



Braving the Storm

Kelly Wallace

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Chapter One

“Damn! Damn! Double damn!” Melony Shepherd leaned on the intercom buzzer once again. Where was the Nelson file? And where in the hell was her secretary?

No answer came from the silent intercom or her racing thoughts. Swearing again, she pushed her half-eaten pastrami over the edge of her desk and into the wastebasket. After scrubbing at the orange coagulated grease spot with a paper napkin, she tossed that into the can too.

Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly through gritted teeth. Rearranging the mess on her desk from one side to the other and back again still didn't turn up the elusive file.

Melony held a fist to her stomach and grimaced as boiling lava shot up from her intestines and into her esophagus. Reaching for her roll of antacids, she popped two, chewed, and washed the gruesome, mint-flavored chalk down with the remains of her cold coffee.

“The girl can't even make a decent cup of coffee,” she grumbled, adding the styrofoam cup to the small but ever-growing mountain of garbage at her side, unobservant of the fact that California pushed a strong Save-the-Earth campaign.

Maybe Brenda could give her some clue as to where her secretary was, or perhaps, help her locate the missing file.

“Brenda!” Melony stalked into her best friend and partner's office, barging right through the door, oblivious to the fact that the other woman was on the phone and probably would appreciate some privacy.

Brenda placed a flat palm over the mouthpiece on the phone after asking the person on the other end to hold. “You bellowed?”

“Where in the effing hell is that good-for-nothing secretary of mine?” She flailed a hand through the air. “What was her name?” She snapped her fingers as the woman's name came back to her. “Lisa!”

“Have you forgotten, O Volcanic One, that you fired her,” Brenda tipped her head back to view the clock on the wall, “two hours and fifteen minutes ago?”

Melony slumped against the doorjamb, removed her reading glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose with a thumb and forefinger. She closed her eyes tightly as she felt her anger slipping away, threatening to turn into that all-too-familiar feeling of weakness that she despised so much. “I fired her?”

“Uh-huh,” Brenda confirmed. She directed her attention to the person waiting on the line, saying she would call them back later, and hung up. “That makes twenty-three in the past year, Mel.” Melony's best friend of seven years, and law partner of three, leaned back in her red leather chair, chewing on the end of her pen. “What did this one do? Forget to water your plants?” Her tone was dry and teasing, yet held an air of truth to it. Melony often fired employees for the smallest reason or provocation.

Dropping her arm to her side, she cast Brenda an indignant look. “I've never fired anyone over something that trivial.”

“Oh, no?” Brenda challenged her friend's memory. “What about Howard Burns?”

“Who?”

“He was approximately twenty, short black hair, brown eyes, wire rim glasses and always wore screaming Hawaiian print shirts to the office.”

“He sounds vaguely familiar.” Melony strove to hold on to her patience, pulling her baby-fine blond hair back into a tight ponytail and securing it with an elastic band she fished out of her pocket. She had no idea why they were having this conversation, she needed to find a missing file, not reminisce over some guy she had let go.

“You remember the coffee incident?” Brenda raised her dark brows in inquisition. “About six months ago?”

“Oh, him?” She gave a dismissing little snort. “That was different.”

“How so?”

Melony let out an impatient breath and stood in the doorway with her hands planted on her slim hips, her black pleated slacks doing nothing to hide her slight figure. “He spilled coffee on my best silk blouse, for shit’s sake!”

Brenda gave a little shake of her head. “That’s only because you bumped into him since you felt he was taking too long to bring you your coffee and went storming out of the office door looking for him,” she quietly reminded.

“Well—well this is different!” she sputtered, going to stand in back of one of the chrome and leather chairs provided for Brenda’s clients.

Her partner gave up the old argument. “For seven years now I’ve been trying to get you to relax and not be so high strung all of the time. And, as always, my friendly counseling goes in one ear and out the other.”

“Oh stuff it. I know I have a type-A personality, I know it’s a problem, I know I need help ... but not right now!”

Brenda sighed and got to her feet. Tossing the pen into a drawer, she asked, “What do you need? Maybe I can help you find it.”

“We can try.” She started for her office that sat across the short hall. “I don’t think we’ll find it, though.”

“What?” Brenda stood at the threshold of Melony’s office, her eyes taking in the battlefield of papers, empty coffee cups and open law books before her. “You probably can’t find anything in this place. When was the last time you cleaned off your desk?” She walked over to the chaos in question. “Or anything in here, for that matter?”

“You know me.” Melony was looking in the one file drawer that didn’t look as foreboding as the others. “I’m working on a few cases, and...”

“That’s just your trouble, Mel.” Brenda turned around and leaned against the desk, arms folded over her ample chest as she watched Melony’s futile attempt to come up with the missing file. “You’re always pushing yourself to the limit and way past. I go home around six and you’re still here burning the oil until one, sometimes two, in the morning.”

Melony closed the drawer after squeezing the folders back inside. “Let’s not start that again. I *need* to work.”

“Why? You’ve already made a name for yourself, got more money than most people know what to do with. There’s no reason for you to still be working around the clock like we did back when we were starting out.”

Melony had met Brenda while they attended and ultimately graduated from the same university and had hit it off right away. When they found this office for rent on one of the busiest streets in Los Angeles, they had jumped at the chance to become business partners. They’d had big dreams of becoming successful lady lawyers. Brenda felt they

had achieved that success a year ago and had settled into a comfortable niche. Melony still wasn't satisfied, though. She worked longer and harder, taking on several cases at once. And, as much as she hated to admit it, it was taking its toll on her.

She rummaged around her cluttered desk for the fifth time, sending a few papers fluttering to the floor. "Maybe you're happy with where you're at," she picked the papers up and tossed them back on her desk, "but I have bigger and better plans for myself." Her tone was caustic, but she knew Brenda had learned long ago to deflect nine-tenths of what she said. Only within the walls of Shepherd and Zimmerman was she an angry, raving tyrant such as now.

"Mel," Brenda's tone was consoling as she placed a hand over her partner's to stop her harried movements. "When are you going to stop beating yourself against a brick wall? Your dad died nearly a year ago. He saw what you made of yourself."

Melony slumped into her wingback chair and bit on her bottom lip, staring at the pen and ink sketch on the wall across the room. "Yeah," she gave a short laugh, "and it was never good enough."

"When are you going to start living for yourself and stop living for your father's ludicrous idea of what he thought you should have been all along: A *man*?"

Melony cringed upon hearing those words. Yes, nothing she did was ever good enough for Simon Shepherd, only because *she* was never good enough. He had wanted a boy thirty years ago. And though Melony had tried to mold herself into the image of what Simon Shepherd perceived to be as the ideal offspring, she was born without a dick, therefore she simply wasn't good enough.

Raised by her father single-handedly since her mother had died during labor with her, she was always trying to live up to his high expectations. But the only thing she had managed to do was become feared within her own office building, and an emotional and social cripple once she passed through the front door and went home.

"Is this what you were looking for?"

Melony snapped out of her somber musings, grateful to have her mind diverted from those depressing thoughts. "Where did you find it?" She snatched the folder away and clutched it to her breast as if it were a long-lost lover.

"In the trash can." She pointed a peach-tipped nail in the direction stated.

"I need these notes for the Nelson case tomorrow." She sifted through the neatly typed pages, printed out by some secretary of hers she had long forgotten the name of, brows bent in concentration.

After a few minutes of intense absorption in her notes, Brenda pulled the file away from Melony.

"When are you going to stop? Look at you. You must have lost twenty pounds in the past year. Twenty pounds your body can't spare."

"Thin is in," Melony quipped. Pursing her lips, she made a grab for the file. Brenda kept it just out of her reach.

"Maybe, although I wouldn't know," she patted one full hip with her free hand, "but you have to watch your health. When was the last time you've had a decent night's sleep, or even a hot meal? And not one of those pull-it-out-of-the-freezer-and-nuke-it-in-the-microwave deals, either."

Melony frowned. "I don't know." One corner of her mouth twitched and she didn't know whether she was going to break out in a case of hysterical giggles or

body-wracking sobs. Things were definitely starting to get to her.

"You're going over the edge, my dear friend. Fast. You have an ulcer, not to mention migraines, sinusitis and insomnia. You won't be happy until you've killed yourself just like..."

Melony held up a hand to stop her words. "Just like my father did," she finished for her. Simon Shepherd had died of a massive heart attack right in the middle of a Los Angeles courtroom. Instead of feeling mournful that her father had passed away, or even relieved that she wouldn't be at the brunt of his overbearing dominance any longer, Melony had been more determined than ever to try harder. Now that he was dead, she felt as if her father was an ominous, invisible entity who watched over her night and day, disapproving of everything she did.

"Yes. And you're traveling down the same fatal path, though at a much younger age. And do you know what's causing it?"

Melony sighed. "You know I hate lectures."

Brenda went on anyway. "Not smoking, not obesity, but stress and all of that greasy junk food you pick on all day. You're underweight and if you didn't go to kickboxing classes every other day you'd be weak as the proverbial kitten. The only reason you go to those classes at all is because you have some weird obsession with wanting to be able to kick ass, not for the health benefits. You're one extreme or the other, and it's going to kill you."

Melony sat there, silently glaring up at Brenda. "Are you finished?"

"For now."

"Don't you think you're carrying this mother hen role a little too far? Maybe you need to have another baby to use up some of the over abundance of maternal hormones you seem to have stored up. You're only five years my senior, I can take care..." Any remaining words were abandoned as she reached for her roll of antacids once more when a tremendous wave of fiery indigestion rolled over her.

"Mel, somebody has to take care of you." Brenda's voice was soft and filled with concern, as were her dark eyes. "Are you looking forward to having a heart attack at the age of thirty, or at the very least, a nervous breakdown?"

Melony leaned back in her chair and forced herself to take a deep, cleansing breath while rubbing her throbbing temples. Lord, she hoped a migraine wasn't coming on. That's all she needed. Those suckers could knock her out for two days at a time. She'd really have a mountain of work to face then. Briefly, she wondered if she had filled her prescription. "Have I been that bad?"

Brenda shrugged. "You want me to fib and say that the reason you've lost twenty-three employees in such a short amount of time is because they felt you were paying too well and, out of the kindness of their hearts, didn't want to take advantage of you?"

Melony snorted, the puff of breath causing her bangs to disarrange themselves over her forehead.

"And we both know it's strictly a suit of armor you wear once you walk through the front door each and every morning. I've been to dinner and the movies with you before. You're quiet as can be out there." Brenda pointed to the window behind Melony where the city bustled on the other side of the glass. "It's like you're two different women: Melony the Titan and Melony the Timid."

Leaning forward, Melony rested her forehead on her crossed arms. "What do you

suggest?" She looked up, casting a doleful glance to the woman who was standing in front of her with compassion in her eyes. Melony was desperate; she knew she had been walking a thin line for a very long time. Her doctor said she wouldn't live to see thirty-five if she kept up this pace. The only problem was, she didn't know how to stop. "If you say a padded cell is where I belong, I just might run you out of here, too." Brenda held up a hand and laughed softly. "Nothing as severe as that." She thought for a moment as if pondering her next words then slid a small pamphlet from the pocket of her slim-fitting skirt that hugged her full hips. "Have a look at this."

Taking the item from her, Melony looked it over and frowned once more. "What's this all about?"

"Hunter McFadden's one-on-one survival course," she said by way of explanation. "Charlie took it a few weeks ago. Said it changed him for life."

Melony lifted a wheat-colored eyebrow. "Shy, timid, virgin-on-his-wedding-night Charlie took a wilderness survival course?"

Brenda giggled at Melony's description of her husband of five years. "The one and only. Now he's a raging tiger—when it's appropriate." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Now I'm really confused." She laid the pamphlet on her desk, knowing that once it left her hands she'd probably never see it again. Her desk was California's own Bermuda Triangle. "You're telling me that a wilderness survival course has made Charlie a better lover? And, if so, what does it have to do with me? I haven't had a man in my life for ages, nor do I want one. My vibrator keeps me plenty satisfied."

Brenda rolled her eyes, resting a hip on the side of the desk again. "It wasn't the fact that taking the course made him a better lover. The course made him feel better about himself. It brought out the machismo in him, roughing it for those two weeks. He's much more self-assured in all areas of his life now. And ... he finally got that promotion he'd been after for such a long time."

Melony was nonplused. "All of that because of a survival course?"

Brenda nodded her head of brown corkscrew curls. "You haven't had a vacation since we've opened. And not once when we were in school together, either. Now, I'm not saying that this Hunter McFadden will be able to change your life as drastically as he did Charlie's, but it's worth a try. Although you're thin as can be, you're in pretty good shape. Besides, the great outdoors will, if nothing else, give you a chance to put your life into perspective and breathe some fresh air for a change instead of brown, hazy smog."

Melony hated to admit it, but the idea was rather intriguing. Perhaps roughing it for a few weeks *would* help to put her life into perspective. At the moment, her brain felt as chaotic as the desk before her. She needed some balance in her life. At the office she was a drill sergeant, but outside the office she felt as helpless as Bambi did when he'd lost his mother.

Adjusting one of her thick shoulder pads, Melony cast her friend a cautious glance. "If I were to take this course, which I'm not saying I am, how would I go about contacting this Hunter McFadden?" She picked up the pamphlet, searching for a phone number.

"You have to write to him." Brenda opened the tri-folded paper and pointed to an address inside. "There are no phones for fifty miles, no cell reception. Can't even get there by plane—a helicopter flew Charlie in."

"Alaska?" Melony looked up at the other woman as if she were insane. "Why in the world would anyone want to freeze their ass off in Alaska?" Her mind conjured up

Eskimos, dog sleds, polar bears and mile upon mile of barren, snow-laden nothingness.

Brenda laughed. "Alaska is beautiful this time of year. Only farther up north is there snow year-round. Charlie brought back some pictures of the scenery—lush, green, gorgeous. Try it. You won't be sorry." The ringing of a phone in the distance prompted Brenda to stand up, smooth down her skirt and head for the doorway. "That's probably Charlie." Melony didn't miss the little sigh in her friend's voice. Brenda was acting as if she was in the throes of her first love affair. And Melony found herself feeling jealous. No man had ever turned her on as much as Charlie seemed to affect Brenda. "Think about it, will you, Mel?" she said before disappearing through the doorway.

* * * *

Melony did think about it.

On the drive home at around midnight and the freeway relatively empty, she thought about it.

While she stuck a frozen dinner into her microwave and sat down at the small dinette table in her kitchen five minutes later, picking at the stroganoff noodles that tasted like rubber, she thought about it.

And much later, when she was in bed staring up at the ceiling as sleep refused to cloud her mind and capture her always-on-the-go senses, she thought about it.

At four in the morning she gave up on sleep, got out of bed, slipped on her satin robe and went to the roll-top desk in the living room. Sitting in the padded tapestry chair, she turned on the small lamp sitting there and looked over the pamphlet Brenda had given her once again.

The advertisement was plain, done in stark black and white. It wasn't full of much information and Melony figured that this Hunter McFadden must rely heavily on word-of-mouth if he was to make a business of this. Though she could only imagine how he could make a business of dragging people through mile upon mile of barren wilderness, living like some primitive from eons ago.

Still, she found herself reaching into the top drawer, extracting some stationery, an envelope and a pen then sat down to write a letter to the man.

Ten minutes later she had her request to sign up for the excursion. She included a check for quite a bit more than the already hefty asking price, hoping it would get her in as quickly as possible. She signed Mel Shepherd at the bottom of the crisp, beige paper. Before she had a chance to change her mind, she folded it, slipped it into the matching envelope and stuck a stamp on it.

Melony stared at the sealed letter, knowing that this was the most spontaneous, and certainly the most adventurous, thing she had ever pursued. She only hoped she wasn't making a mistake, or setting herself up for a situation she wouldn't be able to handle.

On her way to the office the following morning, she dropped the letter in the corner mailbox, her heart beating a strange rhythm of anticipation. She put down her eagerness to the thought that this trip just might change her life forever. No, she *knew* it would. Anything as shocking to one's system as trekking the Alaskan wilds for two weeks would have to change a person in some way. Also, she had to admit that she did crave some sort of interruption in her hectic lifestyle.

