'd invaded it.

Before she could leave with a clear conscience, she had to tell him what she knew. "I spent some time with Jayne today," she began and took a deep breath before going on. He didn't turn around, but his shoulders shifted almost imperceptibly and she was sorry for what she would say next. "You're going to hate this, Brice." She spoke quietly, knowing she was putting off what must be said.

His spine went even straighter as he heard her words. He glanced over his shoulder at her, his brown eyes unreadable in the failing light. "All right," he said as if nothing she said could surprise him. He took a long swig of his cold beer. She could see drippy condensation on the amber-colored bottle. "What is it?" He turned around to face her, still leaning against the support post. He crossed his long legs at his ankles. His large hands held the beer bottle loosely before he tipped it to his lips once more. One small bead of the liquid settled on his lip. His tongue came out to find it. As she watched, he watched back, silently.

All week she'd wanted to feel him touch her again the way he had in the barn. She'd wanted to kiss him the way he'd kissed her. She'd wanted to shake him up the way he'd shaken her. She blinked and smiled uneasily.

"I don't know how to begin." Smoothing the pair of streaked blue and white shorts she'd inherited through her destruction of Jayne's clothes, her mind raced ahead into the conversation.

He stood perfectly still and waited in silence. His solemn assessing eyes studied the line of her leg as she pushed against the floor in a steady rhythm. His knuckles whitened on the bottle as he watched her.

Slowly, she swung. Back. She pushed. Forth. His jaw flexed as he watched. Back. Forth. Caught in the seductiveness of his arousal, she continued the rhythm. Swamped by the knowledge of his wanting her, she luxuriated in the fantasy of holding him

between her thighs and twisting and turning with him in the rhythm of joining. She felt her leg muscles loosen in unconscious invitation and she pulled herself back from the brink of offering.

This wasn't helping, she thought wildly and stopped the swing with a sudden jerk.

He darted a glance to her face, his eyes wild with an energy all their own. Then he sat beside her in a flurry of impatience. The swing rocked crazily. Andi fought to keep herself from falling against him. She couldn't afford to touch him.

Was he impatient with her or with himself? Probably a bit of both, she decided. Impatience had absolutely nothing to do with the riot of emotions roiling through her. She had to gain some control. She had to get the conversation on track.

"Jayne has a crush on you," she finally said baldly.

"What?" He turned to her incredulously. He flushed deep crimson, still shocked.

"You heard me. And keep your voice down, I don't want her to hear this," she whispered harshly, determined to dispel any lingering aura of sexual awareness. "She'd be furious if she found out we were discussing her feelings for you."

"Her feelings for me," he repeated woodenly, as if having difficulty believing the conversation. "What the hell. . . ?"

He leaned close, stirring the air. The scent of soap and aroused man swept toward her. Andi drank it in. She patted his knee slowly, trying to clear her senses

of him.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “This won’t last long. I’d give it a month at the most.” She smiled as she explained. “Jayne’s dealing with Emily’s death in a very natural way, I guess, wanting to be the woman of the house. Wanting to be your woman, Brice.”

“My woman?” He sounded hollow with the realization. “Oh my Lord, this is awful.” The flush in his cheeks showed no sign of disappearing as the news began to sink in. “If Laura Jones finds out, or suspects there might be even a whiff of this sort of thing.” He rubbed his face briskly. “What if Laura thinks I somehow encouraged Jayne?” He kept his tortured voice low. “This could be a nightmare.”

He sounded so strained Andi doubted he could raise the level of his voice even if he wanted. “Laura Jones doesn’t have to know,” she said softly, quickly. She had to get him past this shock if they were ever to find a solution. Time was running out. “I promise, Brice, this infatuation will go away and never return.”

“Jeez, should I talk to her?” Brice asked.

“To Laura?”

“No, to Jayne. Should I tell her the implications?” He shook his head no. “That’s no good.” He hesitated. “Should I tell her there’s someone else in my life? Nah, that’s no good either.” His gaze flicked wildly over her.

The idea there may be another woman in Brice’s life had never occurred to Andi. The thought stuck and she couldn’t dislodge it. “You couldn’t tell her

you're in love with someone else if it's not true."

"Well, it isn't true." He flicked a glance at her and gave an ironic smile. "I guess if I did have a woman, Jayne would have found some boy to fall for instead of me." He propped his chin on his fists and stared at the floor.

"Yes, well, she'd have known you were spoken for. You aren't, are you?" Andi asked breathlessly, every bit as excited, as nervous, as Jayne must have been in the wheat. "Spoken for, I mean." She needed to be very clear on this point.

He looked directly at her for the first time since she'd blurted this news. The shock was receding fast, being pushed aside by darker, more dangerous emotions. She read desire, longing and something akin to anger in his gaze. She felt a shifting and settling inside, an acceptance, sort of, of the link between them. No matter where her world sent her or how far away she went, she'd never forget this man, these children, or this place.

He was close. Very close.

His gaze settled on hers. The heat in his eyes made her breath catch in her throat.

"No," his whispered huskily. "I'm not spoken for. Not yet, anyway."

She licked her lips, trying desperately not to look at his and failing. "That's good," she whispered into the cooling evening air. She leaned close enough to feather his lips with her own. One more time, her soul cried, she needed this one more time.

His hand came up and cradled her face. She leaned into it, marvelling at how gentle he could be in spite of the calluses she knew were on each of his fingers. Her body's response was immediate and devastating, shaking her to the core.

Greedily enjoying these few stolen moments, she let her eyelids drift shut slowly, loving the warmth of his lips on hers. The tip of his tongue touched lightly at the corner of her mouth. She opened for him, avid for the taste of him again.

His arms came around her tightly, dragging her closer. His hands smoothed her back down to her bottom, kneading her buttocks. His fingertips delved beneath the waistband of her shorts as he stroked her skin. She had to have more of him against her. Had to feel his hard length pressing her. She simply had to hold him. She moved her leg out from under her bottom, trying to shift closer. The swing rocked wildly, forcing them apart to keep their balance.

"Damn! My leg's gone pins and needles," she said with a gasp. She stretched her leg out and began to massage her thigh, angry that her own body could betray her at such an extraordinary time in such an ordinary way.

"Here, let me." He smiled sympathetically but his eyes burned his desire. Wicked and dangerous. She was falling as quickly as any fifteen-year-old could. Except she was old enough to understand that if she fell far enough she could never turn back.

His hands were warm and strong on her thigh once

the feeling started to return. He moved slowly, inexorably down her leg to her calf. Then he moved on to her ankle, massaging, prodding and coaxing the blood back. The tingles she felt now were located more in her chest than her leg. By the time he reached her ankle, he had her leg pulled right across his lap. The tingles in her chest had dropped lower. Much lower.

“It’s okay,” she said, afraid he’d recognize the huskiness in her tone for exactly what it was. “It’s better now.” She tried to sit up straight, but he held her leg at the knee and ankle.

“Leave it right here.” He smoothed her from knee to thigh top with small exquisitely erotic circles. “I don’t mind.” She trembled at his touch.

She’d seen Niagara Falls once. Suddenly, she knew exactly what it would be like to tumble over them and be swept away. Swept away. In the middle of the Canadian Prairies. No, it was wrong. She must not allow it.

“I think not,” she said, as much in self-defence as in any sense of propriety.

“Suit yourself.” He lifted his hands from her leg and held them palms up. Now, instead of passion and arousal in his gaze, she saw an appealing sense of fun that she knew she would miss every bit as much as his kisses.

She sat on the swing properly.

An unmistakable buzz by her ear told her their time alone was at an end. Fighting disappointment, she stood. “Mosquitoes,” she said. “Let’s move into the

house before we turn into a full course meal.”

Brice smiled sadly into her eyes and she knew he was telling her he would miss her. She smiled back in acknowledgement.

It was over.

It had to be.

Brice stood briskly and held open the door for her. As soon as he followed her inside, he heard Joe blowing up the bad guys' war fortress in his bedroom. "Joe!" he called upstairs. "Get to sleep!" He laughed, remembering how silent the boy had been when he'd first arrived a year and a half ago. "What a kid," he said to Andi, not hiding the affection he felt for the little guy.

Andi turned around and smiled at him, her eyes alight. She hooked her elegant fingers into the belt loops on the shortest pair of shorts he'd ever seen. On Jayne, the same shorts had been innocent and youthful when they had still been pristine white. But now, with Andi in them streaked with blue, they made him hotter'n new asphalt under the noonday sun. He felt winded, like he'd been punched in the gut.

He followed the sway of her hips as she lead him into the kitchen. Her legs were long and golden, her waist slim, her shoulders smooth under the discolored tank top. He ached with wanting her.

Avoiding her all week had only whetted his appetite for her and his body had responded like a teenager's. He had only one more eternal night to live through before she was gone forever.

He couldn't take much more.

"Want another beer?" she asked, her voice as much like honey as a sound could ever be.

"No thanks, I'm fine." He held up his half-full bottle and pulled out a chair at the kitchen table.

"You make them look so good and cold. Do you mind if I try one?" She stood by the refrigerator, looking at him. One hand held the door handle. Her breasts were emphasized under the tank top by a shadow of perspiration between them. He should have lifted that top, should have tasted her there, should have sucked those pert little nipples 'til she cried out.

He swallowed hard. "Try one? Haven't you ever had a beer?"

She kept on looking at him. Kept on giving him sucker punches.

He kept taking them.

"Not a Canadian one," she said. "German, Mexican and American, of course." She shrugged. "I'm not much of a beer drinker." Then she smiled, real wide. "Most of my friends would be shocked to hear this." Her eyes lit up as if she were about to share some naughty secret. "I usually drink imported natural spring water and I hate it!"

She was laughing, kind of high and loose, as if she were nervous. "There are so many things in my life that I've truly hated and done anyway."

She turned and bent over to look in the fridge, fanny up. He forced down a swallow of beer to hide the groan he felt building. Didn't she realize what she

was doing to him? He heaved a sigh when she finally got a beer and sat down across from him.

She tipped the bottle and sipped slowly. "Mmm, I like it." She licked her lips, savoring the beer on her own flesh.

Flesh he wanted to savor, too.

"There's a bite . . ." she said, missing the fact that he must be staring at her like a starving man at a feast. ". . . an undertone of richness I've never tasted before." She looked at him, smiling uneasily. "What's wrong? You haven't said a word."

He scrambled for something to say that would hide the lust-colored thoughts he'd been entertaining. "What have you hated and done anyway?"

"I've played princess." She tilted up her chin, her eyes wide, filled with a shaky confidence he was beginning to recognize.

"You'll have to explain that one, angel. I've never met a princess before."

"Well, let me tell you," she took another drink, "being a princess isn't all it's cracked up to be." When she settled the bottle back on the table, she started to peel the label in thin strips. A long moment passed while she concentrated on her bottle.

He took a sip and heard Marianne say goodnight as she headed up to bed. He looked at the clock. Nine-thirty. Too soon to go to bed. Too late to work in the study. Too dangerous to sit here with his princess angel.

"What's it like being an angel?" Damn, where'd

that come from, he thought.

“Excuse me?” She looked up at him.

For a moment he was lost in her wide, ice-blue eyes. “That’s what Joe called you when he saw you coming up the lane the first morning. You even looked a little like an angel.” He shifted his weight. It was uncomfortable admitting how he’d pictured her in his mind, but he wanted her to know. He dropped his gaze to the worn table top. “You looked all shimmery with your fairy hair blowing back in the breeze. The sun was coming up behind you.” He chanced a quick glance at her. She seemed enthralled, not at all ready to laugh or scoff at his fanciful description. He went on, “You were bringing the dawn closer with every step you took, all pink and rosy.”

She shook her head, denying the image he described. “I was exhausted. Hungry! Angry at absolutely everything in my life! And my feet hurt!” She gave a derisive little huff. “Some angel!”

“Look at all the work you’ve done since you got here.” Everything was running fairly smoothly and he’d miss her like hell. Starting right now. “Some princess!”

She laughed with him for a moment. They stopped immediately when the back door opened. They both turned to see who was coming in. Jayne.

His chuckle died in his throat. He couldn’t look at her without wondering what was going through her mind. That was something he really didn’t want to know.

Jayne hesitated for a moment when she walked in. She looked from Andi to him and back again, studying them. What had they sounded like to her, laughing over a beer in the kitchen? Like lovers? Like friends? Or simply like co-workers?

She must have decided they sounded like nothing at all because she smiled happily. She walked around behind him and began to rub his shoulders.

He froze. What the hell was she doing? his rational part screamed. His other, emotional side, still tangled in Andi's spell, was stunned into silence by Jayne's raw audacity. His professional side admitted he'd been trying to get through to these kids that normal healthy affection included a certain amount of touching. Torn between allowing this natural extension of affection or nipping her teenage crush in the bud, he did nothing.

"So, I hear Andi's leaving tomorrow," Jayne said. She squeezed his muscles unskilfully. His impulse now was to shrug her off, but he could never deliberately hurt her little-girl heart.

There must be veiled feminine signals he couldn't begin to understand in Jayne's behavior because Andi was reading them all too well. Her shock and horror were reflected in her face.

Jayne leaned down to speak into his ear. "Don't worry, Brice, I can handle anything that comes up." Her breath was rapid against his ear. "I'll be in charge of the house and you'll be in charge of the business. We won't need anybody," she said, as if for confirmation.