She drove the rest of the way to work with a small smile on her lips—the first one that had claimed her face in quite some time—oblivious to the traffic packed around her

and the intense heat that shrouded the city even at this early hour.

Chapter Two

Melony got home well past dark, carrying an armful of files.

She thought it was sad that often the only thing she had keeping her company on long nights was work. But then her thoughts would automatically dig up the memory of her disastrous engagement to Jerry Holmstead. That would set her straight fast, and she wouldn't feel quite as bad and not as lonely as she pored over her files late at night with only a cup of herbal tea to keep her warm.

Stopping by the mailboxes just outside of the condo complex where she lived, she unlocked her box and took out the thin stack of mail. Every once in a while she would order something from a mail-order catalog just to add some excitement to her life and to take the monotony out of the junk mail and bills that occupied her box. Maybe she'd send away for something again soon.

Once she was inside, she slipped off her running shoes and turned on her stereo, which perpetually had a relaxation CD in it. She then made herself a pot of chamomile tea and sat on the sofa to sort through her mail.

Placing her reading glasses on her nose, she took a sip of the weak herbal brew, trying to let the sound of crashing waves and crying sea gulls seep into her bones and relax her. It wasn't working.

Picking up the first envelope, she grimaced. Gas bill. Second envelope, same expression. Cable bill. The next was a reminder that her Smithsonian magazine subscription was nearly exhausted. Perhaps she'd someday get around to actually reading the ones she'd already collected over the past two years. The last envelope was what she had been hoping to receive, yet praying she wouldn't, for the past several days: a reply from Hunter McFadden.

Every day since sending it off, she had cursed herself for writing to him in the first place—and enclosing a check, no less. But determination would set in again. Usually when her ulcer acted up, or a migraine claimed her, or sometime during the night after she had counted around five thousand sheep and still couldn't find sleep. She really needed this excursion. Needed what this trip represented: finding herself and becoming a stronger person, emotionally and spiritually.

Of course, he might decline to take her on. What if he was too busy this time of the year? What if she was being too presumptuous by sending his fee in advance, along with the healthy tip she'd hoped would get her in quicker?

Chiding herself for second-guessing when all she had to do was open the envelope that she held in her slightly trembling hands, she did just that. Her eyes scanned the neatly scrawled writing on the page and a rueful smile tipped her lips. He would be expecting her by the beginning of next week. A helicopter would be waiting for her at the Fairbanks airport.

Extreme elation and total trepidation set in, telling her that it was indeed time for a vacation. But hiking around in the Alaskan outback?

What in the hell was she thinking? She hadn't been very stable in the mental department lately—which was the only way to account for her wanting to spend two weeks with some mountain recluse in no man's land.

Why hadn't she chosen Hawaii, or maybe the Caribbean? she wondered, as images of a frozen, barren land flashed through her mind once again. No, those places were too luxurious. Surf, sand and sun. She'd end up sipping piña coladas all day long and looking over the multitude of cases she would no doubt have brought with her. Yes, this course was perfect. Shock treatment. That's exactly what she needed.

She reached for the phone and punched in Brenda's number, wanting to tell her the news, hoping against hope that her friend would talk some sense into her and get her to back out of this ludicrous trip.

On the contrary, Melony found out a few minutes later, Brenda was ecstatic and told her not to worry about a thing while she was gone. She told Melony to enjoy herself and that she hoped she would come back a changed woman: happier, healthier, more self-confident, slightly fatter and a tad less bitchy.

After hanging up with a, "Thanks, with friends like you, who needs enemies?" Melony read Hunter McFadden's letter two more times. It was short, precise and to the point. She would take the ten a.m. flight from LAX and arrive in Fairbanks, Alaska around two. Then a bush pilot, Wally Baldwin, would take her on the fifty-mile helicopter ride—she gave a small hysterical laugh at this knowledge—to McFadden's cabin and they would discuss their hiking trail, etc. Mr. McFadden had also included a list of the bare essentials she would need for the two-week trip.

Melony scanned the list. *Hiker dome tent. Sleeping bag. Back pack—Kelty Mountaineer pack. Plastic tarp. #22 Stuff Bag. Flashlight. Eating utensils. Tightly woven cotton shirts. Wool sweater. Denim jeans. Windbreaker with hood. Hunting boots with rubber soles and leather uppers. Running shoes. Other items will be provided.*

She found herself laughing again. What was left? Although money wasn't an issue, it would cost a small fortune to buy all of this stuff. And, with the money she had already sent him for the course itself, it had better be damned worth it, that's all she could say!

Once again, she wondered if she was getting in over her head.

And once again, she found herself imagining what this mountain man looked like. Her mind had created a picture she felt represented a suitable likeness: an older man with a grizzled beard and mustache. Big as a bear, just as round, just as dense. Probably wasn't real acquainted with a toothbrush, bathtub, or washing machine. But as long as he knew his business and the Alaskan outback, and as long as she got some good out of this, he could be a toothless vagabond for all she cared.

Her blood coursed quickly with anticipation and she cast a glance skyward—hoping she was indeed looking in the right direction—whispering a silent prayer for her father to see her now. She bet he never would have had the guts to go on a two-week survival course such as this. Simon Shepherd was truly a pampered individual, even more so than she was herself. But now she would be trekking the wilds, sleeping beneath the stars instead of in her queen-sized bed on her therapeutic mattress. Only Mother Nature's birds, beasts and wilderness for as far as the eye could see, instead of brown, throat-choking smog and bumper-to-bumper traffic. Fishing, building fires, living off the land...

Her face melted into a grim mask. Maybe she *didn't* have the guts for it.

Chapter Three

Alaska loomed before Melony, seemingly the end of the world. Her heart pounded heavily and her blood coursed quickly through her veins. This was a once in a lifetime experience that most people would never engage in.

But then she thought of the great distance she was away from home—her TV and stereo, microwave meals, whirlpool bath, her nightly ritual of a glass of wine before going to bed—and she felt a small sob of fear catch in her throat. She was a woman who detested any sort of change in her life, who relied on permanence and sameness, who never deviated from the strict, though chaotic path she had her life on.

Looking out the window at her side, she closed her eyes and balked at her own feelings of trepidation. She was a grown woman for goodness sake! A tiger in the courtroom. Yet here she was feeling like a five-year-old orphan, shipped off to some unknown relative's home.

When they landed in Fairbanks, Melony disembarked with only her Kelty Mountaineer pack. It was packed nearly to overflowing and she hadn't even done that. She had paid the young man at the sporting goods store twenty bucks if he could get all of the things specified on Hunter McFadden's list, along with a few necessities of her own, into the tiny blue backpack. To her surprise, he had it packed in under ten minutes.

Melony looked around the bustling airport thinking that she had never felt so forlorn and alone. Every face loomed before her looking intimidating and malevolent. The air felt thick and heavy and she had difficulty dragging enough oxygen into her lungs. She pulled at the neck of her thick turtleneck sweater, perspiration creating a hot, fine sheen over her face and body.

Isn't this the same feeling that afflicted her whenever she was in wide-open spaces filled with just a tad too many people? A full-blown anxiety attack. Needless to say, she avoided amusement parks and any other place that was too widespread and overly-populated for her peace of mind and personal comfort.

She tried to remain calm and take slow, even breaths just as her therapist had recommended.

It wasn't working, though she did feel slightly lightheaded from all of the deep breathing.

Where was Wally Baldwin, the bush pilot she was supposed to meet?

Oh, great. That only brought to mind the fact that she would soon be taking a fifty-mile helicopter ride. Maybe she should have downed a couple of Valium before she left home. That would have guaranteed her a peaceful trip. She quickly nixed the idea, remembering her episode with the dependency-causing drug a few years ago.

Blowing a heavy sigh through her nose, she scoured the terminal, looking for the pilot. Mr. McFadden had indicated that the man would pick her up at the airport and would be easy to spot since he always wore a gray fedora.

Melony wandered around like a lost soul for a while, hefting the pack, which weighed at least thirty pounds, onto her back.

Fifteen minutes later turned up the elusive pilot, perched outside in the landing area next to an army-green helicopter that sported no side doors. And she was supposed to ride

in it?

“Mr. Baldwin?” She lugged her pack along with her, stopping just in front of the older man. Blue eyes glinted beneath eyebrows that sprouted like dandelion fluff as he looked at her in puzzlement. With a white, stubbled beard and mustache, and that felt hat, he indeed looked every bit the veteran bushman—not that she'd ever seen one before, but he seemed to fit what she imagined one would look like.

“None other than,” he furnished around the unlit cigar in his mouth, thick brows bent in a gesture of bewilderment. “Who might you be?” He looked her over quite intensely before his keen eyes latched onto her heavy pack.

“I'm Mel Shepherd. Melony,” she further explained, sticking out a hand in greeting, when he stood before her with that same baffled look.

His weathered face soon broke into a wide grin and a bout of deep-down belly laughs plagued him. “I'll be damned!” He slapped his knee hard, obviously amused.

Melony felt her ire rising and she bristled at his rude display. “May I ask what it is that you find so amusing?” She dropped her hand and lifted her chin, hefting her pack up onto her shoulder, glad that she was wearing her hiking boots, jeans and a blue camp shirt over the nubby turtleneck, and not some slim-fitting feminine attire. She felt a tad bolder and less intimidated when wearing clothes that didn't look too female.

“Sorry, ma'am.” He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of a bronzed, pudgy hand, lifted the hat off his head and ran his fingers through the four strands of white hair that remained on his otherwise bald head. “Hunter isn't used to receiving women.”

Her eyes narrowed and one brow shot up. “Is that a problem? I wasn't aware that it was a men-only excursion.” Great, a chauvinistic mountain man, just what she needed. Hey, she reminded herself, what else was she expecting? That a wilderness recluse had heard of the ERA?

“No,” he said quickly, smothering a grin. “In fact, I bet Hunter will consider this a challenge.” He grinned, displaying a chipped front tooth.

Melony didn't know whether or not she should feel offended. But, she was here and wasn't about to turn back now, even if this Hunter McFadden wasn't keen on having a woman along on his course.

“Your chariot awaits, Melony Shepherd.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand toward the helicopter and bowed before her in gentlemanly fashion.

Melony relaxed immediately and decided that she liked Wally the Bushman, wondering if she would take to Hunter McFadden as easily.

Once inside the helicopter, Wally handed her a headset then put his on. Melony put hers over her head and settled in as best as she could.

When they were off the ground and in the air, she kept her eyes tightly shut as they made their way over the tundra. But soon, at Wally's insistence, she dared to open them and gasped at the sight below them—though she still kept a tight grip on her seat. The view from the air was magnificent. She was positive that no other country possessed more awe-inspiring scenes than what she was witnessing now with her own wide eyes.

A wild land that heaved with mountains and was gashed deeply with valleys lay before them. For the next few minutes, her mind fluctuated from marvel at the grand scenery to complete nausea of riding in the helicopter and the knowledge that she might fall out at any moment.

Her gaze bolted to the older man at her side. “What's Hunter McFadden like?” she

said into the microphone. Melony felt a great need to talk in order to keep her mind off her terror at being so high up in the air and without side doors.

"The best sourdough there is around," he replied loudly in return. "He knows his way around the outback better than anyone I've ever met. You'll be in good hands." He flashed a sincere smile.

A sourdough, Melony repeated the unflattering word to herself. Her imagination supplied her with an image that fit the description: A *sour* face and a *doughy* body.

"There it is." Wally pointed to a great silvery area in the darkness of spruce. All at once, the helicopter slanted a bit, lowered itself to the ground and touched down on a stony area not too far from the lone cabin nestled among the towering trees.

Melony was grateful to exit the machine she deemed a certain death trap, even if the view had been breathtakingly awesome. Now, before her eyes was an endless, expansive country with hardly a soul for miles.

When her boot-clad feet touched ground, she reminded herself once again that she was here because it was something she had to do and that she best get over any feelings of dread but quick.

The temperature surprised her. She had expected bone-stabbing cold and a ghostly silence, but what she felt was warm sun upon her face, making the heavy sweater she wore unnecessary. And what she heard in every direction was serenity. Just what she had been searching for.

Her senses were instantly alive and alert to all around her: the sharp smell of spruce hanging in the air, the rushing noise of a nearby river, the feeling of blood surging through her veins. It was exhilarating, yet frightening at the same time. Never had she felt so alive. And she had been in this place for all of two minutes!

"This is truly heaven," Melony said in awe as her eyes took in the magnificent view around her and she inhaled another lungful of crystalline air.

"Nah." Wally had joined her, carrying her heavy pack. "Heaven's a helluva lot better than this." His voice was so assured that Melony found herself believing him, though she couldn't imagine anything more wondrous than what was spread out before her right at this very moment.

They walked in silence through the spruce and willow brush and there it was. A log cabin of weather-grayed wood sat among the evergreens, with a low, sprawling roof and wide overhanging eaves. Three steps led up to a porch enclosed with a railing. To the side of the house were cords and cords of wood piled high and neatly against it. Obviously, Hunter McFadden wanted to be well-stocked for the winter. Smoke carrying a delicious aroma drifted up and into the cloudless sky, and red and white gingham checked curtains hung at the windows. It had a warm, homey look to it and Melony didn't feel quite as wary as she had during the trip here.

"Hunter!" Wally bellowed as they reached the porch. "Get your lazy bones out here. You got company."

Melony stepped onto the porch, just to Wally's left, placing her directly in front of the door. Her heart began pounding in her ears.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming. Keep your hat on." A muffled voice with a heavy Scottish accent came from behind the rough-hewn wood before her. The door opened inward and a firmly muscled, shirtless man rubbing his hair with a pristine white towel stood before her. And now she knew she truly was in heaven. "Damn pipes are on the fritz and I had to

take a tub bath,” the tall-as-a-tree man grumbled from beneath the towel, stopping just over the threshold when he caught sight of Melony.

He placed the towel around his neck, hands hanging on to both ends. He frowned down at her and then at the much older man to her right. “Is this some kind of a joke?” He talked as if Melony wasn't standing just twelve inches away from him. As if she couldn't reach right out and wipe away the droplet of water sliding down his wide, bare chest, all the way into his belly button. She bit on her bottom lip, tamping down her long-dormant sex drive.

Wally grinned. “No joke, Hunter. This here is Mel Shepherd.” He gave Melony a little shove, putting her even closer to Hunter McFadden, who didn't look anything like the sourdough she had imagined only moments ago. She sucked in a sharp breath at his nearness, her lungs filling with the scent of soap and his warm body.

He looked down at her as if he had just been played for a fool. His hazel eyes suddenly took on a deep-green color and his thick copper brows bent in the middle.

“Mel?” The one word was a bark, making Melony jump at the harsh sound.

“Melony,” she amended, her voice squeaking out as she felt herself slipping into that timid persona of hers. She smiled up at the towering man before her. The temperature suddenly rose a good ten degrees and she could feel sweat trickling between her breasts. Damn, was she nervous! This was no grizzle-bearded, rotund vagabond. On the contrary, a firm layer of smooth, golden flesh over six feet of well-defined muscle covered Mr. Hunter McFadden.

Her eyes darted from his face, down to his every-button-unbuttoned jeans and ricocheted right back to his eyes. A hot blush flew to her cheeks and she suddenly felt dizzy. She would be spending two weeks in no man's land with *him*? It was a thought that was more than a little overwhelming and deeply arousing.

“If I would have known you were a woman, I wouldna' have sent you that letter of acceptance.” He looked down his slightly long nose at her. “You look like you'd up and blow away with the first Chinook that came along.”

Melony felt herself bristle for the second time this day. She cocked one eyebrow at him and decided to treat him as she would any of her frustration-causing employees. Lord knows she had scared enough of them away in the past year. And though she was quite certain that she would never be able to intimidate Hunter McFadden, at least he would know that *she* wasn't intimidated by *him*.

“A male chauvinist, huh? Well, too bad, buddy.” She wanted to poke him in that gloriously bare chest of his with a stiff finger, but knew she'd just be reduced to a blob of quivering jelly if she followed that urge. She opted for planting her fists on her hips and maintaining unflinching eye contact instead. “My check's already been cashed and the helicopter is leaving.” She jabbed an angry thumb in the direction spoken.