He swallowed hard, fighting to keep from pulling away from her painful ministrations.

Andi smiled a little shakily. "I know you'll do fine, Jayne." She looked at Brice.

He glared back at her. She went back to watching Jayne carefully, ignoring his glare. Ignoring his silent demand for help.

Finally, in desperation, he reached up to Jayne's prodding fingers and patted them. "Fine, Jayne, thanks for the massage. It's almost ten, you'll miss your favorite television show if you don't go now."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" She dashed down the hall to the living room. Seconds later the raucous theme from a teenage soap opera filled the house.

"Turn it down!" Brice hollered, relieved to get his control back. He had fumbled badly with Jayne just now, but how could he know how to handle the romantic yearnings of a girl young enough to be his daughter.

He was tired. In the morning he'd deal with the whole thing much better. All he needed was a good night's sleep, something he hadn't had since Andi Goodson had fallen into his life.

Andi's expression was pensive as she picked again at the label on her bottle of beer.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow, after you've left," he whispered across the table. "I'll explain about Social Services threatening to take the kids away." He was desperately searching for something to cling to. Something definite. "Jayne will understand that she's

too young. She's a kid!" He needed Andi to agree. "You were right, Andi, Laura Jones need never find out." Why wasn't she agreeing with him, why was Andi still picking at her bottle? He tried again. "Jayne will understand. Won't she?"

Finally, Andi lifted her gaze to his. Soft, sympathetic blue eyes. "Sure, Brice, of course she will."

She was lying and they both knew it.

Chapter Eight

Brice drove silently through the summer heat toward Ibbotsville. Andi studied the cloudless sky. She needed to stamp it indelibly into her memory. Would she ever see a place like this again? A dull ache filled her as she realized that even if she did, it wouldn't be this place.

They had spoken little since last night. Andi didn't want to know how Brice would handle Jayne's crush on him. That way, it would be easier for her to pretend everything was fine back here. She wanted to remember everyone as happy and settled, not torn apart by a teenager's misguided affections.

The plastic bag stuffed with her clothes leaned against her legs, making them sticky in the heat. She shifted the bag closer to Brice's side of the truck so she could catch as much of the hot breeze on her legs as possible. "I thought New York City could get hot, but this is ridiculous!"

"You wouldn't say that if you were here in January with the wind chill making it fifty below."

Scooping her hair into a ponytail, she took a rubber band off the dash to hold it. "No place that gets this hot could get that cold."

He slanted her a wry glance. The corner of his mouth tilted up into his half smile that drove her

to distraction. "Good thing you won't be here to find out."

"Good thing," she agreed and fought back a rough jab of sadness. Turning from him, she scanned the fields from here to the horizon. The combines had been and gone already, leaving the area stubbled, still, and quiet. "When will you harvest your wheat?"

"I don't have any wheat." He looked out his window.

She could swear he was hiding a grin.

These were their last moments together. The closer they got to town, the more questions she had. As if she could store the answers and study them later, like photos in an album. Little bits of Brice Logan to remember; maybe even sigh over. He'd be her very own one that got away.

Eventually, she'd be able to tell her friends small bits of this story. Perhaps in fifty years or so, long after the pain eased into a dull monotonous thud.

"If you don't grow wheat what do you grow?" she asked, determined to fill her memory album completely.

"Toys."

She was right. He was grinning. "Toys?" she demanded, curiosity on full alert.

"I make wooden toys in my workshop, Andi. I don't farm anything." He slowed the truck and parked in front of the General Store. When he turned to her, his eyes filled with a gentle mischief. "Contrary to popular belief, I'm not a big, dumb farmer."

“I knew that would come back to haunt me.” A shadow of her New York self flickered through her mind. “But anyone could have made that mistake. Anyone.”

She fitted the pieces together. The sawdust on his jeans. The hours spent in the back of the barn. She hadn't seen any field hands or farm workers around. How had she been so blind? Easy. She'd done nothing but think of herself for the past week.

Her cheeks heated as he continued to watch her. She looked away to stare at the sign in front of the store. A sticker in the window proclaimed the proprietors also ran an office for a catalogue shopping service.

“You're a toy maker,” she said, accepting the truth. He walked around the front of the truck to her door.

He opened it and clasped her lightly around the waist, the feel of his strong warm hands startling. “I can get down on my own.” But she didn't want to. She wanted him to continue to hold her. She wanted his hands to stay on her waist.

They did.

“I'll never see your toys, will I?” she asked, not masking the wistful yearning she felt. She knew even less about him than she thought. Her album of memories would be terribly thin, the pieces of him unclear.

Brice studied her white blonde hair and eyes blue as a January sky. “Doesn't look like it,” he said. He let her slide slowly down the length of him to the ground. She was so lithe and close. She smelled of soap and

flowers. He closed his eyes for a brief moment to let her scent fill him.

She leaned into him, pressing against his chest. He tugged her a little closer lower down and tortured his aching body even more. She relaxed in his arms and looked up at him with shiny eyes, apparently content to let him hold her for a moment. A friendly goodbye hug.

She was leaving today.

“Brice,” her voice was husky, “before I go I—“

“Don’t angel.” He pressed two fingers to her lips for a long moment. She kissed them, firing a shaft of raw desire through him.

To hell with New York, kids and goodbyes. If they had one more night together, he’d do all the things he’d dreamed of and more. She’d turn to flame in his arms and he’d burn just as hot for her.

He stepped back so she would not realize how aroused he’d become. She was leaving for crying out loud, not waiting for an invitation to stay. Andi would be happier than a forgotten turkey at Thanksgiving to be a hundred miles from here.

She watched his face. He kept his hat low to shade his eyes. He didn’t want to let her see what he knew was there: desire, disappointment, loneliness, maybe even a little despair.

“Well,” she said briskly, after a moment, “where should we go first? The post office for your mail or Barney’s for my car?”

“I’d like to check the mail.” The sooner he got a

real housekeeper, the sooner he'd forget she'd ever been in his house; the sooner he'd forget she'd ever been in his mind.

He lead the way into the store. While Andi wandered through the place picking up knick-knacks and tools she couldn't possibly recognize, he made his way to the postal service counter at the back. Two large brown envelopes waited for him, one from each of the newspapers.

He looked over his shoulder to see if Andi was bored yet. He saw her flip through the catalogue apparently entertained for awhile. He ripped open the first envelope. Three replies. Not bad.

The Saskatoon paper had only forwarded one reply. He scanned it quickly and dismissed the woman as too young. Jayne needed a positive role model, not a buddy.

He'd read the three other replies later, after seeing Barney. Andi would be bored stiff by now. He folded and stuffed the envelopes into his back pocket. Drawing nearer, he watched her dig through her ridiculous little beaded bag and hand two American bills to the eldest Gonczy boy behind the counter. Billy gave her a five, some coins and a receipt.

Brice touched her shoulder to let her know he was ready to leave. She glanced up at him and smiled. He followed her outside. "What were you doing?" he asked. He tossed his mail on the front seat of the truck.

"I ordered Jayne some clothes."

“With your last forty dollars?”

“I . . .” she looked at him, her eyes gleaming vague defiance. It was a look he’d seen in females before. It always came just before a complete change of mind.

He waited.

She sighed and looked up and down the street as if searching for the right words. “It was the least I could do after ruining her shorts and tops.”

“You could have sent her some clothes from the city. You didn’t have to do it right now.”

“Yes, I did. She’ll be angry enough when she finds out I’m staying. I don’t need the clothes disaster hanging over my head as well.”

“You’re staying? What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. Heat rose from his neck to his cheeks. This was the craziest notion he’d ever heard. “You’ve just spent a full week waiting to get out of here.” She had punched the wind out of him. Completely.

“I know.” She looked steadily up at him, her blue eyes serious. “But sometime between last night when I saw how poorly you’re handling Jayne’s infatuation, and when I walked into the store, I realized how much you need me.”

“Are you saying I flubbed it with Jayne last night?” It was one thing to admit it to himself, but he didn’t have to admit it to Andi. What did she care anyway? She’d made it damn clear his concerns were nothing to her. He stopped walking and waited for her to realize it.

She stormed on for at least half a block.

Finally, she looked back at him. "What's wrong?" she stopped and put her hands on her hips in that defiant gesture she used when she was royally put out with him.

"I didn't mess up with Jayne last night." He kept his voice firm even though he avoided her gaze.

"Not entirely," she admitted. "At least you didn't make matters worse." She walked the yards separating them. Standing close, she looked straight up at him and smiled easily. "At least you didn't make her cry." Her blue eyes warmed with her teasing.

Fear of making Jayne cry was enough to paralyze his instincts but doing nothing at all could be worse. "I wouldn't make her cry." What exactly would he do? Knowing his back was against the wall, he couldn't do anything but curse. "Hell," he muttered, not caring if Andi heard him or not.

He shoved past her and continued to walk toward Barney's garage. What was wrong with him? Only moments ago he'd been thinking all kinds of dark, hot things about her. But it had been safe to imagine all that stuff when he'd thought she wouldn't be here to tempt him. Now that she was staying, he was scared stiff.

He gritted his teeth and turned around to her. "How long are you planning to stay?" He almost growled the words, damning himself for being so obvious.

"I'm not sure. A few days," she said cautiously. "At

least until Jayne's feelings are sorted out."

He bit back a groan. A few days. Long enough to drive him even crazier. He couldn't take much more before he lost all control and

He walked into Barney's garage. Her Porsche sat, looking for all the world like a large, black wounded beetle. Barney was busy under the hood of Harry Tipton's pickup.

"Barney!" Brice called the mechanic. "What's happening with the Porsche?"

The sweet smell of oil, gas and well-used tools filled the air. Andi stayed behind him, out of the stink.

"Gotta order a fuel pump," he bawled out from under the hood. He never spoke that loud when women were present. Brice wanted to grin, knowing how red Barney would be when he saw her. The less a woman noticed Barney, the better Barney liked it.

"How long will it be before the fuel pump arrives?" Andi called from outside the door.

From where he stood, Brice could see Barney's shoulders stiffen. He looked around the hood of the truck. Barney's gaze travelled from Andi's ankles to her breasts. She looked damned angry under Barney's gaze, but stood quietly. Sometime soon, he'd have to explain about the mechanic's excruciating shyness. Barney didn't mean to stare at breasts, he simply couldn't look a woman in the face. Barney Walchyk was the loneliest man God ever made.

"A week, mebbe two." Barney swung his tortured gaze to Brice's and locked on him.

“May I please use your telephone for a call to Red Deer, Alberta, Mr. Walchyk?” Andi asked.

“Long as it’s collect.” Barney ducked his head and went back to the pickup.

“Thank you.” She walked over to a grease-smearred beige telephone on a desk in the corner of the garage. She picked up the receiver. Grandad was probably expecting her call. Her father must have told him she was missing by this time.

Brice came and stood close, somehow knowing she needed his support. “You okay?” he whispered in her ear.

She nodded. The telephone rang twice. Then she heard her grandfather’s unmistakable baritone. “Hi, Grandad.” She smiled at Brice to let him know she really was okay and he moved away.

First, she told her Grandad where she was. Then she told him she was fine. Finally, she told him why she’d left New York.

“Leave it to Richard to make a mockery of all your hard work,” he said and snorted. “I knew he’d never be able to give up control of Goodson Manufacturing. He’ll keep you and Goodson under his thumb forever.”

“But Mom left it to me, Grandad. He should have let me run it. He’s been undermining me all this time. Everything I tried to do came to nothing,” she said with a quaver. She gripped the receiver tightly, fighting to regain control of her voice. “When I confronted him, he laughed at me. He patronized me as if I was

still nine years old.”

“So you decided to give up?” Grandad asked roughly. “Run away?”

“I needed time away to think,” guilt made her voice ragged, “so I took it.” She closed her eyes. “Has he called you?”

“Yep. Last night.” He chuckled. “And the night before and the night before that.”

“If he calls again—“

“You’re not calling him to tell him where you are?” he asked, surprised.

“No, there’s a problem I have to take care of. It’s important that I stay here for a little longer.”

“What about Goodson?”

“It’ll be fine. Dad’s seen to that!”

She was suddenly grateful Brice didn’t have a phone. “Dad won’t be able to reach me anyway.” She bit her lip. She didn’t want her father to call and confuse her. Not when Brice and Jayne needed her clear-headed. “Could you stall for time?”

“I won’t lie for you or anybody, Andi.” He hesitated. “However, I could go fishing up in northern British Columbia. I know of a lake that can’t be reached by road. No telephones either. But you’ve only got a week.”

“Thanks Grandad. I appreciate it.” She said good-bye and hung up. She turned around to find Brice far enough away not to overhear her conversation but near enough that she wouldn’t feel abandoned, either.

“I told him I’m here visiting with friends,” she

explained. She tugged on a strand of hair hanging loose from her ponytail.

“Your people must have been worried sick about you.” He had a strange, guilty look in his eye. Then his gaze shifted to the floor and she thought she must have been mistaken.

She shrugged. “Probably not. It’s not the first time I’ve . . . taken some time out.”

The guilt in his gaze turned to incredulity. “You mean they’re used to you wandering around the countryside dressed like an actress on Oscar night?”

Her cheeks heated. Would she ever live down the fact that she used to run away from her problems? She cherished the realization. Used to. Not any more.

“Sort of,” she said with a grin. She enjoyed the surprise in his face.