“The helicopter is leaving?” Melony repeated and gasped, pivoting on her heels and watched wide-eyed as Wally grinned and gave them both a salute before lifting off into the clear blue sky. Both she and Hunter stood there for a silent moment until the drab green copter was little more than a speck in the heavens.

“Damn you, Wally,” Hunter muttered under his breath. “I'll never forgive you for this.” Melony turned back around, meeting eyes that were simmering with barely-leashed ire.

“I paid good money for this course, McFadden,” she reminded, clinging to her anger.

"You're stuck with me for the next fourteen days. Like it or not."

Several more black oaths slid from his full lips. Melony admonished herself for finding him so attractive, that accent so alluring, that damp mop of unruly hair so appealing, when he had the demeanor of a prickly porcupine.

Well, she thought with great satisfaction, two could play this game. Hunter McFadden had no idea who he was up against. If there was one thing Simon Shepherd taught his daughter, it was to cower to no one.

"Now," she continued, "it's quite obvious that you have something against women, but since there's no way in or out of this place for the time being, we may as well grin and bear it and try to get along."

He gave a vehement shake of his head, sending water droplets flying into her face. "No. I refuse to drag a woman through miles of rugged wilderness." He was adamant as he stood there blocking her entrance. "Women are weak and pampered. You'll only slow me down." He looked her up and down once more, giving a disgusted snort. "It'd probably take you a full day just to hike a level mile."

Melony delicately wiped away a dribble of water that ran down her nose and wondered briefly who in his past had made him think such negative things about women, but banished such musings from her mind. The only thing that mattered was taking this journey, not who or what had happened to this big gorgeous man.

"Mr. McFadden," she began in a firm, even tone. "I came here to take your survival course. I assure you, you won't be dragging me anywhere. I'm in pretty good shape. I'm also a willing participant and fully intend to take everything you and Mother Nature dish out."

He lifted one eyebrow high in the air, as if she had just taunted him. A wicked glimmer sparked in those eyes of his that seemed to change color as the seconds ticked by.

Before she could even begin to decipher what *that look* meant, he gave a giant sigh that drew attention to his smooth chest. The lack of hair there revealed the outline of every muscle across the broad expanse, all the way down to his taut abdomen. A light dusting of that same fiery copper hair began just below his navel and disappeared into the open waistband of his faded jeans. She bit her lip. Hard.

He must have realized where her eyes had trailed, and he quickly turned around for a moment. When he was facing her again, all five buttons were closed and his face was set in an even tenser mask than he had worn before.

"Come in," he said impatiently. "Not much we can do about the situation now." He didn't sound thrilled about spending the next two weeks in her company. Men! Melony fumed. They were all the same.

Hefting her backpack up and off the porch, she entered the rustic cabin. She expected to see crudely chopped logs for furniture, but what her eyes met was a living room with an open beamed ceiling and walls of varnished wood. The furniture consisted of two oak chairs with leather cushions, an inviting overstuffed sofa, a huge writing desk and a large, overflowing bookcase. A stone fireplace stood in the very center of one wall and a bearskin rug sat before it, the only covering on the polished wood floor. Melony was impressed. Rugged, yet warm and homey is how the decor struck her.

"Does it meet with your inspection?" Evidently, he had disappeared for a second to run a comb through his collar-length hair and to put on a shirt. He stood at the other side

of the room donning a green and black plaid button-up that he was tucking into his jeans. She didn't miss the sarcastic tone in his voice. This man definitely had something against women. Good. His acerbic attitude would keep her mind from drifting toward any fantasies woven around him. She was thrown to find a man of his caliber instead of the older hick she had expected to encounter. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man. Too long. And Mr. McFadden's mouth-watering good looks and rock-hard body were causing every sensitive area of her body to stand at attention. At least his dour attitude would keep her feet firmly planted on the ground.

"Truthfully, it's more than I expected. In fact," she looked around once more, "it's quite nice in here." His lips quirked up at the corners ever so slightly, looking extremely satisfied with the fact that she found his home appealing.

*

Hunter grunted in dismay, admonishing himself for the warm feeling that settled in the pit of his stomach as Melony Shepherd looked over his place, his creation, with obvious admiration. What the hell did he care what this woman thought? What any woman thought? He consoled himself with the thought that it was because he had never had a woman in his cabin before.

Then he was seething mad again. Never had he permitted a woman to take his course. And he hated the very real feeling that he'd been had. Just look at her. He took a languorous survey of the woman who stood five feet away from him. Discarding her surprisingly full breasts and luscious rump, he found the rest of her body sorely lacking in the sturdy department. Her cheeks looked hollow and she had dark circles under her eyes. Her smooth-looking skin was as pale as the blonde hair that hung down to her shoulders in a smooth sheet, and her bangs were as wispy as her waist.

She must be a good ten pounds underweight, and if there were any muscles on that slim body, they were undetectable to his roving eyes, no matter how good of shape she proclaimed herself to be in. There was no way she'd be able to trek across the mountains and cross rivers in that condition. If he had ever seen anyone so physically unprepared for a fourteen-day journey through grueling terrain, it was this woman.

Again, he reminded himself of the fact that Wally would not be back for two weeks. And since there were no phone lines or roads leading in or out of his property... Damn! They were stuck with each other.

At that moment, his dormant libido decided to kick in and told him, quite insistently, that he could be stuck with a lot worse than her. But he promptly squelched his sex drive, putting it back into hibernation.

"Are we going to stand around all day and stare at each other?" She asked curtly in the silence that had filled the room.

She had a spiny tongue, this one. Hunter hated women with smart mouths. And who did she think she was kidding with that aggressive attitude of hers? He had a lot of experience seeing beneath what was presented as truth, and this woman was as transparent as the small river outside his front door. If that was true, then what the hell was she doing here?

Suddenly he felt like a fallen eagle. The uncertain look in her eyes that contrasted with the shaky suit of armor she wore got to him. Bad. Her light complexion was delicate, as was the rest of her, contrasting with the boyish clothes she wore. His sigh was inward and private. If they were stuck with each other, he may as well make sure she got

her money's worth.

She needed rest though. And a good hot meal, as her thin wrists attested. Why, that pack must weigh a quarter of her weight.

When he spoke, his voice was low and accepting. "Take a load off, Shepherd." He gestured to one of the chairs. "We'll get an early start in the morning."

She looked just as deflated as Hunter found himself feeling. Obviously, he was as much a surprise to her as she was to him—a fact that had his rusty ego quickly oiled up and running smooth.

"But, aren't we supposed to start out right away?" she asked.

"You've been on a plane for four hours, then a helicopter ride. You probably want to get cleaned up, take off that thick sweater, have a hot meal and a good night's rest." He moved closer to her, taking the heavy pack from her slender shoulder, making sure that he got a feel of that soft skin on her face with the back of his hand as he performed the maneuver.

Hunter was disgusted with himself for following the urge to sneak a feel, and even more disgusted that he had gotten a rush out of it. He'd definitely been secluded for too long.

He hated being on alien ground. He was used to trekking the wilds with middle-aged city marshmallows. Not once had he spent two weeks with a woman out there, especially a woman as appealing as he was quickly finding Melony Shepherd to be. He decided to call a silent truce, right here on the spot. Whatever reason brought her to him, he would fulfill his obligation and in two weeks she would be gone. But hopefully not before he found some way to get her into his sleeping bag.

His brain paused in the middle of that thought. Did he need any more proof that he'd been without a woman for too damned long? He was already fantasizing in great detail about making raw, wild love to a woman he had met less than ten minutes ago!

He set her pack on the floor near one chair. "Truth be said, Shepherd, you look like hell."

Chapter Four

A bitter retort boiled just below the surface of her brain, but she found herself smiling instead. He was only stating the obvious, and evidently attempting to be civil. “Thanks, just what a woman wants to hear.” She drifted over to one of the chairs and poured herself into it. She did feel uncommonly tired. Maybe it was the clean air up here and the fact that she had no cases to go over, no courtrooms to occupy her time for the next few weeks.

“Why don't I make some coffee and you can tell me why you're taking this course.” He started toward the kitchen. Like a magnet, Melony felt herself drawn to him. She rose from the leather seat and followed him into the next room, taking a chair at the heavy wood table. One side of the oblong kitchen was entirely framed with windows, making the room light and airy. She soaked in the view of massive mountains, towering spruce and imagined an assortment of wild animals peeking back at her. The cupboards, cook stove, table and chairs occupied most of the small room.

“Do all of your clients get this treatment?” she asked. He was reaching up into one of the open cupboards, retrieving two mugs, Melony watched in admiration as his back muscles strained against the soft fabric of his shirt.

“Aye. Each and every one.” It sounded like a lie. She simply stared at his back for several seconds, thrown off-kilter at his abrupt turn around in attitude. First, he was blazing mad to find a woman on his porch, now he was being the cordial host? Something inside of her wanted to be suspicious of the sudden change, but she felt an aura of inner serenity emanating from this man—something she had never known in all of her life—that reached out and cradled her with its tranquility. Wouldn't it feel wonderful to let her guard down, just a bit, and enjoy the next two weeks? To share with this man the reasons she decided to take his course? She did have her pride, so decided to tell him only the reasons that suited her.

He turned from the counter and set two filled mugs on the hand-carved tabletop, the ceramic clinking on the glass put there to protect the intricate design. “Care for milk or sugar?”

“Straight is fine.” She accepted a cup and took a sip of the aromatic liquid.

He shrugged, turned a chair backward and straddled it in a classic male gesture. To Melony, the ladder-back seemed to be a physical barrier. For the first time since arriving here, she began to think that maybe she was affecting Hunter McFadden just as badly as he was affecting her.

Who was she kidding? She chided herself for her totally female thoughts once again. He'd been secluded up here for so long that any woman would look good to him right now. She began to feel uncomfortable. What if she had to spend the entire two weeks fighting off his advances? He did have a hungry look in those hazel eyes of his.

She gave brief assessment of him, sitting there so nonchalantly with the blue mug dangling from the fingers of one big hand. Or worse yet, what if she didn't fight off his advances at all and gave in—willingly, gratefully, and oh so passionately?

Oh, God. She felt an insane giggle forming in her throat. She was losing it. Here she was, in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, with a man who was drop-dead gorgeous

and obviously wasn't happy in the least to have her here, and she was fantasizing about him coming on to her? And her accepting!

Maybe she *should* have spent these two weeks in a nice, quiet padded cell. A lobotomy could also do wonders for her highly imaginative brain.

"You look like you'll keel over at any second." He frowned.

"What?" Melony blinked hard. "I'm sorry." She took a giant swallow of coffee, hoping to jar herself back to the present and the real reason why she was here. "Jet lag, I guess."

He gave a slow shake of his head. "I recognize the look of someone who pushes themselves to the limit on a regular basis. Someone whose life is stress-filled morning, noon and night. I wore that same haggard look five years ago while on the police force in Chicago. Which is exactly why I moved out here."

Melony turned over that bit of information. Now she imagined him in a cop uniform, and that was almost as insanely sexy an image as him in his unbuttoned jeans had been.

He didn't elaborate on why he had quit the force and she didn't ask.

"You were going to tell me why you decided to take my course," he prompted when she simply sat there looking at him.

"Oh, yes!" Melony felt like an idiot. What was wrong with her?

She told herself once more that she was here for a purpose. She also reminded herself that she was not looking for an affair, especially with an Alaskan bushman. As if he'd offered!

"Well," she slowly began, clutching the thick ceramic mug between her palms. "I haven't had a vacation in over three years. My partner's husband, Charlie, took your course a month or so ago." Hunter nodded. Melony itched to reach out and smooth back that stray lock of light auburn hair that had just fallen across his forehead, but resisted. "Charlie swore that this course changed his life." When Hunter raised his eyebrows, Melony said, "I didn't believe it either, Mr. McFadden, but I figured it was worth a try."

"First off, call me Hunter," he said in that deep, clear burr of his that hinted at things wild and passionate. "Second, why do you want to have your life changed?"

"I'm a lawyer." If she was looking for some sign of surprise from this man at hearing the news, she was greatly disappointed. He wasn't impressed in the least. Melony went on, "Brenda, my partner, feels I push myself too hard. I bring my work home with me. Have more than several cases going at once. Go in long before the office is open, stay hours after it's closed." A rueful smile twisted her lips. "Needless to say, I'm stressed out, although I don't know how to get off of the treadmill I've found myself on. I've fired twenty-three employees in the past year for one silly thing or another."

That got his attention. He let out a low whistle. "A regular little dictator, eh? The classic type-A personality."

Melony stiffened. How often had she been called those things, as well as several others, all of them unflattering? "I'm afraid so."

"I'm not making any guarantees about changing your life, Shepherd, but you *will* leave here a changed woman, that I promise." Something about the wicked little spark in his eyes caused Melony to shiver to her very core in anticipation. Just as quickly as it appeared, the gleam was erased, replaced by a look of pride and contentment. "The woods have a medicinal effect. They seep into your soul, plant themselves in your memory for all time. It's a feeling that will stay with you always. You can't help but leave

here in better shape than you came.”

“That's all I'm asking.” She gave a small smile that was quickly swallowed by a yawn. “My goodness!” She placed a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. “I didn't realize how tired I was. What time is it?”

Hunter swirled his coffee around in the mug and downed the last swallow before speaking. “Once you leave the lower forty-eight you leave behind clocks and calendars. Here I live by a few simple rules. If I'm hungry, I eat. If I'm tired, I sleep. If I'm bored, I busy myself.” He got up from his chair, taking both of their mugs and placing them in the small stainless steel sink. “Why don't you go take a nap in my bedroom? When you wake up, dinner will be ready and we can go over your gear, then we'll get some sleep and have an early start in the morning.”

Melony suddenly felt very alert as he uttered the words *my bedroom*. “Isn't there a guestroom here?” she asked in a small voice.

Hunter turned around, leaning against the counter, one penny-colored brow arched high. “This isn't the Holiday Inn. This is my home. It's rare when people sleep over, so I haven't found the need to add on any spare rooms.” His tone was more than a little caustic, as if she had just reminded him why he didn't like females to take his course.

“I have an army cot that I can set up for you in the living room, if you'd prefer.”

“That sounds great, but I'll wait until later. Suddenly I'm not very tired.” No, but she was indeed nervous as he stood there staring at her with those ever-changing eyes of his. All at once, his large cabin seemed to shrink to the size of a matchbox around them. Now, she couldn't wait until they started on their trip. Maybe in the great outdoors she wouldn't feel so tense and constricted having him looming over her and changing attitudes every time he turned around.

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged.

* * * *

Dinner was caribou sandwiches on French bread that Hunter had prepared for them, washed down with hot beef broth. There had even been a few slices of tomato on the sandwich. He had told her they'd been grown in the immense garden to the side of his cabin that provided him with an array of vegetables in the summer.

Melony had at first blanched when he'd told her what was between the thick slices of bread, but after her first bite she admitted that she found the meat to be quite delicious. In fact, pushing any modesty aside, she had asked him for seconds.

Now they stood in his bedroom with the contents of her pack spread out on his bed. The frame was made of sturdy fallen logs and was the focus of the room, the only thing occupying it aside from a dresser and a few hooks on the wall where some of his clothing hung.

She had been surprised to find that the cabin had plumbing, rigged up by Hunter himself, though no electricity ran to the lone dwelling. Kerosene lamps provided illumination in the wintertime, he informed her, but being the middle of July, it wouldn't get very dim, as the sun would be staying just above the horizon every day and night for a while.

“Most of this stuff will do.” He had slipped into that aloof armor of his once again. So had she. “We'll get rid of this.”

“Why? That's only perfume.”

"It will attract bears," he said in a flat tone as he tossed aside her deodorant, soap, shampoo, conditioner and toothpaste. "So will all of this stuff."

"But..." Her hands flailed helplessly in the air. "I refuse to spend two weeks out in the middle of nowhere without toiletries. I'll probably *smell* like a bear by the end of that time." She scrunched up her face.

A smile tugged at Hunter's lips. "Don't worry. I have a spare unscented deodorant you can have. As for the rest, your toothpaste will now be Arm and Hammer. Soap and shampoo will be mine, both Earth-safe. Biodegradable. No way I'm going to let you wade into the river and wash with that poison."