When they parked in the front yard, Jayne was on the back porch, wearing an apron and holding a large wooden spoon and mixing bowl. If Andi wasn’t careful how she handled this, she might very well end up with a bowlful of batter on her head. She got out of the pickup warily.

“What’s she doing here?” Jayne demanded of Brice, ignoring Andi altogether.

Andi walked straight toward her, the plastic bag containing her clothes swung from her hand at her side. Refusing to let Jayne’s petulant tone get under her skin, she smiled as if the girl would be getting happy news. “Guess what?” she said. “I’m staying.”

She got close enough to see the hard line of Jayne's tensed lips. "If you're in the middle of preparing lunch, I'll let you go ahead. I appreciate the help. I'm anxious to tell Joe and Marianne I'm back."

She carefully placed her bag beside the door. She backed up, unwilling to turn her back on the wooden spoon. "Are they down at the dugout looking for frogs?"

"Go find out yourself," Jayne snapped, eyes hard with indignation.

"Jayne!" Brice's voice exploded into the tension. "There's no need for that attitude. Andi's here to help and I'm happy to have her." The warning in his voice crackled. "Unless you'd rather split us all up?"

Jayne huffed and stepped back into the house, glaring balefully at Andi all the while.

"I'll tell the children lunch is almost ready," Andi called through the screen door after her. She swung around to study Brice. She rolled her eyes. "So far so good. Thank you."

He looked at her, his eyes torn with anguish. "She doesn't need to be hollered at." His jaw flexed and he balled his hands into fists at his sides. "I took it out on her."

"Took what out on her?"

Andi walked close to him and touched his arm lightly.

He shuddered at her touch. "Unless you want to be in the dust getting down and dirty with me, I suggest you back off," he said, with a threatening undertone.

“Oh,” she replied softly, knowing full well his sexual frustration was what had driven him to speak so harshly to Jayne. She released him immediately and stepped back. “She’ll be fine.” Her voice went lower. “You’re awfully hard on yourself.”

“Damn it, Andi, you know what’s going to happen between us as well as I do.”

She nodded, her throat too dry to speak.

“And you’re still going to stay?”

She nodded again. “Jayne’s too important to lose just because we can’t come to grips with this . . . attraction.” She felt bleak inside, dead.

“Come to grips?” he demanded harshly. “You threw away our chance to ‘come to grips’ when you decided to stay on.”

“Maybe I did.” Andi felt her heart contract.

When he turned and walked toward the barn, she let him go. He needed to be alone.

Jayne’s reaction, though expected, had shaken her confidence a little. Who did she think she was, poking her nose into this family’s pain? Emily would have known exactly what to do, she thought, torturing herself.

After supper, Brice disappeared into his study and Andi read Joe a story. Marianne was in her room trying something new with her hair. Jayne had gone out to the shed as soon as she’d washed the supper dishes.

Andi closed the picture book. “Well, what did you think of the princess telling the prince he was a jerk?”

"I dunno. It wasn't very nice when he didn't like her 'cause her fancy clothes were all gone."

"You're right." Gingerly, she slipped an arm around his shoulder. Hopefully he'd let her cuddle him a moment.

Surprising her completely, Joe wriggled a little closer. His warm body intensified the heat of the early evening. She stayed very still, wanting to hold onto this moment. She knew how few of them Joe would allow.

"I'm real glad you came back," he said, looking up at her.

"Me too." She hugged him lightly. It was enough to make him squirm.

"Can I get down now?" he asked. "You're awful hot!" He pulled out from under her arm. Then he barrelled off through the kitchen to the back yard.

She sighed, happy and content. She had constantly questioned her decision to leave. Now that she had decided to stay, she didn't question herself at all.

She went to the door of Brice's study and leaned on the frame. Brice finished adding a long column of numbers. He looked up expectantly.

"Now, Mr. Toymaker, show me your toys." She smiled and leaned into the room. "You can do your paperwork later."

He tossed his pencil on a pile of papers with sketches of airplanes on them. "Sounds good," he agreed. He stood and stretched. "I need a break."

They got two cold beers and strolled through the

pink-tinged twilight toward the barn. Once inside, Brice guided her with a gentle hand as they made their way through to the little door separating the big barn from the workshop. His touch sent shock waves down to her toes and back up again.

“This place needs horses,” she said, thinking of her Morgan mare back home.

“Yeah, I know. The kids have been pestering for a couple for months.” He shrugged. “Horses will have to wait for another year or two. I’ll be able to expand by then. ‘Wheatsheaf’ is finally gaining some attention.”

“Wheatsheaf is the name of your company?”

He nodded.

She took a long, cool sip of beer and waited for him to open the workshop door. He swung it inward and turned on the lights. The room was far larger than she had imagined, with lots of room around the machines he used. It was modern and well-lit. Organized.

The clean smell of wood filled her with wonder as she entered slowly. She saw shelves of small wooden trucks, building blocks, puzzles and hobby horses against two walls. On another wall were child-sized rocking chairs, rocking horses and scooters hanging from racks.

She glanced at him. “Brice, I had no idea. All this . . .” her voice trailed off, as she wandered the room, smoothing wooden rockers, fingering the soft cotton rope mane on the hobby horses.

“I’m building inventory for Christmas. I have to

start shipping next month.”

She traced a wheatsheaf burned into the back of a wooden dump truck. His logo.

“Do you like it?” he asked, his voice soft and quiet and very close behind her. The heat of him sang through her blood as he smoothed her arm. He trailed his long, strong fingers down to her hand and lifted it away from the toy. He turned her palm up and kissed it lightly. Desire shot straight to her vitals. She sucked in a breath.

“Yes, I love it,” she said breathlessly, not sure if she meant his touch or his workshop.

He ducked his head as if her admiration embarrassed him.

She touched his lightly bristled jaw, raising his face. Lifting her lips to his, she kissed him; once on the corner he always lifted in his half-smile then once again, full on the lips.

His chest and shoulders tensed as he responded. She heard him draw in a deep breath, as if to contain his desire. She would accept no more retreats, no more control. If he wanted her, he'd have to show her. She wound her arms around his neck to hang on. She pressed close.

Finally, he held her, his strong arms like steel bands around her body. She revelled in the feeling of belonging, of closeness. Wanting to block out everything else but Brice, she coaxed his tongue inside. He groaned and swept his hands along the delicate lines of her back to her behind and molded his palms to

her softness.

Soon he was kneading his way back up her ribs to her chest, her nipples already peaking. He circled her right breast unendingly, making her wait for the feel of his flesh on hers.

She tugged his shirt from his waistband, placing her palms gently against his stomach.

He sucked in a breath and murmured encouragement. "Yes, touch me there, angel." He nibbled at her earlobe bringing her closer and closer to begging for more.

She smoothed her palms up his chest, aware of every hair, every muscle beneath his heated skin. She needed to feel his touch as well.

Finally, his hand brushed lightly against her hard nipples, sending a shock of pure desire through her. More, she had to have more. She sobbed lightly.

"Tell me, angel. Tell me what you want." Both hands slipped under her tank top and up to her bra catch. "Do you want me to open it?"

She nodded. "Yes, yes . . ." If he didn't touch her naked breasts soon she'd cry out in frustration. He lifted her top and bra away from her heated flesh and stood back.

She waited, her aching, needy breasts exposed. His eyes darkened to umber as he studied her. His jaw flexed. "So beautiful." When he came back to her it was with his mouth, not his hands.

"Oh." She sighed, aching for fulfilment, holding his head to her chest as he worshipped her.

“Brice, I need . . .”

“I need too, angel.” He stopped suckling her and rolled his head between her breasts. “But we’re in the workshop. I have nothing here to protect you.”

Protection. She took several deep breaths to help clear her head and slow her racing pulse. Of course. It had been foolish to start something they couldn’t finish. Foolish but deliciously exciting.

He looked up. “Unless you’re on something?”

She shook her head sadly. “I wish . . . it’s been a long time since anyone made me feel this way and . . .”

He stood, tugging her bra and tank top back down. “Shh, you don’t have to explain. I should never have touched you out here.” He closed his eyes and shuddered with his restraint. “We’d best go back to the house. The kids will want us to tuck them in soon.”

Fresh heat raced along her veins. “And after?”

He blew a hard breath out through his teeth. “If I don’t have any protection, I’ll stay in my room and burn for you all night.”

She nodded in agreement. Tempting fate was foolhardy for both of them. “When are you going into town next?” She asked, trying to clear her desire from her voice. She would burn for him, as well.

His eyes glowed with warmth rather than heat, making her feel loved, not only desired.

“Tomorrow,” he said. His husky tone sent a thrill of anticipation shooting through her.

“I promise,” he said on a sigh.

Chapter Nine

The small package fit Brice's palm exactly. He handed over the money and kept the little box in his hand. Billy Gonczy smirked as he gave him a small bag for his purchase. He slid the package and receipt inside and turned to leave the store.

He should have gone into Regina. No one would recognize him and he could have shopped in peace. A four hour return trip for a single purchase had seemed ridiculous, until he'd seen Billy's knowing smile.

His skin crawled, but he fought the urge to turn around to see who else watched him. No doubt about it, small towns were purgatory.

A shadow crossed his path. He looked up to see Laura Jones. Warmth spread up his neck to his face. Damn.

"Good morning, Brice," Laura said, "can you spare a moment for me?"

He put his little bag smoothly into his shirt pocket, cleared his throat and nodded. "Of course, Laura." He smiled tightly.

The old Smith couple walked past. Mrs. ignored him and Mr. gave him a wink. Great, they probably assumed the little package was for Laura's benefit. He should have spoken a clear greeting instead of behaving as if he had something to hide. This town wasn't

purgatory, it was hell.

He turned to Laura, waiting by the window of the store. "Yes?" he asked.

"Have you gotten anywhere yet?"

He swallowed hard. He thought of Andi and knew where he wanted to get. "Huh?"

She frowned. "You have placed an ad, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes . . . for a caregiver." He relaxed a little. "I've had three or four replies and I'll be arranging interviews next week. Would you like to be in on them?"

"Not yet," she said, apparently pleased with his answers now that he could keep them sensible. "But you will let me meet the ones you think are suitable?"

"Of course." He nodded. He'd agree to almost anything to get out of this store. She couldn't have seen his package or she'd have mentioned professional ethics and conduct between co-workers. Laura was sharp, intuitive and very good at her job.

"I'll be out to see you next week," she said. She left him with a feeling of reprieve and relief.

When he got back to the house, Andi was in the kitchen with Joe. Marianne was in her room listening to her favorite pop single. Would she ever tire of it?

He got himself a mug of coffee and a slice of toast. He also got a look from Andi hot enough to scorch a piece of cedar. If he didn't go to the workshop for the rest of the day, he'd lose his mind.

Supper time came and went and from the children's sullen expressions, Andi had had a hard day.

Not nearly as hard as his. He definitely needed to add a shower stall to the workshop. A cold water shower.

Joe whined at bedtime, Marianne sulked and Jayne pointedly ignored everyone but Brice. He wanted them all to disappear.

He followed Andi as she chased Joe upstairs and into the bath. She looked flushed and anxious. She told Joe she was too tired to read their usual chapter of *Black Beauty*.

"I'll read it to him," Brice heard himself offer. "You could relax in a bath yourself," he suggested.

Andi stared back at him silently. Her eyes opened wide and went kind of soft. Then she smiled and his gut tightened another notch. Dear Lord, she was beautiful. "That's a good idea," she said, her gaze flicking across his features. He imagined what she read there. It was a wonder she didn't run screaming down the driveway. His nerves were taut as new fence wire.

She handed a bathtowel through to Joe. At four and a half he expected privacy and insisted on no help to dry himself. When he took the towel, Andi walked quickly to her room. "I'll get my things," she said over her shoulder.

Brice went to find the storybook for Joe, determined to think about anything else but Andi, soaking in the tub.

Two hours later, the house was finally still. Brice stared into a beer at the kitchen table. He waited an extra half hour to be certain the kids were asleep.

He left the beer untouched until it was too warm to

drink. He needed a shave. He walked quietly into the hall. The step third from the bottom creaked, so he avoided it. He climbed the rest of the stairs and turned toward Andi's door.

Andi was almost frantic with desire. She'd waited ages to hear Brice's sure footsteps in front of her door. Now that he was in the hall, she hesitated.

Last night, in the workshop, her passion for Brice had been overwhelming. If she opened her door, he would fill her every sense the way he always did. She had to be certain this was what she wanted. Once Brice entered her bedroom there would be no turning back. They would embark on a brand new relationship, one they may not be ready for. It was a relationship she suspected she'd waited her whole life to find. Desire blended with sheer terror was a heady combination.

She twisted the door knob and opened the door quickly. Brice, big as life, vibrant as live wire, stared back at her. He tilted his head and waited.

She reached for his hand and tugged gently. He allowed her to pull him into her room. He kicked the door shut and placed his large palms on her shoulders.

He looked weary, as if he'd fought the same battle with himself she had. Long endless hours of children, meals and the ebb and flow of desire whenever either of them had thought of the other had taken their toll.

"You went to town?" she asked, as much to break the sudden awkwardness as to have the confirmation.

"Yes." He reached for a drying tendril of hair that

brushed her shoulder. She felt a gentle tug as he ran his fingers through it. The tingle at her scalp echoed at the base of her spine. He touched her everywhere and not at all with his gently tugging fingers.

She tilted her head toward his hand, thrilling when he framed her face. His eyes went dark and darker still as he looked at her. He took the single step needed to bring them close.

Turning her lips to his palm, she nipped him lightly. He let out a soft sigh, pressed his other hand into her hair and lifted her face to his.

His lips captured hers. Retreat was no longer an option. He needed her and she needed him. He kissed her for a long time, ending one kiss only to be drawn back to her lips again and again.

She couldn't get enough of touching him: his strong arms and back, his chest was a wall of hot muscle, fluid but firm under her touch.

He removed the T-shirt she wore as a nightgown and revealed the only other thing she wore: her cotton bikini panties. She gasped at the heat in his gaze. She'd have preferred to be dressed in silk or satin but he didn't seem to mind the sturdy cotton. In fact, he seemed quite taken with it.

He traced tiny circles of heat with one fingertip as he dipped it below the top of her panties. When he touched her and felt how moist she was, he smiled his heart-stopping half smile. Breathing became difficult as he explored her further. Her heart hammered in her chest. He stopped to smooth her buttocks and

hold her pressed against him. He was as hard as she was soft.

She waited on the edge of her bed while he removed his clothes. Magnificently naked, he came to her. He slipped her panties off gently as she lay back against her pillow. Her world consisted of Brice, the pillow at her back and her own thundering heartbeat.

“I want to be perfect for you,” he said on a sigh, as he smoothly nudged her thighs. He protected them and waited without moving, his eyes closed in taut strain. “Tell me you’re ready,” he whispered raggedly beside her ear. “Tell me you want this, want me,” he demanded when she didn’t answer immediately.

Andi opened herself slowly, aware of her own slickness. “I’m more than ready. I’ve had the long day to think of you.”

His eyes flared when he heard the desire in her voice and he moved into her slowly, stretching her to the limit. Her heart filled with love as her body filled with him.

She loved him.

There were no more questions, no more doubts. This was what she’d waited for all her life. Brice was closer to her than any other man had ever been. He was in her soul, in her heart and she felt consumed.

The gentle realization was swept into a torrent of passion as Brice moved into her. Their bodies met tightly and he pushed even deeper. He groaned against her neck. She held him locked.

He held his lips in a rigid line as he held onto his

control. She reached to hold his head to kiss him. The touch of their mouths sent magic urgency to their hips and Brice rocked with her, plunging wildly. The height of her desire held her until she uttered a small moan of capitulation. She crashed suddenly, wondrously, back to reality. Small pulses continued through her as Brice drove on into his own completion.

Andi found her love again and held it close within her heart. Brice needed her. She loved him. Could he come to love her, too?

Brice raised his head to look at her. "Mmm." He smiled triumphantly. "Hi," he said softly as he raised himself away from her. He settled a long hairy leg across hers and held her close.

"Hi, yourself." She grinned back, holding her secret.

"I couldn't wait. I'm sorry. Was I in too much of a hurry, or too hard on you?"

She caressed his cheek as he ran his palm along her hip. "I don't think," she grinned in appreciation, "being too hard was a problem."

"I—hey, wise guy, eh?" He grinned back, apparently pleased with her response. In more ways than one.

"I wasn't in the mood for long and slow, if that's what you think." She sucked in a breath. His fingers had found her, moist and ready again. They danced against her and she arched to him, seeking more.

He spent long moments learning and exploring. "Are you in the mood for long and slow now?" he

asked wickedly after turning her to butter.

She nodded in mute need. He leaned across her chest and lapped at her nipple. The sensation ricocheted from her heart to her loins and she was lost again in the magic he wove with his lips and fingers. Long slow strokes filled her universe until she peaked in ecstasy again.

She opened her eyes. He watched her intently, a quizzical light in his eyes making him seem young and eager. "Good?" he asked.

She smiled, suddenly shy. She'd never had a man take so much time with her. She knew she'd never responded so greedily before. And certainly the idea that Brice wanted to please and tempt and play had encouraged her to wanton sensuality. She nodded again and bit her lip, wanting to tell him everything she felt and give him everything she was and finding no words and no way.

"I wanted to keep you entertained while I rested," he whispered in her ear, sending shivers down her body. "Watching you made me more energized than rested."

She thrilled at the heat in his eyes.

He left the bed, gloriously naked and thoroughly aroused. He walked to his shirt and took out another silver packet. He strutted like a peacock, sure of himself and his incredible power over her. After all, he'd just been witness to it.

When he came back to the bed, all male strength and power, she knew it was time to give as good as she

got. She took the packet from his hand and knelt before him as he stood at the side of the bed. "You won't need this yet," she said on a sigh and reached for the heat of him. He was firm and smooth and strong and vulnerable all at the same time. She felt again the connection of their souls.

She kissed him, tentatively at first, and then more boldly, more strongly as her shyness vanished. Brice shuddered at her loving and she discovered her power over him was as strong as his over her. The realization freed her to explore him completely as soft words of praise gathered about her head. The words became more and more urgent, more and more earthy as he braced himself on her shoulders.

His fingers twined in her hair as he gently tugged her head away. "No more." His command was guttural, strained, completely at odds with the gentleness of his touch.

His eyes lit with fire as she prepared him for her.

She tried to tug him down to the bed. He tugged back and patted the soft plush rug. His chocolate eyes coaxed and she responded with a small laugh. He got the pillows and comforter off the bed and laid them out for her.

"Your back will be tender if we don't use these," he explained, looking down at her. From this view he was huge. She sucked in a breath. She'd already felt his strength and power inside and knew she'd be comfortable with him. Soft comfort was not what she was going to get.

When he nudged her knees apart and slid smoothly inside she gasped with the intensity. She wanted to hold his raw power and tame it. Brice taught her how.

Sometime before dawn, Brice kissed Andi lightly on her shoulder before he gathered his clothes to leave.

He needed to sleep, but when he climbed into his cold empty bed he tossed and turned. Making love to a beautiful woman all night should have worn him out, but Andi's enthusiasm had captured him.

She made love like a woman in love. Not that he'd ever had a woman in love with him before, but what they had shared had been more than plain lust. Much more. He'd known it as soon as she'd opened her door.

The whole situation was impossible.

He punched his pillow hard enough to split the seams. Sex was supposed to ease frustration, not feed it. Only this frustration was more than physical. He grunted, trying to drown out his conscience. Making love had been a big mistake, for Andi and himself.

A mistake he couldn't afford to repeat.

Even as he thought it, his gut twisted in irony. He was already hopelessly caught in her web, already hard again. He could no more stop wanting her than he could ask her to stay. She was still big city and he was still small town. She'd been right all along. He was nothing but a big, dumb farmer. What would an angel want with him?

Next morning, jumbled memories of skin on skin

washed through Andi's mind, sliding, moving together, slick and fevered.

She got out the vacuum and started to use it. The hum got sharper and louder as she pushed it from the dining room rug onto the hardwood. She'd never get the vacuuming finished if she kept drifting off this way. She'd simply have to keep her mind on what she was doing. Joe was waiting for her to go to the dugout to see his baby frogs or caterpillars or . . . something.

Suddenly she heard shrieks of childish laughter from the direction of the front veranda. She flicked the off switch on the vacuum and with it, her explicit day-dream. She tiptoed toward the front door to see what the children were laughing about. She didn't want to disturb them if they were playing a game.

She could hear Joe's high-pitched screams of delight join with Marianne's giggles. What was so funny? She stood hidden behind the screen door.

Marianne was standing in front of Joe, a spiral-bound notebook in her hand. Joe's expression was one of rapt attention.

Marianne began reading. "His hair is golden." She dramatized every word, holding her hand high, she dropped it theatrically to her chest. "His eyes pierce through my heart like blades." She clutched convincingly at her blouse over her heart.

Joe hooted and clapped his hands at the impromptu act. Andi moved in the shadows. Joe saw the movement and went dead quiet. What kind of game was this? And why didn't Joe want her to see it?

Marianne hadn't realized her audience was now rock still. "Oh, Brice!" She read on, "Brice, my love, my life! You mean—"

Jayne tore around the side of the house at a full run. "Give me my book, you little brat!" she screamed, running faster the closer she got.

It all clicked. The long hours in the shed, the notebook and 'Brice, my love!' Immediately, Andi stepped out the door and took the notebook from Marianne.

Andi closed the book with a snap. Then she stepped off the porch to stand in front of the younger children to shield them from Jayne's rightful fury. "Marianne, go to your room."

She sidestepped once, twice, to block Jayne from grabbing Joe. There was no telling what her rage and embarrassment would have her do. "Move it, Joe." The younger children moved like lightning and dashed into the house.

In the silence that followed the slam of the door, Jayne's heavy breathing held several catches. Her eyes filled with tears of anguish. Andi held the closed notebook out for her to take.

Jayne clutched it protectively to her chest. She sniffed but didn't cry. She tilted her chin bravely, her eyes wide and shining with unshed tears.

"Jayne, I . . ." Andi tried to find words but couldn't.

Jayne's single wrenching sob split the air between them. She turned and bolted around the corner of the house. Andi supposed Jayne was headed for the shed,

for the first time not wondering at all what she'd be doing there.

Taking several deep breaths, Andi began to frame the words she'd use to make Marianne see the damage she'd done. Ten was certainly old enough to develop a little sensitivity. If Marianne needed to have a definition of the word, Andi was happy to oblige.

An hour later Andi was still shaken by the incident, wondering if she should tell Brice about it. She'd already said everything that needed to be said to Marianne. In spades.

Leaving piles of unfolded laundry on the kitchen table, Andi slipped out the back door. Would her embarrassment cause Jayne to run away? Andi hoped not.

She went to the shed and tapped unobtrusively on the door. No answer. Andi rapped louder and the door swung open slowly. It was dark inside. Empty. She stepped in.

Jayne had made quite a little nest for herself. There were throw cushions propped up on old crates covered by a thick wool blanket. She had writing supplies stacked neatly in a corner. A tin can held pencils and pens. An old stationery box held erasers and a pencil sharpener. She even had a board set against the wall. The doodles all around the edges proved the board was usually set on Jayne's knees as she wrote. Judging from the stack of spiral notebooks, Jayne wrote a lot. Not all of it could be about Brice, could it?

Remembering her recent lecture on respecting

privacy, Andi held down a desire to read the journals and left them untouched. Jayne would share them if she chose.

After this morning, Jayne sharing her journals was highly unlikely.

She'd come out here to talk to Jayne but now, she wasn't certain talk was what Jayne needed. Perhaps she needed someone to listen. At fifteen, all Andi had wanted was someone to listen to her.

Brice was in the workshop putting the finishing touches on a hobby horse. This one was black with a white patch over its right eye.

She stepped inside and he grinned at her. He was in cutoff denims, his long muscular legs ending in loosely laced construction boots. His gaze swept slowly up from her legs to her eyes, measuring, remembering, warming all the way.

"Hi," he said, all heat and musk and invitation.

She reached for the door knob and held on, determined not to be sucked into temptation. She had to keep her mind on . . . what? Jayne. Yes, Jayne.

"I think Jayne's run away," she said urgently.

"When?"

"Within the last hour."

"No, I don't think so." He looked relieved. "I saw her walk into the wheat about twenty minutes ago. The way you do when you need to get away from the house." He wiped his hands on his shorts. "What happened?" he asked, putting the hobby horse on a rack.

“The children found out about her crush on you and she’s embarrassed, hurt and angry. At her age, I’d have run away as far as I could under those circumstances.”

“How did they find out?” He came closer, intent on the conversation instead of seduction. He smelled good, like hard work and wood.

She stepped around him and explained about the shed and the journals. “I’ve discussed the issue of privacy with both Marianne and Joe, so the teasing should be over.”

He nodded intently. “I don’t think she’ll run away.” He looked at her. “She’ll probably walk for awhile. Think things through.”

Obviously he’d watched Andi when she had strolled in the fields, communing with herself. “I won’t look for her then. She’ll need to collect her thoughts and her dignity before she sees anyone.”

“I’ll act as though I haven’t heard any of this.” Brice smiled.

“Yes. And Brice?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t look at me as if, well, as if I’m naked and stretched out for you.” Her breath caught when she saw fire in his eyes. “Don’t be so hungry.”

“But I am hungry.” He caught her upper arms in a light grasp and pulled her to him.

“One kiss,” she whispered as he tilted her lips to his. “Right,” he murmured back, kissing the corner of her mouth, her chin, her lower lip.

“Don’t do this, Brice,” she pleaded. “We have to talk.”

“Don’t do what?” He nibbled at her earlobe.

“That . . . that look. It makes me think of things.” She pulled away from him, although every sinew screamed against moving.

“How odd,” he said with a teasing grin. “Just the sight of you makes me think of last night. Remember? When I came to you and we—”

“Yes,” she interrupted, sorely tempted to let him go on. “I remember.” He pulled her closer.

She stepped back, out of his reach. “But this has to stop. If Jayne heard us or saw the way you look at me . . .” she trailed off warningly.

He nodded. “You’re right.” He tried a decidedly hang-dog look. “I’ll do my very best to control myself.”

“See that you do,” she teased and moved close to him, no longer willing to accept the distance between them. She nuzzled his neck. “Mmm, I love your man/wood scent.”