"Okay. Although I'm not too thrilled about the prospect of bathing in a river, at least I'll be able to get clean. Is anything else wrong?" She glanced over her clothing and the other items he had written down on his extensive list.

"What are these?" He picked up several rolls of antacids.

"I have an ulcer," she informed.

"And these?" He picked up a bottle of nose spray and eye drops.

"Allergies."

"And this?" He now held in his hand her music player.

"I suffer from insomnia. I listen to relaxation music while in bed to help me fall asleep." Her tone didn't offer any excuse, merely acceptance of her maladies.

He gave a solemn cluck of his tongue. "My, you certainly are a mess. But I'm positive you won't need any of these things while on our hike."

Melony rolled her eyes. "You don't know me very well."

"No, I don't, but I'm willing to learn."

Melony tried not to read too much into that statement.

"I won't last half a day without any of them." She looked at the items he held in his hands as if she'd die if deprived of even one.

"Alright," he gave in. "Take them, and I promise not to say I told you so when they aren't needed."

"You seem awfully sure of yourself." He stood only a foot away from her and she had to look a good ways up just to meet his eyes.

"Aye. I should be. I had three ulcers and chronic angina before moving up here. Now, I'm fit as any twenty-year-old." He tossed the items back down.

Melony's blood rushed. Wasn't that the truth! "How far from twenty are you?" she found herself asking.

"Somewhere in my mid to late thirties. I stopped counting." As Melony tucked the information away he said, "You'll heal."

"I hope you're right. I would love to stop taking this stuff and finally be able to sleep at night."

He gave her a wink. "You'll find me right, have no fear." Melony soon forced her gaze away from his and to the mess they had made on his bed.

"How's the rest of my gear?" she asked.

"Everything else seems in order." He reached over to pluck up a small pile of clothing to test the materials' suitability and a small shower of lacy underthings fell out.

"Oh, my!" Melony squeaked. Quicker than quick, she streaked an arm out and grabbed the items, holding them behind her back. "Guess you're used to briefs and boxers." She laughed weakly, her face catching fire when he unzipped her small makeup

bag and peeked inside. It definitely wasn't makeup that took up residence there. She grabbed that from him too. "Really! Do you have to snoop through everything of mine?" Hunter merely gave a little snort. "As long as that thing is quiet, I don't see why you can't take it along." He chuckled. "Though battery-operated plastic can't compare with the real thing."

She chose to ignore his comment and pretend that she wasn't embarrassed as hell. When he didn't glance away, she nervously went to work at repacking her backpack, shoving her underwear and bras in as quickly as possible, along with the burgundy leather makeup bag. Hunter simply stood there, arms folded across his chest, watching her intently. Her hands shook as she stuffed in her clothes and the remaining articles, but it was soon filled to the brim and she still had a few things left over.

Without casting him so much as a sideways glance she said, "I wasn't able to master packing this thing. I had the young man at the sporting goods store do it for me." She gave another small laugh as she tried to force the rest of her things inside. "Thankfully, my underwear didn't fall out all over the place while I was there."

He grabbed the blue pack from her. "Here, I'll do it." He dumped all of her belongings back onto the dark green spread, her lacy bras and underwear looking as though they were arranged strategically in a display case. Melony watched on as he folded each and every item of clothing and lacy bits of nothing and had her bag packed—tent, clothes, sleeping bag and all—in under five minutes. When he finished she noticed that his brow was damp and he was breathing a bit heavy.

"I'm impressed." She was talking about his packing skills, but her tone hinted at something else. Had that been her voice that came out with the seductive lilt?

"I've had a lot of practice." He was looking right at her, his tone suddenly low.

"I guess you have." Her gaze melted onto his. "How long have you been doing this sort of thing?" Somehow, she had the strange feeling that they weren't talking about his role in leading wilderness excursions or packing backpacks.

"Years."

"Is this something you enjoy?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise. I've never backed away from a challenge yet." His lips lifted into a confident half-smile.

"Thank you for taking me on, Hunter. This is really something I need to do. Something I find myself wanting very badly." Melony knew she shouldn't be enjoying this verbal sparring of innuendoes, but she couldn't help it. She found the touch of desire shining brightly in his eyes greatly arousing.

"It will be my pleasure to *take you on*, Shepherd."

Melony simply stared at him, mute.

Hunter broke the weighted atmosphere. "Let me set that cot up for you." He turned to leave, but Melony's words halted him in the doorway.

"You wouldn't by any chance have a shower in this place, would you?"

He inhaled a long breath. "The pipes that lead to the shower aren't working. All I have is a metal bathtub that has to be filled manually and the water heated over the stove."

"I can tell it's a big job. I'm not about to put you out." She grimaced. "Thanks anyway. I'll wait and take a dip in the river."

After only a moment's hesitation he said, "Give me a half hour and I'll have it ready

for you.”

“Please, don't go to any trouble on my account.” She was still on the other side of the room.

“No trouble. I'm used to such instances of inconvenience. The pipes have a habit of going out at the worst times.” With that, he left.

* * * *

An hour later Melony was up to her neck in hot, heavenly water. The metal bathtub stood in the living room in front of the fireplace, hidden by a divider that folded accordion-style and was hand-carved, just as the kitchen table was. Hunter was obviously a gifted man when it came to wielding a carving knife.

Her eyes were closed in bliss and she let the warmth of the water seep into her pores. When was the last time she had stopped herself long enough to take a relaxing bath? Hell, when was the last time she had relaxed, period? And though she had only been here for a few hours, she could already feel the beneficial effects of the slower pace and no work awaiting her.

She also felt the effect that Hunter McFadden was having on her. Sensations that aroused a dormant part of her, a part she thought best left alone. Hunter was too ... too... She couldn't quite put words to the way he made her feel, though his name said it all: Hunter. Indeed, she felt like prey when around him.

“You still alive?” She heard him call from the bedroom. He had made himself scarce after filling the tub, leaving her to her privacy while he went to correct the pipe problem. He really was a kind man once you dug beneath that tough exterior of his, though his hospitality didn't seem to last for more than a few minutes at a time.

“Almost done,” she informed, rinsing the last of the soap away. Hunter's soap. Hunter's shampoo. Hunter's towel, washcloth and tub.

Oh, great. Here she was getting gaga over the man again. She repeated the litany in her head that this situation was temporary—especially the man—and she had no intention of acting upon the attraction she felt toward him.

An attraction that was mutual, she reminded herself, recalling the way his eyes had taken great interest in surveying her body on more than one occasion.

Melony crawled out of the huge tub, wrapping one towel around her body and one around her head turban-style. “What do you want me to do with the water?” she asked, walking from behind the partition, jumping in surprise when she found him less than two feet away. Had he seen her getting out of the tub? Somehow, the thought sent a wave of warmth between her thighs.

“Just leave it. I have to take a bath myself.”

Melony frowned, readjusting the towel wrapped under her arms. Hadn't he just had a bath moments before she arrived? She shrugged it off. “Okay.” Holding the towel a little tighter, she sidled past him, thinking the rooms were shrinking once again, and headed toward the bedroom where her clean clothes were. “Thanks again for taking the trouble of filling the tub for me.”

“No problem.” She heard the rustle of material and knew that he was removing his shirt. “Hope you enjoyed it. It'll be the last hot bath you'll have in quite awhile, that's why I'm taking advantage of it now. This morning the shower went off before I had a chance to rinse.”

“Oh.” Melony looked over her shoulder and saw him unbuttoning his jeans, head bent, concentrating on his task. “It had been years since I’d indulged in a languorous bath instead of a quick shower.” Her eyes were riveted. One. Two. Three. He lifted his head and his eyes met hers, unrelenting, that sexy half smile sculpting his soft lips. Four. Five. Melony gasped as she remembered this afternoon when his jeans had been similarly unbuttoned and had witnessed the fact that he’d sported no underwear at the time. The recollection caused her to turn and hurry into the bedroom, the sound of Hunter’s low chuckle chasing after her.

Chapter Five

Breakfast was sourdough pancakes and canned ham. Melony had never eaten so much as she had since she arrived here. And she had never slept so well, even on that small, uncomfortable army cot. Her state of relaxation was short-lived though, as Hunter turned from the sink—he refused her help with the dishes—and she saw his bare chest beneath the unbuttoned shirt. Her blood sped into high-gear and she wondered, not for the first time since ambling in here this morning, if he was taunting her on purpose.

She clutched the coffee mug between her hands, eyes plastered on that smooth upper body of his. She had always thought that chest hair made a man more masculine, but Hunter's hairless chest was the sexiest, most virile thing at which she had ever had the pleasure of gawking. It was also most disconcerting knowing that she would be in his company for so many days ... and nights.

Somehow, she managed to tear her gaze away as he took a seat at the table.

Melony searched her lust-clouded mind for something to say. Hunter seemed content to simply sit and enjoy the silence, though it left her feeling nervous and on edge. “So,” she leaned back in her chair, attempting to appear as casual as possible, “what part of Scotland are you from?”

“You recognize the accent?” He talked over the top of his cup, steam swirling up and around his head like the presence of a small phantom.

“It isn't hard to place. Your use of certain words, and the way R's roll off of your tongue...” she wanted to say, *like nectar off a flower*, but didn't. How cheesy was that?

“I was born in Lochinver, Scotland, thirty-seven years ago. I came to America when I was nineteen. Left behind a mother and father and one older brother.”

Melony leaned forward, one elbow planted on the table, chin resting on her fist. This man fascinated her. She paused at the thought. When was the last time she had been fascinated by *anything*, yet alone *anyone*?

She found herself wanting to know more. “What made you decide to come to America?”

“I guess it was the adventurer in me. I had my sights set on a life of excitement. Living in Scotland where the sun rarely peaked from behind the fog and drizzle wasn't what I had in mind for the rest of my days on earth. My parents were plenty mad that I left.” He gave a small laugh at the recollection. “They wanted me to take up with a sturdy local girl and give them a dozen grandchildren, but my brother Jamie convinced me to follow my dreams.”

“And here you are,” Melony said with a little sigh in her voice.

“Well, it wasn't quite as simple as all that. I had my share of troubles along the way, good times and bad, laughter and heartache, but I feel I've finally found what I was searching for.” He sounded satisfied. Melony envied him.

“Hmm,” she murmured, her mind focused on what Hunter must have been like as a child and then a young man, and who in his past had caused him heartache. At that moment he stretched, forcing her eyes to be pulled back to the here and now and that silken torso of his. Her eyes were riveted to his male nipples that her teeth ached to nip at. She sat up straight and stiff, her stomach twisting every which way, and averted her eyes

to her coffee.

“Now that we've discussed me, are you ready to go?” he asked, not attempting to delve into her life, coffee mug dangling from his large hands.

“As ready as I'll ever be.” She made eye contact, forcing her own orbs to keep from drifting southward. She also amazed herself by keeping the bright smile on her face for more than a couple of jerky heartbeats. She was so nervous all of the sudden. Her stomach pitched and she thought she'd lose her breakfast at any second.

“I guess that's all I can ask, isn't it?” His tone made her realize that, though they were getting along well within the walls of his cabin, he was less than excited about the prospect of their traveling together.

Melony wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea of tramping the wilderness with this man either, but she had to admit that the notion was rather stimulating to her senses—and she knew that kind of thinking would only get her into trouble.

She gave a silent lecture to herself at her fluctuating feelings, watching on in a sort of eager anxiety as Hunter rose to pour himself another cup of coffee.

After they sat there in unnerving silence for another five minutes while he finished up the third cup, she couldn't stand the sight of his naked upper body any longer. Her sex drive was in overdrive and if he didn't cover up soon, she'd...

Taking a giant breath, knowing she was going to make a complete idiot out of herself, she averted her gaze for the seventeenth time in as many minutes and asked, “I know this is your house and your show, but would you mind buttoning your shirt? It's not everyday that I sit across from a half-naked man.”

Hunter's eyes were on her hot face. A wide grin of complete and utter male pride spread across his lips. “No problem at all, Shepherd.” His voice slid out smoother than the maple syrup they had just eaten with their pancakes.

When Melony's eyes drifted back to him, he had just finished with the last button. She allowed herself the privilege of a relieved breath, not caring what Hunter thought of her request.

* * * *

Half an hour later, they were finally on their way. Hunter closed the heavy wood door behind them, Melony noticing that there was no lock on it. “Don't you feel uneasy about leaving your home unlocked?”

He looked at her. “Who would rob the place out here? We're so many miles away from civilization, over rugged terrain. All around us there are stretches of untracked valleys and unnamed rivers. Nothing but trees, streams and trout. And the bears outnumber the people. Besides, my home doesn't contain anything that would be considered priceless. Each and every item in there is easily replaceable.” He gave a small shrug that lifted the huge pack on his back a fraction higher. Melony could tell that he carried most of the load—her sleeping bag included—although he certainly had the shoulders for it. She had insisted on carrying all of her own things, but he'd said he had plenty of room and she wasn't about to question his gallant offer.

“What about that beautifully carved table and room divider?” She adjusted her own pack to a more comfortable position though found it impossible. Now she understood why Hunter was adamant about taking along only the bare necessities. And she would have this thing stapled to her back for two weeks?

“Cool it, Shepherd. Trust me, there's nobody around for miles and miles. It's only you and me out here.”

Melony tried to ignore the funny way her heart slipped around in her chest at that knowledge. Was it trepidation, knowing that she would be alone with this big, rugged man? Or was it sheer excitement? She knew the answer flitting around in her mind, but didn't like it, so kicked it away.

She watched as Hunter fiddled with the big hunting knife that was encased in a leather holder and strapped to his right thigh. He had said that it came in handy; cleaning fish, clearing otherwise overgrown passages, and as protection against a bear if the need arose. Melony hadn't liked the sound of that—encountering bears—and vowed to stay as close to this man as possible, but not too close.

“Let's get going,” he prompted as she simply stood there staring at his thigh that was as big around as any tree trunk she'd seen.

Melony forced her second bright smile of the day and coerced her eyes into meeting his. “Which way?”

“Follow me.” He started tramping off to the west, telling her that over the next thirteen days they would make a wide circle, ending back at the cabin on the last day.

Setting her legs into motion behind him, Melony cast a last doleful glance at the cabin—the only shred of civilization left out here—before focusing on the man in front of her.

A mile later, deep in thought as Hunter wasn't much of a talker along the trail, Melony's attention was captured as she watched an eagle turn slowly and glide away across a dark stand of spruce that marched unevenly up the slopes to her left. His piercing cry came back on the wind and she felt a sudden emptiness in her soul she had always refused to examine. Yet here it was, aching, growing with each passing step she took. And she had the distinct feeling that this was only the beginning of the rest of her life.

“Get a move on, Shepherd!” Hunter yelled from some five yards away. “We have to make camp just over that ridge, and we haven't even started.”

With a resigned sigh, Melony picked up her pace once again, plodding over the uneven ground, grateful that she had followed Hunter's advice in the letter and had bought her hiking boots one size too big to allow for swelling. She had a feeling that by the end of the day, her feet, along with other parts of her, would indeed be swollen and painful.

* * * *

They traveled that day without much stress or difficulty as most of the terrain was on relatively even ground. Just when Melony started feeling that this hiking business was a piece of cake, she remembered his statement earlier in the morning that the first day would be smooth traveling since the mountainous region was that far away. Her spirits to plummeted, wondering what was in store for them come tomorrow.

They kept going until the evening deepened into a dusky blue haze. Hunter informed her that this was as dark as it would get, a kind of twilight.

For the most part Melony enjoyed every turn and passing mile and was wide awake to the beauty that surrounded them on all sides. Her eyes devoured the magnificence of this place. From time to time, a fish darted above the rippling waves of the sparkling river they plodded alongside. She listened to the birds singing nearby in the woods, absorbing

Hunter's deep voice as he hummed a tune unfamiliar to her. She wished he would initiate some sort of conversation, but he mostly kept to himself; a silent, copper-headed guide.

They stopped to rest every couple of miles and Melony knew that it was purely for her benefit. When she would otherwise resist being treated like such a weakling, a new ache, pain or twinge in her back or shoulders would remind her that she should take Hunter's quiet courtesy with equally quiet gratitude.