He growled, low in his throat and his hands swept down her back to cup her bottom. He pulled her up and hard against him. She framed his face to hold it still and kissed him properly, her own hunger burning through her clothes to scorch him.

He groaned and set her away from him. “Be gone, woman, or I won’t be held responsible.”

She smoothed her shorts, trying to get her desire under control and walked around him. Although how

she managed it was beyond her.

Andi was reading a cookbook about an hour later when Jayne walked quietly into the kitchen. Andi continued to flip pages, looking for something that appeared easy enough for her to prepare that had nothing to do with cooking noodles.

Jayne got a drink of water.

Andi stared at the colorful pictures, hoping for inspiration on how to begin a conversation. "These casseroles look fascinating," she blurted. "Do they really look like the pictures or do they look more like a dog's breakfast?" She groaned apologetically. She needed inspiration, not inane drivel.

Jayne gave her a weak smile in return. She placed her glass very carefully on the counter behind her. "I guess all that stuff Marianne was reading sounded kind of funny, didn't it?"

Andi blinked, not believing what she'd heard. Jayne's voice sounded different, downright pleasant, with the petulance gone. "Not to me." Andi hastened to reassure her. "It sounded very . . . real."

Jayne pulled out the chair next to her and sat in it. Up until now Jayne had always taken a seat as far away from her as possible. Andi waited.

"Well, maybe it was real." She hesitated. "Before." She tugged on a strand of her hair. "Hearing it all out in the air like that made me think." She waited a couple of heartbeats before going on. "Brice is a nice guy."

Andi nodded encouragingly, afraid to speak in case

she ruined any chance of further conversation.

“I mean, he’d be nice to anybody, wouldn’t he?” Jayne’s words were rushed, as if she wanted this over as quickly as possible. “So, just because he’s nice to me doesn’t make me special to him, does it?” It sounded more as if she were trying to convince herself than trying to convince Andi.

Last week Andi would have denied Brice Logan could be nice to anyone. Now that she’d glimpsed his vulnerability, seen his hesitation in dealing with Jayne’s crush, she smiled and nodded. She patted Jayne’s knee.

“I think,” Andi said, “Brice wouldn’t want anything to ruin your relationship with him. The relationship he’s worked so hard to build. That you’ve both worked on.” She studied Jayne closely. Her eyes were a little too bright, but steady, her hands shook a little, but she didn’t try to hide them.

“You’re a nice person, Jayne,” she held up a hand to stem the interruption she could see building behind Jayne’s shocked look. “Brice wants to see you grow and mature and find your own way. All parents do.” Inexplicably, her own father’s face danced before her mind and she blinked him away. No, it wasn’t possible. He had insisted she live his way all her life.

“Even foster parents?” Jayne’s question pulled her back to the conversation.

“Maybe especially foster parents.” She smiled and gave her hand a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “I think they must be very aware of being teachers and setting examples. I know Brice is.”

Jayne's tension seemed to ease at her touch. "Yes, he is. He wouldn't do anything to upset us." Jayne looked seriously back at her, her expression too mature for her age. "He was pretty torn up about Emily dying. She took him in when his old man drank himself to death." Jayne gave her the information baldly, as if everyone knew Brice's history.

Perhaps everyone did. Everyone but her.

Her heart cried for the little boy Brice had been. Alone and lonely. Until Emily. Emily and Bart. No wonder he wanted to keep this place going. No wonder he'd lie, cheat and coerce her into staying if it would make a difference. She couldn't imagine the man he might have been if Bart and Emily hadn't taken him in.

"Where do you fit in here?" Jayne asked curiously.

Andi thought of last night. Passion and intimacy blended into a kaleidoscope of images. Brice, watching her convulse in climax, eyes glittering in triumph. His own harsh, guttural cries.

She considered Marianne and Joe and the laundry and Laura Jones. Then, finally, she thought of her father and New York. "I'm not sure where I fit any more. Perhaps I'll never fit anywhere." Going home seemed like a hazy decision she'd make some day. Staying with Brice was becoming more crystallized into a reality. But whose reality? The Andi Goodson talking to a teenaged girl in a country kitchen or the Cassandra Morrison who ran out of her father's penthouse, spitefully angry?

“That’s kind of sad,” Jayne’s voice was soft and easy.

Andi wondered who was more grown up, herself or Jayne. “Oh, about my not fitting anywhere? I guess it is.” She didn’t want to talk about her problems. She didn’t want to think about parents and all their dreams for their children. She wanted to make certain Jayne was as happy as she appeared to be. “I’m glad you’re all right. I was worried you’d run away.”

Jayne looked surprised at the idea. “Running away never solved anything,” she said briskly. “Emily told me that and it stuck. My mother runs away a lot.” Jayne stood and got more water to drink. She turned back toward Andi and leaned against the counter. “She moves around from place to place, whenever she gets fed up.” Jayne shrugged, as if accepting her mother’s lifestyle, but not embracing it for herself. “She’s run off so often, it’s the only way she knows. She promises to come get me, but she never will.” Jayne sighed and smiled sadly. “She just keeps running.”

Andi’s heart contracted with every word Jayne uttered. Her mother’s abandonment was simply one more reason she saw so much of her younger self in Jayne. While the details of their lives may have been different, their reactions seemed quite similar, up to a point. She had been left by her mother’s death to the care of a man obsessed with money and power while Jayne had been placed in a loving, supportive home with both a mother and father figure. And given some sound advice along the way.

“Emily was right, running away never solved anything,” she whispered. Emily had been one smart woman.

Chapter Ten

Brice's heartbeat thundered in his ears. His spine felt like jelly. He lifted his head and looked into Andi's sated eyes. She gazed back at him lovingly with a soft smile playing on her lips. The scent of her filled him and he smiled back. Making love with her would never be enough, he'd always want this warmth and cuddling afterward.

They untangled themselves as soon as their heartbeats returned to normal. He trapped her legs beneath his thigh and the heat of her body called to him. He snuggled her close. She came willingly, responding with a sharp intake of breath when he plucked at her nipple.

He should ask about New York and her father, but why ruin this perfect peace? He nuzzled her neck instead of talking.

She giggled. "I'm ticklish there."

"You weren't a few moments ago." He licked her ear.

"I know," she said. She slid her fingers across his belly. His muscles contracted and he laughed. "That was before." She pulled herself up to the head of the bed and stuffed the pillow behind her back. "I'm never ticklish before."

He used her stomach for a pillow and settled in. She played with his ear, making it impossible to rest,

but that was fine, he didn't need to rest. He needed to hold her.

"Jayne seemed all right at supper tonight," he commented, trying to flick her fingers away from his ear. She was driving him slowly crazy. "What happened after we talked in the workshop?" he asked.

"She told me she wouldn't run away. You're off the hook, Brice, the crush is over."

He tentatively licked at her stomach. She squirmed and moved her legs restlessly.

"I pointed out the clothes I ordered for her in the catalogue," she said a little huskily.

He lifted his head to look at her. "Are you telling me the war of obstruction Jayne declared is over?" He couldn't believe it. Andi had been here less than two weeks and had sorted out his biggest worry.

"Yes." She smiled at him as if he'd never begin to understand the workings of a woman's mind. She was probably right and from where he stood, he was better off not understanding.

"Jayne loved the clothes," she went on. "She said I have great taste and know how to make the most of my assets."

He growled against her belly. "Speaking of your assets, I'd like to make the most of them right now." He slid a little lower, blowing small puffs of air across the curls he found. She wriggled.

"Tired?" he asked. He smoothed the soft, inviting flesh of her thighs and pressed himself against her. Soon, he'd be inside her moist, warm heaven.

She nodded. "A little." Then she grinned. "And I want to tell you something else Jayne said."

There were times he was sorry he was a foster father. He sighed and raised himself a little so he could see her face. He might as well know how serious this new problem would be. These kids were definitely out to ruin his life.

"Jayne told me Emily had taught her running away from problems was no solution." Andi smiled her most generous, loving smile yet. Her eyes went soft and full of wonder and delight. "I thought you'd want to know you and Emily made a very real difference for Jayne, Brice. You should be proud."

Then again, one of the kids said or did something to bring his heart to his throat. There was no job on Earth he'd rather spend his life doing. He swallowed hard. "Jayne said that?"

Andi nodded. She slid down the bed under him. She gathered him close to her breasts. The scent of her went straight to his nervous system and set it to jangling. He found a nipple and sucked slowly, easily. She sighed beneath him.

When he found her wet and ready he slid silently between her welcoming legs. This time, he moved slowly, enjoying the sight of her in full passion. Her eyes opened and closed, focused and lost it. She bit her lower lip, his neck, his shoulder until he stilled her with a kiss. As soon as his lips met hers, she rocketed into spasms beneath him. His control cracked and gave way.

This was making love, real love. He couldn't get enough of her and drove deeper to keep her at the peak for as long as possible. Then he crested his own wave.

For a crazy moment, as he slid down this side of reality, he pretended he had the right to ask her to stay forever.

He pretended she said yes.

The pretending went on long into the night, as Andi lay curled beside him. He dozed, only to be woken by her heated, loving kisses. She was so soft, so beautiful.

She was here, wasn't she? In bed. With him.

Andi Goodson, angel, satiated from Brice Logan's lovemaking. Even though they'd shared a bed only twice, he'd learned her places. He'd made her sigh, moan, pant and explode in his arms. Surely, there was more to her response than sexual need.

What would her family think of her being in bed with some hick toy maker who barely remembered a father who'd come home drunk one time too many? She obviously came from an impeccable, privileged background with prestigious connections. Probably lawyers, doctors, judges and other powerful types.

Foolish, that's what he was. Foolish to hope a woman so blatantly different from any farm wife he knew would actually consider staying on.

But he didn't need a farm wife, did he?

He needed Andi, with her loving, gentle hands and the way she could make him smile. He needed her to

balance him, to make him ease up on himself. Other women had told him to lighten up, that he might even be charming. Andi could actually make him lighten up.

He'd teased her more than he'd ever teased anyone. He loved the way her eyes widened when he said something she didn't know whether to believe or not.

When she stomped angrily across the yard after him, her hair swung with a life of its own, as if it was as mad as she was and ready to whip him good. He grinned up into the darkness of her room. He held back a laugh. If he woke her he'd have to explain what he found so funny.

He slid his leg across her thighs, tucked her head under his chin and settled to sleep. Not for all night, he told himself, only for a little while.

Only for as long as the pretending could last.

"I haven't been swimmin' all summer," Joe complained. He grasped the carton of milk and gingerly poured some over his cereal. He spilled a little and Andi held back a smile. He looked stricken when he saw her watching him. She gave him a wink of encouragement.

Brice suddenly slapped his forehead as if he'd remembered something important. "I almost forgot." He grinned. "We haven't taken Andi to Sadler's Creek yet."

Joe whooped. Marianne cheered and Jayne smiled at Andi. "Don't worry, I can lend you my old bathing

suit. It should fit you.”

Brice groaned goodnaturedly when he saw the suit Jayne planned to wear. It consisted of two very thin pieces of fluorescent orange and green material with a small ruffle at the hips. “Jayne,” he said, “one look at you and the boys will be lined up down the driveway.” He grinned. “The tele—“ he started to cough and Andi patted him on the back.

“Oh, Brice, they will not.” Jayne tried to look grouchy but only managed to look pleased. She walked over to Andi. “It’ll be faster if I help you make sandwiches for the picnic,” she said, reaching for the peanut butter.

Andi smiled, pleased at her offer. “Thanks,” she said. She handed her a loaf of bread and they both set to work.

With a picnic lunch packed in a large cooler, they were ready to leave. The two smaller children sat in the jump seats behind the bench seat in the truck. Andi sat between Brice and Jayne. They were all crowded, rowdy and excited.

Joe entertained them with rock and roll songs, fracturing most of the lyrics. Their shared laughter was a cacophony and Andi drank it in. She had never had this kind of fun.

The creek Brice drove them to was barely more than a stream until they walked around some shoulder-high boulders. Here, the stream collected into a large pool of clear, cold enjoyment. Several other families were here to enjoy a break from the

unremitting heat as well.

The children soon found friends from school and spent the day splashing, running, playing and squealing. They all ate when they were hungry, napped when they grew tired and laughed for the sheer fun of it.

The other women chatted with Andi about the weather, the crops and their children but mostly they were curious. Andi stuck to the same story she'd given Laura Jones. Brice had told her how fast gossip traveled around Ibbotsville and she didn't want to cause any if she could help it.

Andi caught Brice's attention just as he tossed Joe, wild with delight, into the water. He begged off playing any more water games and came to join her in the sun. Water glistened in his hair and ran down his chest in rivulets. He flicked drops at her and laughed as she tried to dodge them.

"Stop it!" She smacked at his hands and missed. "I only wanted help putting on my sunblock." She passed him the bottle and turned her back to him.

He squirted a stream of lotion onto her back. The icy feel of it made her pull away. Then his hands were on her flesh, heating it again. He smoothed the lotion luxuriantly across her back and up to her shoulders.

"People here like you, Andi," he said. "The women are thinking of inviting you over for coffee."

"It's only because I didn't give them enough information to satisfy. They're dying to hear about New York and what I think of life here."

His hands stilled against her skin then dropped

away from her. She looked at him over her shoulder. His face looked ragged, if that was possible. His eyes were bleak.

“Yeah,” he said. “They’re not the only people who’d like to know all that.”

She thrilled to her toes at the thought of telling him what she really felt about life here.