Hours later, with her muscles aching from the unexpected work of hauling a pack and hiking for umpteen miles, Hunter said that they were ready to make camp. They hadn't traveled the required quota of miles for the day, but both were hungry, and she was dead tired—and only once had she complained. Pretty good for her, she mused.

Trying not to appear too eager about stopping, Melony laid her pack down next to Hunter's in the small woodland clearing he had chosen for their campsite.

"How far are we from the original destination you'd had planned?" she asked, rubbing a throbbing shoulder through the Windbreaker she had slipped on a while ago as it had gotten quite cold compared to the previous heat of the day.

"About five miles." His tone was flat and void of any emotion whatsoever.

"Wow. Five miles," she dully repeated, treating her second shoulder to the same deep rubs as the first, watching as he began to ready the ground for what she supposed would be a campfire. "Well, let's hope that we make up for it tomorrow."

"Aye. You'll toughen up over time." He had cleared a small area free of leaves, twigs and other natural debris, leaving behind a smooth space of dirt then gathered stones, arranging them in a circle, deep in concentration.

Melony knew she had two alternatives when it came to this hot and cold man. She could either be just as sour-faced as he was, or just let his attitude roll off her. While back in the city she would have opted for the first idea, but being out here in the middle of nowhere with a giant who had a huge knife strapped to his thigh had her thinking again. She pasted on a cheery mien, fully intending to do all she could to help out while on their trek. She had something to prove. To herself. To her father. And now, to this man as well, although she had no idea why the thought of showing him how tough she really was meant anything to her at all.

She started toward the edge of the river that flowed a few yards away, her sights set on a nice flat boulder around twelve inches across, worn smooth by years of persistent water cascading over it, but when she picked it up she realized that, though Hunter carried the stones with no problem, they were far heavier than they appeared. She struggled with the great gray object for a minute, then a long arm clothed in plaid reached down and one huge hand grabbed hold of the equally huge rock, lifting it from her grasp like it was nothing more than a pebble.

Melony jerked upright, her backside meeting a wall of taut flesh and bone and muscle. She heard Hunter take in a great gulp of air, just as she had.

"I was just trying to help." She didn't have to look up at him to see the intense scowl that she knew he wore. His hot breath fanning the back of her neck was enough to scorch her skin and melt her insides.

He gave a little grunt, turned away, and placed the last rock down that completed the circle. Melony pursed her lips at his dark behavior, wishing she could take up one of those big, hard rocks and hurl it at his equally hard head. "Look, I want to help you. I didn't come out here to be babied or treated as if I didn't exist."

He let out a breath, obviously giving in to his predicament. Dragging one hand through his awesome head of hair, he said, "All right. If you want to help, why don't you go find some firewood? Small branches an' twigs for kindling. Be sure they're dry. Green wood only makes a whole lot of smoke, but no fire. I'll get things set up here."

"Okay. No green wood." Would she recognize green wood from dry?

Grateful to have something to do aside from stand around and watch his firm and delicious ass encased in those snug-fitting jeans as she had done for the better part of the day, Melony set out to find *small branches an' twigs*.

When she came back, Hunter was seated on a large stone that he had pulled over, sharpening his knife, his tent already pitched. Her pack was still tightly bundled. So much for gentlemanly courtesy, she thought, walking over to the bare circle of earth and stones, and dumped her cache down next to it.

Promptly she chided herself for hoping that he would have put up her tent for her. She was here to rough it, not to have Hunter be her caretaker. And hadn't she just told him that very thing?

"Are these okay?" she asked, taking great interest in Hunter's chore as he swept the edge of the blade across the hone from hilt to point. Turning the knife over, he repeated the procedure. His movements were rhythmical, almost hypnotizing, the muscles beneath his flannel shirt rippling and flexing. She found the act quite erotic and could easily imagine him using the same technique on her: Sliding his hands over her slick body from head to toe and repeating the exquisite sensation in reverse order. *Lord, I really need to get laid*. The thought startled her since she hadn't fantasized about sex with a man in a very long time. Too long, it seemed. Look at all the lustful scenarios her mind was conjuring up!

When he finished, he slipped the knife back in its case, set the hone aside and looked at her booty of twigs and branches. "Fine." He rose to his feet, came over to where she stood and sorted through the bits of wood. Squatting down, he threw out the only green piece she had acquired, arranged the rest in a teepee-like fashion, placing the smaller pieces below.

"A woodsman is known by the time it takes him to build his fires with whatever wilderness material there may be at hand. Lucky for us we're smack dab in the middle of a forest." He actually tilted his head back and flashed a grin as he withdrew a wooden match from his back pocket, scraped it across his denim-covered thigh and watched as it bloomed into a fiery blossom.

Less than a minute later, they had a warm, blazing fire before them.

"I'd have been more impressed if you would have rubbed two sticks together," she drawled, reaching her hands out to absorb some of the heat the fire offered. It had grown quite chilly, and Hunter's attitude had her insides doing crazy things that left her feeling cold and somewhat abandoned one minute and like an inferno the next.

He gave a little laugh. "We'd probably be here all night long if I'd resorted to rubbing sticks together. Matches are quicker and always reliable."

Melony smiled at him, grateful that the wall of silent hostility he had erected between them was gone for now, though she still sensed an air of edginess emanating from him.

She turned and walked over to her pack, but remembered that her sleeping bag was in Hunter's pack, not hers. "Mind if I take my sleeping bag out?" He was already busy

with what she prayed was dinner as her stomach let out a growl, reminding her that they had only eaten trail mix and—yuck—Spam for lunch. Melony wondered again how Hunter kept that huge body of his nourished with the measly tidbits they ate along the hike.

“Go ahead.” He lifted his eyes. “Have you ever put one of these up before?” He inclined his head to his dome-shaped bedroom that was an exact replica of hers, though his was a four-man and hers a two-man.

Melony pursed her lips, slugging her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “No.” Seeing the grim set of his mouth, she quickly went on, “But I suppose it isn't all that hard.” She hurriedly turned away from him, dug into his pack that was at least twice the size of hers and extracted the nylon blue bundle. Unzipping her own pack, she withdrew her tent. After opening the carrying case, she set the tent on the ground about ten feet from his and placed her fists on her hips. She had no idea where to begin.

Casting him a glance that she hoped didn't appear too helpless-looking, she said, “Uh, Hunter?”

Before she could voice her question, he heaved a sigh. “Here I come.” Melony heard his hiking boots thumping on the packed earth as he approached closer then crouched down next to her pack.

“Just show me once how this all works. I'm a fast learner.”

When he muttered a few choice expletives, Melony felt her own ire rising. She paid good money for this course and refused to be treated like a bothersome imbecile. “Listen, buddy.” She turned, noticing that he had half the contents of her pack dumped out all over the ground for the second time this day. What was he looking for? “I don't know what your problem is, but I'm not exactly thrilled to be here with you either. I know I'm not what you're used to, nor what you were expecting, but that gives you no right to treat me like a burden. I'd be more than happy to pull my own weight if I just knew what to do. Are all of your clients Rambo material?”

“No.” He stood to his full height, looking down at her, legs splayed, arms folded over his chest in that cool, macho stance of his, tent spikes held in his right hand. So that's why he had been digging around.

“Are you this rude to every person you take along on this excursion?” If so, it was amazing that anyone recommended him at all.

“Truthfully, no.”

“Oh, great!” She lifted her arms then let her hands slap against the sides of her thighs. “So you saved this endearing mien just for me? Why don't I feel flattered?” Impatiently she brushed back a few stray locks of hair from her face that had long ago fallen out of the braid she had put it in before they'd set out.

“Look, Shepherd,” he reached out an arm, prodding her right between the breasts with a big, square finger, “don't think that I was exactly ecstatic to open my door and find you standing there; all fragile-looking, and thin as a rail. Even so, you get me goddamned hot just by breathing around me. You've got a face and ass that sends my heart into warp speed. And may I say that seeing you in that clinging sweatshirt you're wearing now has the same effect on me as I did on you this morning when you asked me to button up my shirt.”

He quickly added, “I'm used to balding, slightly overweight, middle-aged men who have had some camping experience in their past and want to rough it for a few weeks, not

underweight women who have psychological problems and think that my survival course is going to give them a backbone and a sense of purpose in life.” If he thought he had crushed her fragile spirits, he was wrong.

That did it. And Melony didn't give a flying damn if he did have a huge knife on him. “Oh, yeah?” She poked him back in the chest, ignoring the flames that sizzled up her arm and burned through her body, coming to rest a few inches below her navel. “Well I didn't expect to find you on the other side of that door, either. I was expecting some hairy woodsman who had a rotund waist and a few missing teeth, a scraggly beard and red long johns. And what do I get?” She held a hand out in dismay. “An auburn-haired giant who could make the cover of a Chippendale’s calendar and who has the attitude of a grizzly awakened during his hibernation period!”

They stood there like that, toe to toe, face to face. Silent. Eyes narrowed. Breathing ragged. All at once, Hunter let out a low growl, dropped the tent spikes to the ground, grabbed her by the arms, and hauled her against him. Melony's entire body melted like an ice cube being hurled at the sun. Against all will and logic, it felt good being held so tightly against him. Visions of submitting to this harsh wild man swam languorous laps through her veins.

His voice slid out low and soft as he whispered, “Let's say we call it a truce, okay?” He inclined his head, bringing his lips against hers with the lightest of touches. His breath was warm and moist upon her suddenly dry lips.

“I'm not looking for an affair, Hunter,” she breathed the words against soft lips, her hands clutching at his shirt, wishing she could tear the aggravating shield of cloth away and lay her greedy hands all over him.

“Neither am I.” His mouth was still unbearably close and she thought she'd die if he didn't kiss her.

“I'm too dependent. I get crazy with men. I'm clingy. Possessive. Jealous. You don't want me.” She closed her eyes, feeling as if she was under a spell. When had she ever felt like losing control as she did now?

“Bullshit. And you're a liar. Besides, nobody said I *did* want you. What makes you think such an asinine thing as that?” He was rubbing his lips against hers, creating the sweetest, most erotic friction she'd ever had the pleasure to experience. “I don't want a woman. Don't need a woman.”

Melony opened her eyes, seeing that his were heavy with desire before closing completely, gold-red lashes fanning his cheeks. “Then why are you trying to kiss me?” Her bones felt like blades of dry grass bending in the wind, threatening to snap at any second.

“Is that what I'm doing?” One hand wandered down her arm and around to caress her spine. It was then that she noticed his hand had burrowed under her jacket and sweat shirt as she could feel the heat from his rough palm on her waist.

“I—I think so.” Her hands had started roaming the wide span of his chest, fiddling with the buttons of his flannel shirt, aching for just a feel of his satin skin.

“Maybe I should stop then.” Instead, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her even closer, trapping her hands between them.

Melony let out a tiny gasp. “Maybe you should.” Her voice was as thin as the wispy clouds that had laced the heavens all day long.

Hunter's eyes drifted open only a fraction of an inch. His lips nibbled at hers. “Did I

stop?”

When was the last time she'd ever felt this hot and aroused? This alive and passionate? “No, I don't think so.”

“Damn,” he mumbled against her slightly open mouth. “Maybe you should help me. My willpower isn't all that strong right now. Give me a little push.”

She nodded slightly. Lifting her arms that felt as if they were nothing more than fifty-pound sand bags, she slid her palms beneath his shirt as she found that most of the buttons had somehow worked themselves loose. Fingers splayed over rippling muscle and silky smooth flesh, absorbing the heavy beat of his heart that thudded beneath her fingertips. “Did I push you?” she asked, caught up in this thing as much as he was.

“No, I don't think so.”

“Damn.” In the next breath, his lips crushed hers with a wet, openmouthed kiss that tasted wilder than the land around them. Melony leaned into him, longing to give herself up to the strength he offered, knowing she had to keep her head about this thing. She had already forced one man out of her life; she didn't want to add a second to that list. Still, she allowed herself to enjoy his thorough kiss, realizing that she had never experienced anything so untamed in her entire life.

His tongue was primitive and did wicked things to the inside of her mouth that had her mind conjuring up more lustful images than a mere kiss. His hands were wandering entities, traveling over the hills and valleys of her body with great familiarity. As if he knew her as well as he knew the Alaskan outback.

When his large palms dipped down to cup her bottom, pressing her closer to the hardness in the front of his jeans, Melony lifted her mouth from his and at last found the strength to push him away. “This is getting out of hand,” she said in a voice that was as unsure as she herself felt at the moment.

“You don't hear me complaining, do you?” His eyes were a smoky olive-green color, and his lids were heavy with desire. “Let's not stop now.” He rubbed his pelvis against her stomach, bringing a gasp and a shudder from her. “That's it,” he crooned. “We could spend a nice long night in my sleeping bag doing a lot more than kissing.”

“No,” she said more firmly this time. “Take my word for it, you don't want me.” Every syllable was clearly enunciated as if his head was a little too thick to comprehend their meaning.

He slid his body up and down the front of hers so that she could get the full effect of his aroused state. “You're not convincing me of that fact.”

With a strength that surprised them both, she shoved him hard and ducked out of his heavy embrace. His face contorted into a dark scowl. “I know you're mad, but you'll thank me for not letting that go any further than it did. One kiss and I can go nutso on you.” She waved her hands nervously in the air. “Didn't you just hear what I told you? I get possessive, jealous...”

“Clingy,” he finished for her then said, “I'll back off for now, though none of those things sound overtly repulsive to me. In fact, they sound pretty damn cozy.”

“Don't you understand? I'm a doormat.”

“Great, I'm controlling.”

He made a grab for her but stopped when she started shaking her head in refusal. “Trust me, it's best if we keep this thing on a platonic basis only. You'll be grateful when I'm out of your hair. You've known me less than two days and we've already managed to

argue on several occasions and then we were lip-locked just a minute ago. I hate to admit it, but I'm not a very stable person."

When Hunter looked at her with questions in his dark eyes, she elaborated. "Okay," she threw up her hands in surrender. "I wasn't going to tell you this, but I'm slightly schizophrenic." When he let out a short laugh, she frowned. "You think I'm lying? Why else would a woman in my condition take a trip like this?" He shrugged. "I'm a wimp, Hunter. A weakling through and through. When I'm in my office I'm a bulldozer, a dictator, a domineering, overbearing bitch."

He lifted one brow in surprise. "You?"

She nodded. "Me. I've lost twenty three employees in the past year alone," she reminded him. "I'm one extreme or the other. A dynamo in the courtroom, but once I'm out in the real world I run for cover. I'm afraid of everything. Of being mugged, of being raped, of falling in love, of ending up an old maid, of being in crowded places, of being alone. I've been seeing a therapist for two years now. I was hooked on Valium for nine months a couple years back because I couldn't relax enough just to make it through a normal day and night. Compulsive. Dependent. Nutso." Her eyes were wide and her cheeks were flushed.

"Maybe you're just too damned hard on yourself. Did you ever think of that?"

She had no idea what to say.

"Oh, hell," Hunter grumbled, then stalked away and went to stand at the side of the stream that had grown into a river as they walked along its banks during their long hike.

Melony watched in fascination as he stripped off his shirt, untied his boots and slipped those off. His socks were next to go before he unbuttoned and discarded his jeans and waded into what she was sure was frigid water.

At that moment, Melony felt the chill from the water seeping into her soul. She had just given up two glorious weeks in the arms of hunky Hunter McFadden? If that didn't prove that she was a mental case, nothing would. But she'd rather have him know the truth and stop now before things got any more intimate between them. She knew herself too well. No, it was better this way.

Only when she realized that she was still staring at Hunter as he waded around the waist-deep water, hoping to catch a glimpse of him when he walked back out gloriously naked, did she force herself to look away and concentrate on attempting to get her tent set up.

Chapter Six

“Shepherd! Get your lazy ass up. Are you planning on sleeping the day away?”

“I’m awake,” she mumbled.

“Breakfast is in five minutes,” he barked through her firmly zipped tent.

“I’ll be right out.” Her tone was just as bitchy as his, though still husky from sleep. It traveled all along Hunter’s nerve endings like a nomad trying to find a place to rest. He smiled when the feeling found its destination: his dick.

He walked back over to the campfire and the task of making coffee. Last night he’d had his first bout of insomnia in over five years. And it was all because of the woman trudging toward him with sleep still in her eyes, dressed in a pair of ass-hugging jeans and a khaki camp shirt. She also wore a phony air of aloofness, he noted. Oh yes, he was affecting her just as badly as she was him. Though he still wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

Last night, as he lay awake wondering if she felt as hot and bothered by their kiss as he had, wondering if she was using that pink vibrator he’d seen in her case yesterday and rubbing it between her silky thighs, he came to a few logical conclusions. Something had definitely happened in Melony Shepherd’s past that had her thinking she was a walking psycho. The woman was determined to avoid any sort of intimacy with him. Perhaps any other man would take the not so subtle hint and back off. Not him. He didn’t like taking no for an answer. Especially from a woman he found himself desiring very much. He’d had a taste of the fiery passion in her, but she’d promptly squelched the storm they’d created. He didn’t like not getting his own way. He was an ex-cop who’d had the toughest perps caving and giving him what he wanted. He knew the right buttons to press and when.

Melony was used to pushing herself to the limit and beyond. She knew about that, was comfortable with it. So he would push her each and every step of the way. Wearing her out would build her up. Mentally. Physically. She was that kind of woman. And hopefully, in building her up on the one hand, he would wear her down on the other and she’d renege on that asinine vow of *hands off* between them.

Something about Melony Shepherd touched him deep inside. As profoundly as the Alaskan outback had touched him half a decade ago, and still did to this day. Whether it was simply because he knew he couldn’t have her or something more, one thing was certain—before she left, he would know what it was like to be buried deep inside of her. The sooner the better.

Hell, maybe once he’d had her, he’d get her out of his system. It had been a while since he’d had sex. Perhaps his hormones were just overreacting. As desperate as he was, he probably would have jumped on Wally if he’d been wearing a skirt the last time he saw him. The thought made him cringe and he knew it was a lie.

*

Melony walked over to Hunter, not eager for another day of hiking and wishing she were still snug in her tent.

“Bout time, Shepherd. Your coffee’s getting cold.” He jerked his head in the direction of her tin mug perched before a smooth, flat boulder such as the one he was

sitting on. The very one she had sat on while they had eaten dinner in complete silence the night before. However, instead of the five feet of safe-space she had put between them last night, she noticed that her rock was now situated less than a foot from his.

Marshaling her strength to ward off his silent, yet deadly, sex appeal, she took a deep breath of crisp early morning air and took the seat, grabbing the warm mug of coffee.

Last night, after Hunter had taken his impromptu swim in the river, he had calmed down somewhat—as had she—and instructed her on the construction of her tent. It wasn't as hard as she had thought, and she was certain she could manage to set it up herself this evening.

Melony slid a sideways glance at him under her lashes. Goddamn, he was sexier today than yesterday, if that was possible. Memories of his mouth on hers came rushing back with all the force of a flash flood. She bit her bottom lip, noting that it felt bruised from the devastating kiss she had shared with him last night. Never had she indulged in anything so sinfully erotic. She could only imagine what his lovemaking would be like. And she'd done plenty of imagining all night long. Which is exactly why she had warned him about her mental state. She had to scare him off somehow! It was for her good as well as his. She'd been down the road of heartache and disappointment before. Once more, she vowed to herself that another steamy episode such as the one last night would never happen again. Maybe.

Look how she had treated Jerry, and he had been about as exciting as a saturated cotton ball. Hunter, on the other hand, even put the rugged wilderness around them to shame. Imagine how crazy she'd get over him. Then again, maybe she had treated Jerry like crap *because* he was so damned boring.

Melony shook the sobering thought away. She was here to strengthen her character, to put into perspective some of her not-so-happy childhood and adulthood, and to find some peace. But she was *not* here to have an affair with Hunter McFadden. Maybe.

As if the bitter brew in her mug contained a magic elixir that would make sense of her jumbled insides, she inhaled the aroma and took a large swallow. "Mmm." She closed her eyes for a moment in bliss. "I don't think I've ever had a more wonderful cup of coffee."

"It's the country. Everything tastes better out here." He was bent over a skillet, removing a pancake and adding it to a hearty stack to his right. At least they didn't have to eat trail mix for breakfast. Melony looked at the pancakes, trying not to drool. Hunter had brought along a few boxes of complete pancake mix that only needed a little water added, saying yesterday that they would top them off with brown sugar.

"I don't know about that. Those canned beans we had last night weren't all that appealing." She wrinkled her nose at the recollection.

Hunter gave an amused snort. "That was our emergency rations. Usually we'd be fishing and eating from the land. Seeing as how we didn't make camp last night..." He let the rest of his words trail off as he gazed into the fire, coffee mug perched between his lips. "This part of the river isn't deep enough to harbor a minnow."

Melony heard the derision in his voice and knew that it was because of her that they hadn't made proper camp the night before. Well, she would push herself today come blisters or aching muscles. "We'll make it today. I told you I fully intended to pull my own weight around here."

He set his mug down to flip the last pancake. "You don't weigh much, Shepherd. I'm

going to need more of an effort from you than that.” He cast a sideways glance and laughed when she flipped him the bird.

“Why don't you quick knocking me and hand me a few of those pancakes, McFadden?” she drawled sweetly though every word came out through gritted teeth.

“Sure thing.” He handed her the plate, grinning.

Melony rolled her eyes.

* * * *

For once, they were on schedule, something that pleased Hunter to no end. Aiming to cooperate, knowing it was for her own good, Melony had helped him clear the campsite and repack their backpacks as quickly and efficiently as she could. She still sensed that he was somewhat impatient with her for being too slow the previous day in making and breaking camp, but she made a silent oath to hike and work faster, argue less.

She'd taken her customary spot three feet behind Hunter, the view of his nicely rounded ass vying for her complete and undivided attention. The terrain was much more rugged and a whole lot denser with brush and trees than what she had seen the day before. It was also taking its toll on her even with the frequent stops they made.

After a few hours or so of traveling, her mind was fixed on her boots, sending her hot, throbbing feet mental messages not to conk out on her. Hunter grabbed her by the arm and whispered in her ear. “Look at that.”

Her head lifted and she met the sight before them. “Is it a reindeer?” she asked in the same hushed tone, trying hard to keep her eyes on the furry brown animal with the antlers and not the copper-haired man who was breathing soft and warm in her ear.

“Caribou,” he corrected, his lips brushing her lobe.

They stood there for several minutes watching as the lone male walked in and out of the trees just a few yards ahead of them. Hunter had one big hand at the back of her neck and was kneading the sensitive skin there. Melony tried to keep her senses attuned to the caribou, knowing this was most likely the first and last trip she'd ever make to Alaska, but Hunter was doing delicious things to her insides. The warmth from that huge hand of his was slowly seeping into every part of her body and coming to pool between her legs.

As if detecting their presence on the light summer breeze, the caribou jerked his head, looking right at them, ears shooting straight up in alarm, and went bounding off in the opposite direction.

The spell broken, Hunter's hand dropped, and so did the temperature inside of Melony's body. Where before there had been a lethargic, rippling heat spreading inside of her, now she felt as if an Arctic wind was blowing right through in his absence. And she wondered again, how long she would be able to resist this man.

“Let's get a move on, Shepherd.” He slapped her ass, propelling her into motion.

* * * *

By evening, they made camp as scheduled. Melony was sure that she had blisters covering every inch of her feet and the straps of the heavy pack felt embedded into her shoulders. But she didn't complain. At first out of pride and determination, and then out of sheer exhaustion.

Without out a word, they cleared the ground for their tents and an area for a fire.

Since she knew what to do this time, she helped him gather stones and wood for the fire, then laid the tarp out for her tent and had it up in less than five minutes.

Although Hunter looked impressed, he kept any comments to himself.

“Ready for dinner?” he asked. Melony noted a sparkle of mirth in his eyes. Now what was he up to? Coming from him, it had to be either torturous or nerve-wracking.

“Sure am,” she replied, wishing for a long, hot soak in a Jacuzzi right about now.

“Here.” He shoved a fishing rod at her.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” She feigned ignorance. After a countless-mile hike through briars and brambles and brush, climbing hills and valleys and wading across not-so-small streams—after taking off her hiking boots and changing into her running shoes since Hunter informed her that they had more traction—they were now supposed to go fishing?

“We’ve already gone through our emergency rations. Now it’s up to us to stay fed.” She noticed that he was smothering yet another grin. He really enjoyed seeing her at the point of exhaustion.

“And what if I don’t catch anything?” Hell, she didn’t *want* to catch anything except maybe twenty-four hours of deep, dreamless sleep.

He shrugged. “There’s plenty of other nourishment right around us.” He held an outstretched hand toward the land, making a sweeping motion to encompass it all.

Melony looked around in the fading daylight in disbelief. All she could see was a bunch of evergreens, bushes and wildflowers. “Am I supposed to gnaw on tree bark, or what?” She was tired and her voice came out sharp.

Hunter only gave that half smirk of his. “There’s wild rhubarb along the river bank.” He inclined his head to an area behind him. “Over there are some blueberries.” He pointed to her right. “And we’ll make a nice fresh salad of fireweed greens.”

Melony had had blueberries before, and even rhubarb—something she didn’t particularly care for—but she’d never heard of fireweed greens. “Do I want to know what fireweed greens are?” They sounded hot and prickly.

“Fireweed is one of the most common plants in this country.” He motioned for her to follow him. They went down to the riverbed where he said a dwarf variety of the plant grew. Its spikes of reddish pink brightened the land around them. “None are in bloom yet.” They squatted among the stems and slender leaves and he picked a plant crown. They stood up and Hunter held the little bud out to her.

Reluctantly she opened her mouth and he popped it in, letting his finger linger on her lips for the briefest of moments. Melony closed her mouth and chewed, the feel of his fingertips still burning into her lips. She forced a small smile. “Not too bad.” Though she really couldn’t taste anything except the flavor left behind by his touch.

“With a little sugar and vinegar, you’ll never miss lettuce.” He returned her smile though heat simmered in his eyes.

With the utmost restraint, Melony turned away from his mute invitation and plodded back over to the campsite, taking up the fishing pole he had offered her a moment ago, aware that he was right behind her.

“Dinner might be awhile.” There was a rueful twist to her lips as she eyed the long length of dark brown wood with fishing line threaded through it. “I don’t know if I can hold still longer than fifteen minutes at a time.” *Or keep from falling asleep.*

“If there’s one thing Alaska teaches people, it’s patience the hard way.” He already

had his pole in hand.

Patience? Melony held back her laugh. This from a man who grumbled every two minutes if she so much as stopped to rest her aching feet?

They walked back to the edge of the river to a spot where the water was deeper and relatively calm. "I'll let you in on a little secret, Shepherd." Melony followed Hunter's lead as he sat down on nature's carpet of fragrant moss and blooming wildflowers in various colors. He had rolled a fallen log over so they could lean against it. "I used to be ten times more high-strung and domineering than you could ever even think of being."

She shot him a dubious gaze. "You?" She sat down beside him thinking that this was all a gorgeous background for lovers. She changed her line of thinking fast. "What do we use for bait?"

"Here." He took the rod from her and stuck a red, gelatinous-looking ball on the hook. "This'll catch anything from salmon to trout." He gave her back the rod, then picked up his own after repeating the bait process and cast the line out into the water. Melony repeated the same movements until they both had their lines dangling in the river.

For a few minutes, they sat there in companionable silence. Melony inhaled the air around her, trying not to fidget, trying not to let the scent of Hunter's musky body get to her. She looked out over the twilight land, concentrating on the soft breeze that was blowing over her skin, and thinking how incredibly exhausted she was. Sometime later, she started to nod off.

Shaking the cobwebs loose, she cast her drowsy gaze to Hunter who looked perfectly serene sitting there, holding his fishing rod, looking out over the land like an older version of Huck Finn.

"How long does this take?" She couldn't help complaining as she stretched to work out the cramps and kinks in her back and neck.

He turned his head in her direction and cocked a red-gold brow at her. "Would you believe me if I told you we've only been sitting here a little over ten minutes?"

Melony gave a small laugh. "I'd say you were severely mistaken. Even my rump is numb!" She wiggled around, trying to get some feeling back.

"Want me to wake it up for you?" He shot her a devilish look.

Melony wanted to blurt out a resounding, *Yes!* To beg him to wake up all of the dead areas outside and inside of her, but she didn't. She wasn't willing to face the consequences an affair with this man would entail. Instead, she picked up their previous conversation. "You were telling me that you used to be a high-strung individual."

"Aye." He leaned back against the log a little further until he was nearly lying down. His relaxed body contrasted sharply with the hard look that had come to his eyes. "As I mentioned at the cabin, I was on the Chicago police force for ten years."

She did remember, and it fit him. Though she'd thought more than once that he must have been an army sergeant what with the way he barked orders all day long at her and that tough-guy exterior he often exhibited. "How did you end up here in the Alaskan outback?"

His eyes clouded over and he turned his head back toward the river. "Everybody has their turning point in life, Shepherd. Something so heinous that makes them wake up and realize they don't like where they're heading. I killed a fourteen-year-old kid."

Hunter heard her gasp and didn't need to look at her to know her sky-blue eyes were wide with shock. "That was my turning point in life." His tone was dead, and a muscle along the side of his neck twitched. "Let's hope yours isn't quite so drastic."

"Oh, Hunter." He could hear the sympathy in her voice. Whether it was for the kid he'd gunned down or for himself, he didn't know. Maybe he didn't want to know. "I'm sorry you were forced to do such a thing."

He didn't resist looking at her this time. Just like that, she accepted what he said and believed that he had acted in self-defense. Suddenly he wanted to share with her what had happened that night. "He was a known gang member who was high on meth and had a .357 pointed straight at my partner." His voice was strained with his next words. "I wish to hell it could have ended differently."

Melony reached out, resting her hand on his forearm. "I'm sure you did all you could. You were trained to confront such situations with a level head. You did what you had to. And think of the innocent lives that were spared. I'm a lawyer, so I see things from a different perspective, but I've seen what gangs, drugs and weapons can do to children, to their families and to society." She gave his arm a firm squeeze. "It must be a hell of a thing to carry around on one's shoulders, knowing that you've killed another."

"It is." He closed his eyes for a minute thinking that of all the things that had been said to him in regards to that incident over the years, Melony's had gone the deepest. Her words weren't adorned, weren't spoken by a well-meaning friend or a money-earning shrink, they simply came from her heart.

When he opened his eyes and saw the soft smile on her face, he felt a sense of alleviation set in. Melony understood. Really understood. That meant a lot to him. And he wanted her all the more. He was used to overly confident women. Women who knew how to get what they wanted from a man, whether a roll in the bushes, something more materialistic, or for their own personal gain. He had been seduced by the best.

Probably one of the reasons that he hadn't had the inclination to pursue anything longer than one-night stands in the past five years. Few of them at that. Melony was different. Hell, he'd known that from the moment he'd opened his front door and found her standing there. She wasn't a user. And she was greatly unversed in the ways of flirtation and seduction. Not that she was trying to attempt either one, but she turned him on like a madman. Full of raging ire one minute, uncertain as a doe the next. Coming apart in his arms with complete abandon, then modest as a teenage virgin. And she got him so hot he thought he'd melt right into his leather boots at any second.

Just as he leaned forward for another ball-busting kiss, she slid her eyes from his lips to her unmoving fishing rod and said, "You never did tell me what made you decide to leave your life in the city and move up here. Was it the shooting?"

Hunter recognized the way she sat up a little straighter and stiffer. She was getting nervous. Felt that things were getting a little too close. He bit down hard on his tongue, hard enough to bring him back to reality. Melony wasn't ready for a man yet. And certainly not for the likes of him. But she would be soon. Unfortunately, not soon enough for his long-deprived libido.

It was with the utmost restraint that he didn't resort to some primitive act such as taking her on the spot among the soft carpet of leaves. When the time was right, he wanted Melony to come to him, passionate and willing. He wanted to earn her trust. Somehow, this was important to him.