Before she could begin to frame her words, Joe ran by quickly spraying water like a spaniel across their faces. “Nah, nah, can’t catch me!” he challenged.

Brice leaped to his feet and chased him back into the water. They played and swam for at least another hour before they were all together again. By then, Andi had decided their talk could wait until later, when she was again in Brice’s arms.

The day was moving along, the sandwiches were gone and the drinks were warm. The children voted for a quick trip into town for ice cream.

Brice sighed and capitulated with good grace. “I can’t say no to pistachio,” he quipped with a smile.

Andi and Jayne collapsed against each other in giggles. While they held each other up, Brice and the little ones gathered the picnic things. Jayne lingered behind the others, signalling to Andi to walk slowly with her.

“What’s up?” Andi asked.

“Did you see that guy?” Jayne’s gaze slid away from hers.

“The one who followed you everywhere? Danny?” Andi grinned. “Cute!”

Jayne blushed. "Do you think he likes me?"

Andi bit back a grin. "I think he's head over heels," she advised. "Lost—a goner—reel him in, hook, line and sinker." She threw her arm around Jayne's shoulder as they walked and gave her a light hug. Jayne hugged her right back.

"Take this money, Joe, and spend it on an ice cream for you and Marianne." Andi handed him four dollars. The brassy coins had a picture of Queen Elizabeth on one side and a loon on the other. People called them loonies and made jokes about loony bins in Ottawa, the capital. She smiled. No one could ever convince her Canadians couldn't laugh at themselves. They did it all the time.

Brice was collecting his mail and Jayne was poring over the catalogues at the order desk.

Andi used the telephone at the front of the store to call Red Deer. Grandad was home from his fishing trip. After a short to-the-point conversation, she hung up.

Brice was standing close behind her, concern in his gaze. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes. Grandad will send Barney the money to pay for my repairs. He'll also call my father to let him know I'm all right." There wasn't much point hiding out any longer. Dad would have to learn about Brice sooner or later. It might be better sooner, that way they could get it all over with.

Brice nodded but didn't speak. Perhaps he didn't

want to talk about a future with her in front of the kids. Perhaps he was worried she'd want him to move to New York. She refused to think of all that now, not when they were having such a good time together.

None of them wanted the day to end, least of all Andi. She couldn't remember a more relaxing, a more hectic, a more spontaneous day than the one she'd just had with her family.

Brice shoved his mail in his shirt pocket, collected the kids and stopped to chat with the storekeeper. Andi saw a stack of newspapers at his feet. A picture of her father was on the front page.

She picked one up and bought it. She waited to get into the truck before she checked the headlines. "Tycoon Morrison Winds It Up" she read aloud. "I didn't think he was ready to complete this purchase." She spoke more to herself than to anyone else, but there was total silence in the crowded truck when she finished.

She glanced at Jayne, who was staring blankly at her. Then she turned to the children in the back seats. They were quiet, expectant.

"It's a small electronics firm in Texas," she explained weakly.

"You know him?" Brice's voice cut into the collective disbelief. He sounded strained, almost strangled. He shifted gears clumsily and everyone jerked forward and back against their seats.

"Yes," she admitted when she could talk again. She smiled at him warmly, privately. She wanted him to

take the news well. "He's my father."

"Your father?" he bellowed. Damn! He slammed on the brakes and slew the truck to a stop at the side of the road. He opened his door and jumped out, too agitated, hurt, and angry to drive.

He stormed across the road and stared across the dead field. There was nothing but a bleak horizon. He spun around and glared at the truck, daring her to climb out and face him. He watched as she slid across the seat and down to the ground. She walked three paces closer and stopped.

Her face looked stricken, afraid. Her eyes were huge and wary.

"Damn it, Andi you told me your name was Goodson." It was more an accusation than a statement.

Jayne slid over into the driver's seat and watched them solemnly.

"What does it matter what my name is? Or who my father is? I'm still Andi. The same woman who's been here all this time . . ." she trailed off.

Yes, she was the same woman he'd held and loved and wanted. She was the same woman he'd pretended about. And all that didn't matter now. She was Richard Morrison's only daughter. Flashes of grainy society and indistinct tabloid pictures crossed his mind. Cassandra Morrison on the Riviera. Cassandra Morrison dancing with princes. Cassandra Morrison's disappearances. He walked over to her, too angry to shout. "You used my home," he kept his voice low and his words terse,

“my kids, my life just to have another escapade.”

“No,” she whispered horrified that he could think what he did. “It’s just the initial shock,” she said in desperation, “you’ll get over it. The Morrison name has that effect sometimes.” She wanted to plead, but some scrap of pride stopped her.

From behind her, inside the truck, she heard Joe ask what was happening. Jayne shushed him.

Marianne refused to be shushed and kept saying, “Oh, wow! Oh wow!” to no one in particular.

Andi was dying inside, watching Brice deny her and everything they’d meant to each other. His brown eyes turned cold and stony as the fire in them died. His jaw flexed in time with her rapid breathing.

The Morrison name carried tremendous weight from North America to Europe and even into Asia. As her father’s empire had grown, he’d manipulated a hundred thousand dollar inheritance into a billion dollar empire in less than forty years. Who wouldn’t be impressed by a reputation like that?

Brice would never look at her again without seeing her father’s money and power. It was her legacy but it wasn’t her fault.

She spun on her heel and climbed back into the truck. The keys were still in the ignition so she started the engine. Brice simply stood and stared at her, anger and hurt etched into every carved feature. She let her gaze travel from his boots to his eyes, slowly, taking in every inch of him.

“Get in the truck,” she said, jamming it into gear.

~ ~ ~

The next morning Brice was as terse with her as he'd been on her very first day. Pride made her respond with her haughtiness well engaged. Grandmother Morrison would be proud, she thought as she tilted her chin.

Brice withdrew further and further away from her into his workshop and the children. She saw him walk in the fields the way she used to when she'd first arrived. Not, she kept telling herself, that she was interested. But what was he looking for? Peace of mind? Exhaustion?

He read *Black Beauty* to Joe. He even braided Marianne's hair. Not very well, but he tried.

By suppertime, the atmosphere in the house was decidedly melancholy.

Joe gulped his milk and smacked his lips. "How come nobody never talks to nobody anymore?"

Brice sprang to his feet like an exclamation mark.

Andi watched him closely as she gently corrected Joe's triple negative.

Brice lifted his plate. "I'll finish this at my desk."

"Huh?" Joe demanded, wide-eyed at the rule about to be broken. "Nobody eats anywhere but with the family," Joe reminded Brice.

Andi hid a smile by ducking her head.

Brice relented and returned to the table to eat in silence.

After supper, Andi had had enough. There were

lots of ways to run away from problems. Going to another place, the way she used to, was only one way. Brice had simply put up a blank wall of stubborn pride to hide from her.

She wasn't going to take it any more. She deserved better.

She set the last clean plate on the rack to drip dry.

She pulled the plug in the sink to let the water out.

Then she dried her hands.

Brice liked her hair loose and flying in the breeze. She fluffed it before crossing the kitchen to the door.

She strode through, filled with a determination she'd never felt before. She would fight this out with Brice until he came to his senses. She warned herself not to be disappointed if the stubborn man tried to avoid her again. There would be another time.

Brice Logan had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

She opened the barn door and walked toward to the workshop quickly and quietly. The ginger cat darted across her path, something small and grey in his mouth.

Thin streaks of brilliant sunshine shot through the shadows. Her heightened senses gathered more sounds and smells from the old barn than she'd ever noticed before. She heard the rustling of little wings way up high. Dry straw swirled at her passing.

When she got to the door of the workshop she pushed straight in, hoping to catch him unaware. What she saw stunned her for a moment. She stopped and wanted more than anything not to have come in.

Chapter Eleven

Brice was facing away from her, speaking into a cellular telephone. A telephone!

Even worse, her adrenaline-heightened hearing picked up his conversation. She wanted to cover her ears to drown out the sound of betrayal but she was too sick with shock to even lift her hands.

He was arranging to meet his new housekeeper. The best woman for the job, he was saying, each word an individual tearing slash to her soul.

The best woman for the job.

Obviously the time, work and love she'd put into this house and these children meant nothing.

He'd used her.

Used her.

Used her. Even when he should have known she wanted to stay with him. Hadn't she done well enough? Hadn't she learned how to take care of everyone? Hadn't she loved them all enough?

She choked on her heaving breath and made a small sound in her throat. How dare he accuse her of using him and the children as an . . . an . . . escapade!

Indignant with him and his pompous anger, she picked up a wooden truck on a shelf beside her and hurled it against the wall.

There was a sudden thwack against the wall by his

head that startled Brice. What the . . . Andi! He turned to see her, white-faced and rigid, staring at him. Her fine fingers were clenched at her sides. Her chest heaved in slow, deliberate time. The phone felt like a lead weight in his hand.

“User,” she whispered raggedly, making the word sound like filth.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Ackerly,” he said absently, to the woman on the other end of the line, “I’ll have to call you later, something’s come up.” He slowly disconnected the call.

She turned with jerky movements and left the workshop, letting the door bang shut behind her.

Andi was halfway through the barn when Brice caught her by the upper arm. She spun on her heel, hand raised to smack him. He stopped her arm in mid-swing. “Don’t,” he warned and held her at arms’ length.

Andi glared back at him, eyes too bright, skin gone milky, even in the shadows.

“Is it the phone?” he asked, knowing it wasn’t. She had told him what he’d done. He’d used her.

She stared and didn’t speak. Not with her voice, at least. But her eyes. Her eyes slashed him with rage and then, for a fleeting millisecond, grief, before they finally closed down altogether.

Her ice-blue, lively eyes turned dirty-ice grey and died, right there, right then.

He dropped his hands from her still body and waited. For what? Her eyes to come back, her spirit to

return? Whatever she'd felt for him was gone, he knew it. Gone.

She turned and headed stiffly for the door. When she stepped through, it closed softly behind her. He stood in the shadows for a long while, hoping she'd come back.

She didn't.

He punched an old dry bale of hay. It felt good, got rid of a little of the rage.

So he punched and punched and punched until his knuckles bled and he couldn't punch anymore. He sank to his knees on the floor of the barn. It was best this way, but God how it hurt.

He'd thought keeping his promise to Emily anyway he could, would be enough. He'd lied, tricked and seduced Andi into staying. But seduction was a tricky thing, it wound its way around a man's vitals and grabbed him by the heart before he could stop it.

Andi would leave and take his heart with her. Would keeping the kids be enough then?

He heaved one dry sob and stood slowly, feeling every one of his thirty-five years. The kids would have to be enough, he told himself, the toys would have to be enough, because the big, dumb farmer had screwed everything up.

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Chopper blades roared overhead, as Joe settled against Brice's hip. The little guy was almost choking him in his excitement but Brice didn't mind. How

often did a bunch of Saskatchewan foster kids get to see a real helicopter land in their own front yard?

He recognized the insignia on the side of the machine. Known the world over, the stylized M overlaid with a fox's face was a clear symbol of power.

Brice looked at the windows of the house. He hadn't seen Andi since the scene in the barn last night. He hadn't had a chance to tell her what a horse's ass he was.

The big helicopter settled on the ground like a mosquito on an unprotected arm. The engine sound changed and the rotors whooshed in slow chops. Joe wriggled to climb down. Brice let him.

Andi came around the house. She must have been out walking. She looked flushed, overheated and overexerted. She had a damp streak down her chest, separating her breasts. Her hair was held in a loose, flowing ponytail.

She refused to look at him. Her chin was set in the same haughty angle she used to hide the fact that she was hurt.

He hadn't treated her any better than her old man. If he told her he'd also seduced himself with all his stupid pretending she'd laugh. It would be the same bitter laugh she'd given whenever she'd mentioned her father.

A man climbed out of the chopper and ran toward them, his head low. Even so, there was no mistaking him. Anyone would know this was Richard Andrews Morrison; if not by the cut of his expensive suit, then

by his predatory, all-consuming gaze. He drank in everything in sight. Brice saw him file all useful information away to be used or not, when the need arose.

Right now, the man watched calmly as his daughter approached. Only his eyes gave away his real purpose. He was assessing her as if for damage.

Brice remembered the angel-woman who'd practically stumbled into the yard a few short weeks ago. Her hands had been smooth, the nails painted, well-manicured, her eyes flashing with anger and humiliation. She'd been haughty but that hadn't lasted long. Just until the first load of laundry she'd washed, he recalled.

Today, she walked with purpose, but no fire lit her eyes. Her hands were still smooth, but she'd trimmed and filed her nails weeks ago. She had capable hands now, soothing hands, loving hands. They reached into his chest and wrenched his heart.

She watched her father as if he was the lesser of two evils. Better the devil you know, he thought, watching her. Was he going to stand here and do nothing to stop her?

Damn straight, he was. It was the only thing he could do, the only thing she'd let him do.

Richard Andrews Morrison walked to his only child, reached out a hand and offered it for a handshake. Andi clasped it lightly for a heartbeat. Brice wondered if Morrison saw her wipe her palm immediately after touching him. The flex of the older man's jaw answered the question. They turned as one, each

of them a study in restrained politeness. They waited for him to speak, each one possessor of ice for eyes and a cut to their chins he would have found similar enough to comment on under other circumstances.

“Mr. Morrison,” he said, holding out a welcoming hand. “I’m Brice Logan. Care for a beer?”

The tycoon’s grasp was pretty much what Brice had expected. Cool, dry and firm. Very firm. One precise shake and release.

Andi wanted to ignore the niggling bit of humor Brice’s question started in her. Care for a beer, she thought. Imagine saying that to her father. Well, if he wanted to make an impression, he certainly had. Dad’s eyes actually widened in surprise. Had Brice noticed?

A gleam of satisfaction deep in Brice’s gaze told her he had seen. She bit back a small smile.

Her father glanced once around the yard and nodded. “Sounds like a good idea to me.” He let Brice lead them into the house.

Joe sidled up to her, trying to keep in stride so Dad wouldn’t notice him on her other side. “Andi, can, uh, may, I stay out here and look at the hellycopter? Please?”

She knelt down to look him in the eye. It was the only way to get him to realize the seriousness of anything. “Yes, you may. But mind what Joseph says. He’s the pilot and he’ll tell you what you may touch and especially what you mustn’t.”

“Joseph?” Joe’s eyes couldn’t have gone any wider. “Hey! That’s my name!”

“Really?” she asked. “I thought it was Joe.”

“Most of the time it is.” He turned and ran toward the helicopter. “Guess what?” he called to the man climbing out. “My name’s Joseph, too!”

When she stood again, her father watched her critically. “The boy is quite at ease with you,” he said, tilting his head the way he always did when faced with a puzzle.

“Why shouldn’t he be at ease with me?” she asked. “I’m his foster mother!”

“What nonsense is this?” her father demanded.

She walked past him without answering. He might be here to take her home, but he didn’t have to know yet that she was as anxious to leave as he was.

Andi strode on, no longer weary from the long sleepless night or the arduous walk she’d just finished. She’d heard the chopper and come running.

She opened the door and waited for him to walk through to the kitchen.

Brice handed each of them a cold beer and leaned against the counter negligently. His jeans molded his hips, his arms were crossed over his chest. He was far more alert than his relaxed stance showed. She saw a muscle flex in his jaw and his eyes had the same look she’d seen on her arrival. Hard, assessing and dismissive. Only this time, her father was the object of his gaze.

“Why did you come, Dad? You usually send an employee to fetch me.”

“I wanted to see why you took so long to contact

me,” her father said with a frown. “Your normal scene is to call within a week. You usually time your call for when I’m in the middle of vital negotiations.” His gaze, designed to censure, did little to arouse more than curiosity in her. “I also wanted to see how you’d managed without your credit cards.”

She leaned against the counter in imitation of Brice’s nonchalant stance. “Well, what do you think?” She tipped the beer bottle to her lips and sipped. She smiled and swiped her lips with the back of her hand the way she’d seen Brice do.

Richard Morrison raised his gaze to Brice’s but spoke to her. “I think we’d best get you back to New York and undo the damage.” A warning flashed from her father to Brice.

Brice’s jaw flexed once. She could see her father had gone too far and said too much because Brice was livid. He stood away from the counter and stared her father down. “All you see,” he said quietly, deliberately, “is damaged goods?” Brice flashed a brief warning to her to keep quiet.

She heeded it.

“What kind of father are you?” He seemed to get even bigger as he bristled with controlled rage. He took one step closer.

Her father squared his shoulders, his suit jacket strained across his back. She’d never seen him stand so straight. Brice had about two inches on him, but it didn’t seem to matter much. “Do you realize who I am?” he warned.

“I sure as hell do,” Brice snapped. “You’re a man who sees his daughter as some kind of tool.” He leaned even closer to her father then turned his head to look directly at her. “Or maybe some kind of delectable carrot to be dangled in front of up-and-coming competition.”

Her father’s face reddened and a pulse beat beside his temple. He was a frightening, commanding man facing an angry, determined one. He looked at her, too, his eyes glaring a command. “Cassandra, get your things.”

At least now Brice would understand why she’d always found it expedient to run away. When her father wanted something he got it through sheer force of will. She’d always been powerless against him. Arguments had never worked. Pleading had never worked. The only way he’d ever seen her side of things had been after she’d been away for awhile, out of his reach. Then and only then, could she get him to listen to her side.

She’d never wondered why that was, until this moment.

She’d been raised by one of the best users in the world. Then to make matters worse, she’d fallen in love with an even better one.

She stepped into the hall, her hand clutched against her mouth, determined to get away from both of them.

“Logan, you’re dead.” Her father’s voice ripped into the kitchen. “I’ll see to it your little piss-ass

company goes belly-up inside a week.” Oh, no, she thought, he was in a dead cold rage. She’d seen his eyes when he’d used that tone before. She shivered. Brice wouldn’t stand a chance.

She stepped back into the kitchen, flashed her own warning at Brice and walked around her father to face him down. “How dare you?” she demanded. “How dare you threaten Brice Logan!” Her voice rose as painful triumph wiggled its way to her heart. “Do you have any idea what this man stands for?”

“Cassandra,” he said, his voice brooking no argument. “Get out of this room.” Deceptively calm, his fury at being questioned was palpable in the sudden silence.

Her father could crush Brice’s business in a morning. A couple of telephone calls or a deliberately worded fax transmission would be all it would take. Brice would flounder without ever knowing how it happened. Even if he did guess why.

Andi couldn’t let her father destroy him, in spite of any hurt Brice had caused her. He hadn’t made her any promises. Her own desperate desire to belong here had betrayed her.

She laughed a harsh bark. “Go here, go there. Smile, Cassandra. Wave, Cassandra. Don’t do anything, Cassandra.” She sucked in a deep breath. “You know what, Dad? I’m sick and tired of being told where to go, what to say and how to say it.”

Her father blinked. “I see.” His hard grey eyes softened slightly. “Well, perhaps you’ll do me a favor,

then. Will you go to the spa for a couple of weeks?" He walked to her and put his hands on her shoulders. He was only a little taller than she was, but he'd always made her feel small. "Take some time off? See to yourself, girl. You need to take a break."

"A break from what? I haven't been doing anything I haven't loved doing." She refused to admit he was concerned. It was only a ruse to get her to comply.

"What have you been doing that you love so much? Running after snot-nosed kids?"

Insulted, she drew herself up to full height. "Yes, I've taken care of children. Children who need me, Dad, in a way you never have." She tried to blink away the images of the children's faces. Her breath caught. "Without me, I don't know what would have happened to them over the last couple of weeks."

His hands squeezed her shoulders lightly. His eyes were incredulous. "You said they were fostered here. Surely this godforsaken place has more than one foster home? They'd have gone somewhere else."

"No!" she argued, determined to make him understand. "Don't you see? Children need a stable home. They can't be shunted around like empty boxcars." She caught her breath and looked at Brice "They need to belong and Brice promised to carry on."

Brice stared at her in amazement.

"Then," her father warned, "he can carry on without you. Get your things, Cassandra!"

"My name is Andi!" She clenched her fists at her sides.

Her father only reply was to wrench the kitchen door open and storm outside. "Joseph! It's time!" he bellowed across the yard.

The storm of anger that carried her father's voice back into them swirled around her and Brice for another long moment.

She turned toward the hall.

"Are you leaving without a last look?" Brice asked calmly.

She stopped but refused to turn around. It would make leaving more difficult if she saw the expression that went with his gentle tone. She started when his hand brushed from her elbow to her fingertips. He held on and tugged at her. She followed him through the kitchen.

When they got to the back yard her father stood by the helicopter. He watched them silently. He had apparently said everything he needed to say to get her to do what he wanted. He'd dismiss the whole episode as another of her useless escapades.

Brice tugged her along quickly until she had to jog to keep up with him. He walked her across the yard and into the wheat, his fingers biting into her wrist.

Finally, he stopped and pointed to the sky. "Look, Andi. Look at it."

The blue went on forever and she closed her eyes to hold it inside. She'd never forget. "I see it," she whispered. Whenever she needed to, she'd only have to shut her eyes and it would be there. She thought of New York skyscrapers choking the blue and hated

the image.

He stood behind her and put his hands on her upper arms to turn her in the other direction. "Look, Andi, look at the wheat."

The fields stretched around her for miles: golden, waving, rich with life. She tore a full head from the stock and folded it into her palm.

"And the house," he said. He turned her once more so she could see the place. Joe stood between her father and the chopper, holding the ginger cat up so Richard could see it. Marianne and Jayne were running up the driveway, obviously anxious to see what was happening. They'd been in town with friends and . . . Her heart filled with ache. How she'd miss them. She fought back tears.

"Look at it, Andi. Look at everything and remember. You might be able to leave here, leave us." His voice went low. "But this place will never leave you." His chocolate eyes looked back at her the way they used to when she pretended to herself that he cared. "It's as deep inside you as I have been," he said.

"Let me go, Brice. I can't listen to this. You're deliberately confusing me." She pulled away and walked toward the yard again. She couldn't look back at him. It hurt too much.

"You can leave, Andi. But it won't matter. You need this place as much as we need you," he spoke in a husky tone he'd reserved for her alone.

She squeezed her eyes shut to stem the flow of tears burning tracks down her cheeks. "You would have

thrown me away as soon as your housekeeper arrived,” she whispered raggedly, even though he probably couldn’t hear her.

She walked steadily back toward the farmyard and her father. Her knees threatened to give way but she held on.

Jayne and Marianne ran toward her. She kept walking, finally allowing great, gushing tears.

When the girls saw how distraught she was, they hung back to let her pass between them.

She wanted to stop and hug them, but knew if she did, she’d never let them go.

She walked straight toward the chopper, trying not to see Joe and that damned cat. Joe tugged at her father’s trouser leg, looking for attention, oblivious to what was happening.

Her father watched her. His hard assessment reminded her of the way Brice had looked at her just before she’d walked into his house for the first time. “That man’s insane, Cassandra,” he said, as she drew nearer. “You’re better off back in New York with me.”

“That was my first impression of him.” She choked back a sob. “I know better now. Brice is not insane, Dad.” She stood directly in front of him, staring into his cold grey eyes. “He’s a lot like you. Only better at what he does.”

Her father looked past her to the field again, watching Brice. “I’m your father, Andi,” he said quickly, touching her elbow to hurry her along. “I know what’s best for you.” He slapped his thigh in his

impatience. "We've got to be in Tokyo in less than twenty-four hours."

The rotors started slowly.

Whup.

Whup.

Whup.

She reached up for a handhold into the chopper and turned for one last look. Whup. Whup. Whup. The air-churning rotors brought dust to her eyes. She squinted against it.

Jayne and Marianne stared at her with eyes wide in disbelief and disappointment. Joe clung to Jayne with tears streaming down his face. He'd finally realized Andi was leaving. She had no time to go to him. He'd never understand anyway. He turned his wet face into Jayne's waist and his shoulders heaved with every sob.

Brice stood in the field, a black silhouette against sunset's fire. She could see the tension in him, even from here. His head was cocked slightly, as if he was listening for something.

If he tried hard enough, he would hear her heart break.

Joe peeked out from Jayne's waist and waved stiffly with one arm.

She waved back. The chopper whined and lifted off.

Joe kept on waving for as long as she could see him, a small speck in the wide, wide ocean of wheat.

Chapter Twelve

Tokyo had been everything Andi had expected: too crowded, too noisy, too hectic and incredibly lonely. The business had taken longer than her father had estimated and she'd been trapped with him for a week longer than she'd expected.

She was more than ready to take off for the spa. Easy conversation, friendly faces, a cocoon of warmth and intimacy to hide away in, the spa would refresh her and help her repair herself.

She was in sore need of repair. Her heart was ragged from the wound of leaving Brice and the children. It even hurt to look up at the postage stamp of visible sky in the city.

She placed a bathing suit in her suitcase. She fingered the fine material and thought of wild orange and green. Jayne had looked like a teenage boy's dream that day at the creek. Danny. That was his name. Did Jayne still like him? Were they dating?

She slammed the suitcase lid down. She slammed down equally hard on her desire to call directory assistance. She refused, ever, to talk to Brice on that damned cellular phone he had hidden—hidden!—in the workshop.

Would the spa get her out of her blue funk? Two weeks of massages, tennis, mud baths and jogging

would never be enough to make her forget.

The door to her bedroom opened and Tilda walked in. Since Andi had returned from Saskatchewan, she'd tried to get her maid to wear casual clothes, but Tilda refused, saying she preferred to wear her uniform. She was afraid she'd forget her duties if she wore anything else.

"Are you going to let me pack for you or have I become obsolete?" Tilda asked, smiling. "I've never seen you do so much . . . I mean, for yourself . . . I mean" Her hands fluttered in her embarrassment. "Let me pack for you." She reached for the suitcase.

Andi smoothed back her hair and sighed. "I'd rather do it myself, Tilda. I miss having things to do." She sat on the bed, covered in pillows and ruffles and lace. She smoothed the fine silk. Too delicate for a real bed. Brice would snort in derision if he ever saw it.

So would Joe for that matter.

"Would you please tell Marcel I'll cook dinner tonight, Tilda?" she asked. She smiled. "Macaroni casserole, what do you think?"

"I think Marcel will quit." Tilda chuckled and shook her head, her fine grey hair falling out of her bun as usual.

"Let him, I've never liked his cooking anyway," she smiled, enjoying the idea of using a kitchen again. She hadn't cooked a meal since she'd left Brice and the kids.