He let go of his amorous thoughts for now and leaned back into his previous spot. "Partly. After the realization of what I had done set in, a lot of things became clear to me. I finally decided that I didn't want to fit into somebody else's idea of what they thought I should be. I was treated like a hero by the force for saving my partner's life." He gave a derisive laugh, shaking his head. "I killed a kid and it was celebrated. Anyway, I woke up one morning and realized that I hated my job and my stress-filled life, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my days on earth with my fiancée. I was simply living the biggest facade of them all: The American dream. You can't live your life for what other people want you to be, Shepherd."

"I'm beginning to realize that." At that moment, her arm jerked. "I think I caught something!" She was on her feet, holding the handle of her fishing rod tightly.

Hunter gave a rueful smile. Melony had been the first person he had shared that episode of his life with in so many years. Somehow, he felt raw and vulnerable after exposing that part of himself. But he pushed all self-centered feelings aside when he viewed the childlike excitement on her pretty face.

He got to his feet also. "I do believe you've just caught your first supper." He helped her to reel it in, laughing outright when she grabbed a hold of his shirt when the huge trout flopped around on the ground near her. When was the last time he'd had such fun?

* * * *

An hour later, they had three fat trout. Two caught by Hunter and the one by Melony. She had never felt so proud in all of her life. Not even when she'd passed the bar exam.

She helped Hunter collect the greens for the salad, but passed on the rhubarb. Thankfully, he'd brought along potatoes to bake in the fire. Blueberries were their dessert and they washed it all down with Hunter's unique blend of coffee. She was amazed that she hadn't needed her antacid tablets in nearly three days now, even with the coffee she'd been drinking.

Dinner was pleasant, the trout delicious, and Melony volunteered to wash the dishes since Hunter once again did the cooking. It was hard for her to get used to the lack of absolute darkness, and she had long ago lost track of time, not to mention which day of the week it was. She was dead tired, the hunger in her stomach was satisfied, but she felt like she hadn't had a decent bath in a year.

"Hunter?" He was stoking the campfire, adding a few branches to keep it going until they decided to turn in for the night. "How do we go about the chore of keeping clean?" Most of her hair hung out of her braid, and the campfire, though warm and pleasing to the eye, left her with a sooty, smoky smell that clung to her clothes, hair and skin.

He looked up at her and grinned. "You saw what I did last night?"

She swallowed hard and nodded as the memory of his bare ass ran through her mind. "Yes."

"There's soap, shampoo, and all you'll need in my tent." He gestured to the blue and black dome behind him and then the river in front of them. "Help yourself."

She pursed her lips. "I know I said I didn't want any special treatment, but I'm not quite ready to take a bath with nothing but my birthday suit on in front of a man, least of all you."

"I'm hurt, Shepherd." He grabbed at his heart as if it actually ached. "I don't recall any modesty on my part when I took my spur-of-the-moment skinny-dip."

Melony heaved a sigh of aggravation. "Well, that's not surprising. I think most men would run around naked all day long if they could."

He laughed. "And that I do, barring company."

She rolled her eyes as more images of his naked body streaked through her mind. What was she going to do? She couldn't stay filthy. And she sure as hell wasn't ready to bare all for gorgeous Hunter McFadden.

"Take it easy, Shepherd. There's a secluded area just a hundred yards away. Get your supplies and I'll take you to it. And I promise," he held up his hands in a surrendering gesture, "no peeking." Though he made the promise in jest, she hoped he was a man of his word.

"Okay." She visibly relaxed, even though she didn't completely trust him, and went into his tent to retrieve the toiletries he offered. When she emerged a moment later, she went into her own tent for a towel, her thermals and jacket to cover up. He waited just outside.

"This way." He started off, taking an invisible trail that led into the woods and came to a little twist in the river that was obscured by bushes. "Nature's own private bath." He stretched out an arm.

"It's perfect," Melony declared, greatly relieved that she wouldn't be bathing right out in the open.

"I gave a lot of thought to the campsites along the way," She noticed he wasn't in any hurry to leave as he leaned against a tree and folded his arms over his chest, feet crossed at the ankles. "I spent an entire summer hiking a hundred mile radius choosing the best spots. We hike seven miles a day during the entire course, give or take, and we cover most of it."

"Well this is certainly nice." She clutched the bath paraphernalia close to her chest. Only seven miles a day? It felt more like fifty. "I wasn't looking forward to being on display right out in the open."

A lazy shrug lifted one of his shoulders. "Nobody'd see you except for some caribou, maybe a few Dall sheep and spruce grouse ... and me." He grinned, the twilight rays of the nighttime sun glinting off his copper hair like a Fourth of July sparkler.

"Which is exactly why I'm taking refuge behind these bushes," she drawled. "I don't want a repeat of last night's episode. Now, if you don't mind, I'm perfectly capable of bathing myself."

Hunter gave a soft snort, turned and headed back to camp.

Melony let out the breath she had been holding. All it would have taken was a little persuading from that silky tongue of his and she knew she'd give in and they'd be splashing around in the water faster than the time it would take to remove their clothes. Yeah, she had it that damned bad for Hunter McFadden.

Chapter Seven

After her chilly bath, Melony walked back over to camp, leaves rustling beneath her sneakered feet.

Hunter looked up from his spot before the fire, abandoning his whittling as he saw her approach. "Feel better?"

She smiled and it felt as equally forced as his question had sounded. "Much, although the water was a few degrees cooler than I would have liked. Just above freezing was more like it. I thought about diving right in, but I wasn't quite so brave. Inch by inch was more like it."

"Sorry, there's no control knob to adjust the river's temperature. Besides, cold water is good for the circulation." His tone was playful and held no hint of his usual air of sarcasm. Somehow, this threw her off kilter.

"At least I'm clean."

When she stood there staring at him for several seconds he said softly, "You okay?"

She blinked hard. "Yeah. I'll just put these back." Her eyes shifted from the items in her arms and back to Hunter.

He gave a little nod and went back to carving with a knife that was a smaller version of the one at his thigh.

Clutching the toiletries in her arms, Melony walked over to Hunter's tent to put back the items she had borrowed. When she entered, the natural scent that clung to his big body hit her full force again. His bedroll lay to her left, rumpled and inviting, and it wasn't too hard for her to imagine sharing that great big sleeping bag with him.

"Just set them next to my pack. I'll be taking a dip later myself." His voice came from directly behind her, making her jump at his nearness.

"You scared me!" Everything toppled out of her arms and onto the floor of the tent, afraid that he had somehow deciphered her thoughts. Hunter seemed to have feet the size of a bear yet the footsteps of a deer.

"Sorry." He smiled, not looking apologetic in the least. "I just came in to grab a change of clothes." He was reaching behind her, taking his pack. His arm brushed against her, his body so close she could feel his personal heat drifting over and around her, making her inhale a sharp breath. Hunter seemed oblivious to the effect he had on her.

The tent was low so they had to stoop over or walk on their knees, and even though it was a four-man, with the both of them in it, the tent seemed minuscule. She really should be leaving. "I have to go check on the clothes I laid out on the bushes by the river. I rinsed them out while I was down there and..."

"You okay, Shepherd?" he asked again as her words trailed off and she simply sat there leaning back on her heels, eyes glued on the front flap of the tent, pondering a quick getaway.

"Hmm?" Melony shook her head and frowned. "Me? Just fine. My shoulders are a little stiff from lugging that pack all day long, but other than that, nothing major." She was silent for a breath then said, "Well, I think I'll be going now." She got up into a stooped over position and headed toward the exit, but Hunter reached out a hand, grabbing hold of her right shoulder. "Ouch." She winced at the tenderness she felt from

his touch, though she knew he wasn't exerting any excess pressure.

"Did I hurt you?" He didn't make a move to take his hand from her shoulder.

"Like I said, my shoulders are a little sore." She looked back and was instantly ensnared by his darkening eyes.

"I have an excellent remedy for sore, aching muscles." He pulled her down to his sleeping bag with ease. Melony admonished herself for her obvious weakness and extreme willingness when it came to this man.

"I don't think this is such a good idea." Her heart was throbbing in her head so fiercely she felt she'd been hanging upside down and all of her blood was pooling in her ears.

"Don't be so edgy. I'm only going to massage your shoulders, not coerce you into a session of steamy intercourse." He was sitting behind her with her bottom wedged between his big, firm thighs.

"Oh, okay," she gave in with only the slightest hesitation. A massage couldn't hurt, she told herself. In fact, the way her muscles felt at the moment, it would feel pretty good. Maybe she'd get the feeling back in her arms.

Hunter slipped off her burgundy Windbreaker, the rustling sound of the nylon echoing in the small tent. Melony shivered, not from cold, but from the knowledge that she was seated intimately between this man's legs in only her pajamas.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" She figured that by talking she would keep her head on straight and not be lured into the vortex of sexual oblivion into which Hunter had the habit of pulling her.

"Trust me," he said in a smooth, silky voice. "I know exactly what I'm doing. An' I'm positive you'll love every minute of it."

Melony swallowed hard. That's what she was afraid of.

He draped her damp hair over her left shoulder, and his hands started working their magic. With slow, deep pressure, he kneaded her aching shoulders and neck. Melony let her head fall forward, relishing the exquisite sensations winding throughout her. Oh, yes, there was definitely feeling in her arms now—and in several other places not even remotely adjacent to her arms.

"Feel good?" he murmured in her ear, his warm breath gliding over her skin.

"Heavenly," came her husky reply.

Hunter massaged her muscles with slow, rhythmical motions. From her neck, down to her shoulders and back up again. "You smell like soap, shampoo and woman," he breathed against her hair.

She laughed a little, trying to feel uncomfortable with his nearness and not finding it. "Thanks, I guess."

When his palms glided over the cotton material to her shoulders again, he let his hands dip forward just a little, under the neckline of her shirt to the curve of her breasts. She inhaled a small breath of surprise that soon turned into a soft moan. She really should be getting out of here, away from Hunter, away from what would surely be happening within the next five minutes if she didn't.

He pulled her back until she was resting against his chest, his heart thudding against her spine. He used one hand to tilt her head to the side and lowered his lips to her neck, running kisses along the throbbing vein there.

"Hunter." There was a hint of trepidation lacing the desire in her voice. "I don't think

this is such a good idea.” She didn't make any attempt to withdraw from his arms. If nothing else, she burrowed further against him.

“Does it feel good?” he murmured against the side of her throat, his teeth nipping at the warm flesh.

“Mmm ... too good.”

He let out a little laugh. “Then this is a *very* good idea.”

“But, aren't you forgetting what I told you?”

“Aye, I remember. Jealous, clingy, possessive.” He cupped her breasts in his palms. “Perfect,” she crooned in her ear. When she felt his stiff erection against her bottom, she inhaled a sharp breath and pressed further against him. Hunter let out a throaty moan.

“Let me do this for you, Shepherd. Don't think. Don't reason. Just ... feel and enjoy. We don't have to go all the way, just as far as you want.”

Feelings fluctuated in Melony's head. Run. Stay. No. Yes. Stop. Go. In the end, her struggle was short. She melted against him, a wax mannequin in flames. His hands roamed to the front of her shirt again, cupping her breasts through the soft cotton, his thumbs caressing her nipples in a steady back and forth motion that soon had them roused into tight peaks. His touch was sheer ecstasy, yet she still harbored a bit of reluctance. She was getting very close to losing her head, falling over the brink of sanity where this man was concerned.

“Hunter?” She breathed his name on a shaky sigh.

“Hmm?” His body was liquid heat behind her, his hands magic on her body, his lips whispering love spells against her ear.

“Why do you call me Shepherd? Why not Mel, or even Melony?” Her hands had wandered to his thighs, caressing them through their denim barrier. She noticed that he had removed his ever-present knife.

“Calling you Shepherd is a whole lot safer. You're definitely not a Mel, and saying the name... Mmm... Melony only reminds me that you're a very desirable woman and that I'm a very deprived man.”

“You don't know that now?” She was talking nonsense and she knew it.

“Aye. All too well, I'm afraid. I've gone against my promise of hands off, haven't I?” He slid a palm between her thighs finding her hot and damp. A low groan rumbled against her as it vibrated within his chest. “Never let it be said that I'm not a man of my word. Would you like me to stop?”

“Yes.” Her arms had taken the trip up to his face and were caressing the soft stubble of his two-day beard and mustache. She tilted her head back to accept another one of his deep, wet, openmouthed kisses.

“Did I stop?” His hand now wandered under the waistband of her thermals.

She opened her legs for him. “I don't think so,” her voice was a soft whisper of surrender.

“Maybe you should help me.” The words were mumbled against her moist lips as they played the game they had started the other day.

“Maybe you should be quiet and kiss me again.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

With a loud growl that could have come from any wild animal outside of the nylon walls, he crushed her mouth beneath his while his fingers probed within her; slipping, sliding, gliding, swirling, bringing her the pleasure she knew he could.

Her whole body tensed and relaxed in an even cadence as his one hand palmed her breasts, and his other massaged her clitoris, his fingers deep within her. After a few short minutes she was grabbing at his shirt, begging him to take her completely. "I've got to feel you inside of me, Hunter."

"Uh-uh." He shook his head. "I won't take you yet. I want you to see that I can give as good as I get."

She moaned. "You haven't gotten anything yet."

"Ah, that's the key word now, isn't it? *Yet*."

Melony noted the tone of his voice and the glimmer in his eyes that told her he thoroughly intended to collect on that not-so-silent vow. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, but he would collect and she didn't know whether she was anticipating the rendezvous or fearful of it.

Soon she didn't care about anything; all she could do was drown in wave after wave of ecstasy that swelled over her. "Oh, Hunter!" She arched sharply against his palm. Her hand at the back of his neck brought his lips down to hers where she devoured him with her kiss.

"Melony..." he mumbled against her lips as he held her tightly. "Shit!" And he, too, reached a climax.

When their breathing became steady and Melony felt that her bones would hold her weight, she adjusted her clothing and turned to see the look of embarrassment on Hunter's face. "I seem to have lost control inside of my jeans." He glanced down at the damp spot near his upper thigh.

She smiled, holding a hand over her mouth. "Oh dear." Melony met his rueful eyes and started to giggle.

"I'm glad you find my predicament amusing."

She reached up to caress his face. "I'm not laughing at you. It's just flattering to know you were so excited that you..." She glanced at the front of his jeans once more.

Hunter's smile was quickly erased as he pulled her into his arms once more, his mouth hushing over hers. "Next time, Melony, when I get that excited and come, it will be when I'm buried deep inside of you."

"Oh my," she whispered.

"And you better be ready for me, little one." Just when she thought he would kiss her again and make good on his promise, right here and now, he lifted his head, placed a chaste kiss on her nose and said, "Now is not the time, so I want you to creep back over to your tent before I lose control again."

Chapter Eight

Melony woke up early to watch the sunrise and the awakening of the land. She didn't want to miss anything, and being asleep—even in a warm and cozy sleeping bag—seemed such a waste of time when one had this view to greet them each day. She had been concerned about sleeping on the ground and camping so close to the river, fully expecting to catch pneumonia or at the very least be paid a visit from her chronic sinusitis. To her great relief, her allergies, with all of their wheezes and sniffles and sneezes, hadn't returned yet. Come to think of it, neither had her ulcer, or migraines. She was so overjoyed with the fact that she didn't care if Hunter did say, “I told you so.”

She whistled merrily as she started the fire, learned from observing Hunter, and started a pot of water to boil for coffee. Hunter had warned her against drinking the water from the river straight. Though they seemed crystal clear, Alaska's streams and lakes were infested with *Giardia*; a parasite that causes beaver fever, he'd said. And unless she wanted a bout with intestinal trouble, all water must be boiled for at least five minutes, even to brush their teeth.

Measuring instant coffee into her mug, she poured boiling water into it, inhaling the strong aroma that mingled with the scent of the spruce and earth and all living things. As she viewed the awe-inspiring sunset, she knew the scene would always leave the most lasting impression on her. It seemed to climb like a giant ball of fire on the horizon. The sky was cloudless, the wind was at a standstill, and the birds were singing sweet morning carols in the nearby bushes as if practiced for her sole listening pleasure. She was filled with a sense of peace and joy she had always longed for yet it had always remained elusive to her over the years.