"Mr. Morrison will be home for dinner this

evening,” Tilda said. “He just called. Since you’re going away, he probably wants some time with you,” she added gently.

“Yes, I expected to hear from him. He always spends the evening with me before I leave.” She grinned again. “All the more reason for the casserole.” She had taken great delight in reminding him that she’d seen a different way of life, a different way to live, when she was with Brice. He did his best to ignore her reminders but she knew they bothered him.

What was he afraid of? Even the idea that Richard Andrews Morrison could be afraid, was novel. She had no idea how to handle her realization.

Tilda snapped her fingers. “I just remembered. The driver you sent to pick up the Porsche called while you were in Tokyo. He said the car ran beautifully.” She tilted her head. “Then he mentioned something bizarre.”

Andi perked up, curious. “What was it?” She tried not to get her hopes up. “Something about Brice or the children?”

“No, it was about the mechanic who fixed your car.”

“Barney Walchyk?” Andi asked in surprise. “What about him?” Brice had explained about Barney’s incredible shyness with women. Andi couldn’t imagine anything bizarre happening to a man like Barney.

“Apparently he’s getting married.”

“What?” Shock made her voice thin. “There must be some mistake.”

“He’s marrying a mail-order bride,” Tilda explained, bowling over Andi’s disbelief. She always loved a good story. “Can you believe things like that actually happen?”

Poor, shy, Barney. Andi smiled, happy someone’s life was taking a turn for the better. “You’d have to know Barney to understand.”

Marcel was infuriated with being given the night off unexpectedly and wanted to hang around the kitchen to see what damage Andi would inflict. He left, throwing up his hands in futile frustration, when she got out the elbow macaroni.

When Andi set the table in the kitchen, Tilda laughed so hard tears came to her eyes. She didn’t wait to see her employer’s reaction, though, and left for a bingo game with friends.

Her father, hiding his shock admirably, ate in complete silence. Probably pretending he was somewhere else, Andi thought. Like in a movie with a bad script.

When he finished his dessert of ice cream and canned peaches, he smiled for the first time since he’d come home.

“When you get back from the spa, I’ll need you in London. We’ll be entertaining a Duke and Duchess and I think they’ll like you.” He sipped his coffee experimentally. He looked pleasantly surprised. “This tastes better than Marcel’s,” he said, with a nod of approval.

“Thank you,” she accepted. Her mind skittered away from the memory of the cereal box with red

crayon instructions scrawled across the back.

He cleared his throat. "The Duke and Duchess are famous for their eccentricities." He drained his cup and rose to serve himself a second.

She smiled and tilted her head, acknowledging his little barb. "You mean they're crackers? That's why they'll like me?"

"Exactly."

He was teasing her! She sat perfectly still and stared at him.

He smiled more deeply, apparently enjoying himself. "I enjoyed this dinner, Cassie, as much as you hoped I'd hate it." He added cream to his cup. "When I was a boy, we had a cook at the Hampton house who used to make me special meals." He swung back to the table and sat again. He leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "Your grandmother would have been scandalized if she'd known I'd ever been fed ham hocks." He stretched back into his seat. "We used to sit in the kitchen, just like this." He waved his hand to encompass the room. "Lizzie would tell me stories of swimming in creeks and fishing with a pole and string." His voice dropped lower as his mind returned to distant memories. "She'd cook the fish right on the bank and eat it with her hands. She and her father would disappear for the day and just . . . be . . . she'd say."

"Why weren't we like that?" she asked, wondering where the chances had gone, the times they could have had together but never did.

His gaze clouded a little. "I think I was afraid," he said softly.

"Of what?"

"Of loving you too much." His gaze held hers and for the first time in her life, Cassandra Morrison saw her father vulnerable. "The way I did your mother." He put his head in his hands. He pressed his eyes against his palms. Hard.

Andi sat still, afraid to break the enveloping silence. "But it didn't work," he continued after a moment, "because as it turns out, I love you even more. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Cassie. Nothing." When he looked at her again, his eyes were filled with remorse and it shook her to her soul. Richard Andrews Morrison had never apologized in his life.

She rallied, realizing she wasn't his daughter for nothing. This would be the best opportunity she'd ever have to get the explanation she needed. If they were ever to have any kind of normal relationship, she would have to press him.

"Why did you undermine everything I did at Goodson Manufacturing?" she asked. "You knew how much I wanted to succeed. I wanted to run the company and run it well. I wanted to be needed there, not the figurehead you made me."

He blew a breath out between his teeth. Bullseye. "You're more like your mother than you'll ever know. She was such a giving woman." His eyes filled with pain and moistened. "Lydia always thought of others first, was never ambitious for herself. All she ever

wanted was to keep her family happy and whole.”

Andi nodded, blinking back tears. He'd never talked so openly before. Had never shown her this pain.

“Cassie, as much as you want it.” He shook his head. “As much as I want it, you don't have what it takes to be an executive.” He looked at her sadly. “If you did, you'd have seen what I was doing within days of your start at Goodson. As it was, it was only a fluke that you ever found out. If I hadn't been sloppy and let you overhear a conversation at the penthouse party, you still wouldn't know.” Now that he had started to explain, his words flowed on and on like a river of torment.

“You'd still be thinking you were keeping Goodson running. Keeping your little family together. I never wanted you to think you couldn't really do the job.” The river of words stopped for a moment as he collected his thoughts. “I was afraid you'd leave me to find out what you could do.”

Now she knew. Never in her life had she envisioned he'd know her so well. So many times she'd thought of the Goodson employees as family. She'd even used her mother's family name so they would always have a Goodson to come to. For three years her 'family' had laughed at her, aware she held no real power. Her father was right. She didn't have what it took to be president of a company. All she'd ever been was a laughingstock.

Would she never learn? Was she destined to let her

need to be loved overwhelm her good sense?

She stood and cleared away the dishes, too upset to continue sitting. She piled them on the counter above the dishwasher. She clenched her fist in frustration and leaned on the countertop. "Brice didn't have a dishwasher." She squeezed her nails into her palms until it hurt. "I don't even know how to put the dishes in properly."

She wouldn't cry.

She wouldn't! She punched her thigh impotently, arm rigid.

Then she felt her father stand behind her. He touched her shoulders lightly. He tugged until she turned into his arms. "Oh, Dad, I should be angry at you." She sniffed messily and sobbed against his shoulder. He gathered her closer. "I've made such a mess of my life. One screw-up after another."

"Don't say that, Cassie. It's not true." He held her away from him, tilted her chin up and looked her in the eye. "You made real changes at Goodson." He smoothed her hair away from her face. "Changes for the better."

"No, I didn't. You never gave me a chance."

"Do you remember when you first started at Goodson and you toured the assembly plant?"

She nodded.

"Remember the survey you ordered done?"

She nodded. "The one that showed us how many employees need daycare for children and elderly parents. What about it?"

“You convinced the Board to provide space right inside the plant. Then the employees pitched in and built the playground for the kids.”

She'd been so proud. When she'd gone back to see the daycare center the office staff had given her a spontaneous standing ovation when she'd stepped off the elevator.

No one had laughed at her then. She smiled hesitantly. Her father smiled back, deep in his eyes, the way he used to when she was little.

“Do you realize how well your daycare increased production? How drastically absenteeism fell off?” He grinned wider. “Not to mention employee loyalty.”

She shook her head no. “I never checked.”

“No, you wouldn't have. A strong, ambitious president would have checked.” He studied her intently. “I did.”

He pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. “Here,” he said giving the handkerchief to her. “I'd like to keep this shirt if you don't mind.”

She chuckled. “Thanks.” She blew her nose. “How could you know me so well? I always thought you didn't care. I thought I was nothing but a . . .”

“Tool? Like Logan said? No, Cassie, you've been my light and my life.” This time, he was the one to turn away. “I was afraid I'd lose you. I tried to keep you so busy with me you wouldn't have time to find yourself.” His voice went so low she could barely hear him. “I was wrong. I see it now.”

She walked around him and forced him to look her

in the face.

“I’m sorry, Cassie,” he said. “Forgive me?”

She nodded, over and over again. She couldn’t speak.

“I was wrong to try to control your life. Every time you ran away, I was terrified you wouldn’t come home. I was afraid you’d find yourself out there somewhere.”

He touched the side of her face and she tilted her head against his palm. “When I saw you out on the prairie with Logan and those kids, I knew my worst fear had come true.”

She nodded. “Yes.”

His grey eyes were luminous. “You’re going back.” It wasn’t a question, but an acceptance.

“I love him.”

“When we were leaving I watched him,” he said.

She remembered it all so clearly it was painful. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Logan looked the same way I felt when your mother died.”

Next morning, Andi dug through the bottom drawer of her dresser. Tilda had unpacked the box Brice had sent while she was in Japan. She found one pair of jeans, two blouses, a T-shirt, five pairs of panties and a cheap pair of running shoes. Beneath those, she found some blue-streaked shorts and tank tops. She stuffed everything into her suitcase and closed it. She grinned.

Then she called her lawyer to have him find out

about Canadian immigration laws. She didn't want any problems from authorities. She would stay with Brice for as long as it took to convince him Cassandra Morrison was the best woman for him and for his foster children.

She told Tilda she was leaving for Saskatchewan and Marcel what she really thought of his cooking. Then she called the doorman to hail a cab for the airport.

She stepped off the elevator and walked through to the lobby. The doorman's back was to her and from his stance, it appeared he was having some trouble with a belligerent visitor. She backed up a bit, hoping to get around them to the waiting cab.

"Miss Morrison doesn't see anyone without letting me know they are expected. She's not available."

"Listen, Mac, I'm telling you she'll see us—"

"Brice!" She pushed past the doorman and launched herself into the midst of a gaggle of visitors. She hugged Brice, Jayne, Marianne and picked Joe up in her arms. "Oh, I can't believe you're all here! I can't believe you'd come all this way!" She couldn't see any of them any more for the tears in her eyes.

She hugged and kissed them all and then did it again to make certain she didn't miss anyone. She was vaguely aware of the commotion they caused, because of the smiles of other people coming and going through the lobby.

Brice tugged at the lapels of her silk blazer to hold her still for his blistering kiss. Everything and everyone

faded into the background.

When she'd been thoroughly kissed and thoroughly aroused, she came up for air. "I was on my way to the airport. I was going back."

"Damn right." His lip lifted at the corner in his lazy half-smile she loved. She kissed it.

"Where's your father, Andi?" he demanded. "We've got some talking to do."

"You won't hurt him, will you?" she asked, worried what they might do to each other, considering the fine tempers they'd been in the last time they'd met.

"Not if he gives me permission to marry you."

She held her breath, not certain if he was serious. He had a way of confusing her. She waited for the delayed explanation that must be coming.

His eyes went very, very dark, and very, very still. "Will you? Marry me?"

"No." She waited patiently for his reaction. First, surprise, deepening into shock.

She smiled. "Gotcha." She kissed him quickly before he could explode. "I've waited for weeks to do that. You drove me crazy for the first few days, always saying no to the simplest requests."

"You scared the hell out of me." He pulled her close and buried his face in her neck.

"But there is one condition."

He lifted his head and stared down at her, happiness making him shudder. "Name it."

She pulled his head down so she could whisper in his ear. "That we add some of our own children to this

brood. Do you think they'd mind?"

"Mind?" He shuddered again and pulled her erotically closer to his hips. "That's all Joe's been talking about. He figures on at least four."

"Four?"

"Ask him."

"Joe, why would you want four babies?"

Joe looked up at her as if she should know the answer. "'Cause that's how old I am."

She shuddered to think about what he'd say in a few years, if he kept to that logic.

She laughed and ruffled his hair.

When Brice got her attention again his eyes were serious. "I love you, Andi." He gathered her closer still, if that was possible. "And if you ever leave me again, I'll come after you," he whispered against her ear.

"You'd better!" she answered clearly. "I love you, too."

There was a sudden scuffle behind her and she heard Joe begin to speak but he was cut off in mid-whine by Marianne. "Shh," she said sharply, "you'll have to wait."

"What about your father?" Brice ignored the shushing and the whining. He watched her intently, his chocolate eyes telling her how much he loved her.

Joe clamoured against her thigh. "Cut out the mushy stuff. I'm hungry!"

"Joe!" Jayne said. "Leave them alone, can't you see they want to talk?" She yanked Joe away.

“Don’t worry about my father, Brice,” Andi said, smiling. “He realized as soon as he saw you that you loved me. That’s why he was so scared.”

“Scared?” Brice said doubtfully. “That’s hard to believe.”

“He knew I’d never be able to stay away from you for long. He’s afraid of being lonely, Brice.” She swatted Joe’s hand lightly away from her sleeve.

“Richard Andrews Morrison? Lonely?” Brice shook his head in disbelief.

Her heart caught in her throat as she realized what all this meant. The children wanted her. Brice loved her.

Somehow, she’d found herself out on that prairie and she’d never lose herself again.

She looked from Brice, eagerly loving her with his gaze, to Marianne, blinking back happy tears, to Jayne, pinching Joe’s shoulders and nodding ecstatically back at her.

Andi opened her arms to Joe. He pulled away from Jayne and launched himself against her. He pressed his face into her stomach. His sturdy golden-hued body was warm and strong against her. He cuddled closer, looking up at her, his eyes glowing trust. “I knew you’d want us. I knew you would. You’re a’angel, Andi, and angels are always there when you need ’em.”