A lone fox caught her eye at the edge of the forest. He skirted in and out among the trees, his nose to the ground and ears twitching and then he was gone. A moment later, a rabbit scampered from its burrow, sitting upon its haunches to see if the coast was clear. Melony smiled at the sight. The scene reminded her a bit of her and Hunter. Hunter was the lone fox on the prowl, searching for his prey. She was the cautious rabbit avoiding capture. Though last night she had been a willing captive, she reminded herself, taking a long sip of coffee as her blood thrummed through her veins at the memory of his tender, seductive forays.

The smile suddenly dropped into a firm grimace. Damn. She was doing it again. She promised herself repeatedly since Jerry dumped her that she would not get ditsy over another man. Yet here she was, whistling like an idiot, seeing the world through her well-worn rose-colored glasses.

Though last night was special to her, with Hunter's rugged looks, sex-appeal and blood-tingling accent, he probably spent too-numerous-to-count evenings with other women. What made her think she was special to him?

She pursed her lips and frowned again, long and hard, at the blue and black nylon dome to her side. What did Hunter think of her now? That she was easy, surely. That he could have her whenever the mood struck him, obviously. Why hadn't it struck him last night? Why had he simply taken her to such heights of passion, then walked her back to her tent without so much as a, “Thanks, Shepherd, let's do it again sometime”?

But, he'd said that he wanted to please her, show her that he could give as well as he could get. When she had been writhing in his arms, so high in the sky she thought she would break into a million pieces, he had held her close as she tumbled from the highest plateau, and had turned her down flat when she'd asked him—no, begged him outright—for more.

Melony felt something shrivel inside of her and thought that maybe it was her fragile ego. She was embarrassed at having been so greedy for his touch. She was mad at having given in so easily. And she was beyond mad at Hunter for taking her so far when she had told him how crazy she got with men.

Perhaps that's why he had manipulated her; so he could see just how crazy she got. After all, what did he have to lose? She would be leaving here in just a little over a week. He could get what he wanted from her and never see her again afterward.

How stupid could she have been?

Needing to busy herself, she started breakfast, determined to put last night with Hunter out of her mind. She would simply go on with the trip. What other choice did she have? Run over fifty miles of rugged mountains to Fairbanks? Not likely. She had no other choice but to pretend last night never happened, and deflect any passes he may make at her in the future.

"Why the grim look, Shepherd?" A sleep-warmed voice traveled to her ears and pulsed hot and thick through her veins. Her nether-regions were on instant alert, clambering for another episode such as last night.

"Just getting breakfast ready," she said, hoping for an air of aloofness. "Pull up a log and take a load off, McFadden. Pancakes will be done in a jiffy."

"You're up early." He cast a half smile that looked purely arrogant and thoroughly pleased.

She ignored the look. "I have no idea whether it's early or late since you commanded me to leave my watch back at the cabin. I just wasn't tired anymore so got up."

"Sleep well, aye?" Now he looked satisfied. Boy, what an ego!

"Since you seem so interested in knowing, yes, I slept very well—even on that bunch of twigs you call *nature's mattress*."

He gave a soft laugh, taking up a greater portion of the fallen log. "Just for your information, it's approximately six a.m."

She looked at him nonplused, walked over and handed him his filled plate. "I've never woken up that early. I try to get to the office by nine and just barely make it most of the time. Sometimes without makeup or even a cup of coffee in my system." She felt rather pleased with the bit of information. And he seemed pleased with the look on her face. Probably his machismo thinking that it was all his doing that she was up so early with an idiotic smile plastered on her face. Men!

Melony took her own plate after serving Hunter a mug of coffee and sat at the opposite end of the suddenly very small log and tried to choke down her breakfast. How could he eat after last night? How could he act as if nothing happened? Wasn't he sitting there reenacting every moment they'd shared in his tent, as she was? Or was he sitting there thinking what an incredible pushover she was?

She reprimanded herself on the spot. Perhaps his silence in regards to those moments in his tent was a blessing in disguise. Wasn't it for the best that they ignore what had happened? Hadn't she just spent the past half hour or so counseling herself on the benefits

of forgetting how his hands had become well-acquainted with her body last night? So why did she find herself more than a little angry that he was acting as if having a woman come apart in his arms was an every day occurrence for him?

He scraped his plate clean and was casually leaning forward, sipping on his second cup of coffee. Melony looked down at her still full plate and blurted out, "I know last night was probably no big deal to you, but that was the first time I ever had a man do that to me without wanting something in return." She forced herself to meet his smoky, olive colored eyes. She couldn't take it any longer so she jumped to her feet and went to dispose of her breakfast remains in the fire, unable to finish the brave speech she had started.

She was running scared, mortified, though she had no reason to be. He had been a willing partner in their little ... whatever it was.

Hunter followed her over to where she stood with her back to him, arms wrapped around her waist. "Melony." He placed his hands on her shoulders and pivoted her around to face him. Her face was hot with anger.

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "It's been quite some time since I've had a woman, but last night wasn't just a way to pass the time. At the risk of sounding like a classic male, I'm pleased to know that I brought you pleasure. It gets a mite lonely at times," he said in a voice so soft and so full of feeling that Melony nearly relinquished herself to him right on the spot.

"Hunter." She felt her eyelids growing heavy with the weight of desire at having him so near and hearing her name upon his sexy lips. "You know we can't pursue this any further, don't you?" He gave her a little smile and his thumb slid upward to trace her top lip now. "I mean, I'm only thinking of the future when I'll be leaving here. If we made love," she tried not to quiver as his thumb dipped into her mouth and caressed her tongue before sliding back out to moisten her lips. "If we made love, I would begin to expect something out of you that you couldn't give, especially since I'll be leaving here at the end of next week."

"I'm not asking for anything more than last night, Shepherd. Not a single thing. It was a one time thing and I thoroughly intend to keep my hands off of you from this moment forward."

"You aren't mad?" She was looking into eyes that were drowsy with desire.

"Now why would I be mad? You think it's best if we avoid any further intimate contact, and I readily agree." He gathered her tightly into his arms, one hand low on her bottom and the other burrowing underneath her shirt that he had somehow pulled from her waistband without her realizing it.

Melony's arms crept up and around his neck. "Just as long as you aren't angry and as long as you know that there can never be anything between us."

"Aye. I'm neither angry nor dense. No more touching. No more kisses. No more sultry looks..." His lips came down and covered hers.

* * * *

Sometime later, after Melony had most reluctantly broken off the kiss and slipped out of his embrace, after their tents were dismantled and the campsite cleaned up, they hefted their packs onto their backs and set out on the next leg of their journey.

Melony had meant what she told him; there could never be anything remotely

intimate about their relationship. Last night had been a one-time thing. She simply refused to let herself get lost in the clouds over this man, and mentally chided herself for the kiss they had shared this morning and the perfume she had dabbed behind her ears before they had left camp. Against every cell in her body that warned against it, against every sensible word that rolled through her head and came out of her mouth, she was trying to attract Hunter McFadden.

Chapter Nine

Hunter plodded ahead of Melony, clearing the way for her, thinking that he had never seen the world quite as he was now. Yes, this woman was affecting him badly. Since when had the sky looked so blue? The trees so green? He inhaled a deep breath of mountain-scented air. Since when had the wildflowers smelled so fragrant? It was as if their perfume was magnified tenfold and followed them around, everywhere they went.

As they traveled along in silence, each in their own thoughts, a low grunting sound caught Hunter's attention. It was coming from directly behind them. "Hunter!" Melony's voice was a tiny squeak. A look over his shoulder found a black bear only a few yards away with Melony directly in its sight.

Now why would a bear be bothering them? When he came up beside Melony—nice and slow so as not to get the bear angry—his nose encountered the reason. It hadn't been the wildflowers after all. "Dammit, Shepherd," he said in a harsh whisper. "You're wearing perfume."

"Yes," she gasped, reaching blindly out to her side, grabbing him by the upper arm.

"I told you to leave that shit behind. Bears have a keen sense of smell. To him you don't smell like perfume, you smell like food."

Melony clung tighter to him. The bear let out another low growl. "Can we run for safety?"

Hunter gave a quick shake of his head. "Bears can run up to forty-one miles an hour. We wouldn't have a chance."

"I'm so sorry," she choked out. "I should have listened to you and left the perfume behind. What are we going to do?"

He slid one arm behind her back. "Stay very still, listen to me, and do exactly as I say."

Melony nodded, letting her palm slip around his back as he had done to her, her thumb slipping into a belt loop.

"Raise your free hand in the air in a non-threatening gesture. Keep holding on to me and I'll do the same so I'll be guaranteed that you won't make any rash moves." They both did as he instructed, taking a few slow steps backward. Just then the bear stood up on its back legs, waving its big black nose in the air. Melony shrieked and clung to Hunter like a bur on a sock. "Cool it, Shepherd." He slowly pried her loose. "He's just trying to identify us. He's not attacking."

She resumed her place by his side, hand held in the air. The bear got down on all fours and turned sideways. "You see that?" Hunter said. "He's demonstrating his size to us, showing us that we're no match for a big lad such as him. In other words, it's our invitation to back away *slowly*." He started talking to the bear in a calm, firm voice. "We're just going to leave now, Mr. Bear." The shaggy creature let out a few more grunts. "Yes, you certainly are a nice bear. I really wouldn't want to have to use my big, sharp knife on you, nor for us to end up as your next meal."

What seemed like a century later, they were out of the bear's sight.

"There," Hunter said, letting out a pent-up breath of relief. "We're safe now."

"I thought we were going to be killed. That bear was huge." Her wide eyes were

fixed in the direction where they had been confronted by the giant animal.

"I wasn't looking forward to adding another rug to my cabin."

"You—killed that bear that's in your cabin?" She sounded shocked.

"Aye. There's a nasty scar on my upper thigh to prove it, too." He raised a brow at her and smiled, though it quickly fell as he glared down at her. "And the next time you do something totally asinine like that, you're on your own. I warned you against wearing any type of deodorant or perfumes. Besides, there's nobody out here except us. Why in the hell would you feel the need to primp in the wilds?" His eyes grew wide for just a fraction of a second before he obscured a satisfied grin.

"Let's get a move on, Shepherd!" Hunter barked. "That little confrontation with the bear wasted a good hour's hiking time and we have to make it over that ridge," he pointed directly in front of him, "before nightfall."

"You can be a downright bear yourself, you know that?" Her brows were sewn together in a pissy frown.

"Get used to it. Now move!" He slapped her ass as she offered him a few choice cuss words and fell into step beside him.

* * * *

Left. Right. Left. Right. Melony trudged behind Hunter, ready to fall on her face at any moment. They had hiked through streams and small rivers. They had climbed the side of a hill she was certain had to be the height of Mount Olympus. Her feet hurt like hell and her hands were scraped raw from the spill she had taken down the side of one of those mountains. A tree branch had slapped her in the face earlier and scratched her right cheek. She lifted up a hand and felt the dried blood there. She wanted to crumble on the spot, to crawl into a nice, soft bed after a long, hot bath and pretend that this had all just been a bad dream.

Her eyes trained on Hunter's broad shoulders just ahead of her; his firm butt and thighs encased within his faded jeans. No, she was glad to be here—even if Hunter was acting like an angry father figure. She knew he was still miffed over the bear episode, and she couldn't blame him one bit—they could have been killed!

When it came to the trails they were taking, she had no doubt in her mind that he wouldn't face her with any challenge she wasn't capable of handling. The knowledge warmed her more than anything. Here was somebody who believed in her. Who knew she could handle anything he set before her. She gave a wistful smile at the large man in front of her before tripping over a large rock and sprawling to the ground.

"Keep your eyes open, Shepherd," Hunter reprimanded, crouching beside her.

She looked down to check the damage and saw that there was a hole in her jeans over her right knee and crimson was staining the blue denim. "Ouch."

"You got a nice scrape there. We'll be making camp soon and I'll fix you up good as new," he assured, the sharp edge that had tainted his voice all day was nearly gone. "I doubt if anything will be left in the first aid kit once I've finished with you." He took note of her palms and the deep scratch on her face. With the gentlest of kisses, he touched his lips to her marred cheek, stood back up then took his spot directly in front of her.

Melony adjusted her pack and spat out the mouthful of dirt she had just eaten, wondering if it was her load, or her heart knowing that she would be leaving this man soon, that had her feeling so heavy all of a sudden.

* * * *

A twilight glow had pervaded the land before they finally made camp. Melony had never been so exhausted, bruised and battered. She dropped her pack to the ground and silently went about the task of pitching her tent. Before she did so, she had to clear the ground of rocks and twigs and other debris, and lay the plastic tarp down. Afterwards she erected the small tent and laid her bedroll out. When she had finished she thought she would most likely die before morning came.

While she was in her tent, she afforded herself the luxury of tears. Good lord, when was the last time she had cried? Probably when her grandmother had died. There was no part of her body that didn't hurt. There was no part that didn't feel scraped raw.

She acknowledged to herself that her tears weren't of anger at Hunter for pushing her so hard, or regret for taking this trip in the first place, but simply of exhaustion. Back home she was usually wound up tight when she finally forced herself into bed around midnight, and she almost always awoke feeling the same way.

When her tears had subsided and she had dried her face with the sleeve of her shirt, she emerged a few minutes later, feeling slightly better at having expelled her well of self-misery, something she almost never did. She looked up and saw that Hunter's tent was already up and he was walking in the direction of her tent with the blue plastic first aid box in his big hands.

"I was just coming in to see what was taking so long. I thought maybe you'd fallen asleep on me." He eyed her with great scrutiny, but didn't comment on her puffy eyes and pink nose. She was grateful of the fact.

"I'm impressed." He was inspecting her palms.

"Why so?" She looked up at him.

He gave a sheepish smile and admitted, "I was so riled about the bear incident that I purposely took you on an extremely rough trail. And you stuck it out the entire day."

Her eyes grew incredulous as he went on. "Not once did you complain. Not when you fell in the river and got soaked clear through. Not when you sliced that pretty face of yours on a low hanging branch. Not when you fell down a hundred foot mountainside. You look like hell."

Melony was just about to call him a dirty bastard when he said, "And I feel like hell for putting you through it all. But I also have to admit that I'm damned impressed."

She felt herself deflate, and let out a sigh. She didn't have the strength for a verbal war or to kick his ass, as she'd like.

"Why don't you go down to the river and wash up?" His voice was soft and husky, and she couldn't help the little tremor that passed through her.

"I don't know if I have enough strength." She attempted a smile, but that proved too much of an effort.

Hunter reached out and plucked a few leaves from her tangled hair. "You'll feel better if you do, trust me."

"I do trust you," she whispered.

"Good." His hand wandered down from her hair to caress her lips. Her eyes were on him. He bent his head for a soft kiss, his lips and tongue doing all of the work as she simply leaned into the strength his never-tiring body offered.

"Why don't we take a bath together?" he whispered against the hollow at the front of her throat.

Her body stiffened. "I'm practically dead on my feet." *Did you hear that, Mel? You couldn't say no, could you?*

"Just a bath, Shepherd. Ye're too tired to lift a hand to wash your face, yet alone share in a session that making love with me would entail."

Why was she putting herself through such torture? The other night when he had laid his hands on her in his tent, she had spent most of the night awake and aching, wanting so badly for him to cover her with his warm, hard body and sink right into her.

"I can show you my bear bite." His voice held a teasing lilt to it and she noticed that whenever he became aroused or angry his accent thickened considerably. She liked the low, silky burr that ignited a fire within her just with a few spoken words.

"Hunter," she placed a flat palm on his chest that quickly turned into a fistful of plaid shirt. "Please don't do this to me. I'm in no position at the moment to fight off your advances—or enjoy them for that matter. All I want to do is fall into my sleeping bag..." His lips came down on hers once again. His tongue roused hers with its languorous sweeps and flicks. When he lifted his head, his smoky eyes drowsy, Melony smiled. "Let's go."

He nipped on her lower lip. "I thought you'd never ask."

After retrieving their necessary supplies, they walked over to the river, Melony feeling as if she was in a dream. She watched as he placed their dry clothes and toiletries on a small piece of plastic tarp a few feet away. He went to her side again. "Don't worry," Hunter murmured as his hands reached out to withdraw each of her shirt buttons from their holes. "All we're gonna do is get clean. I'll wash your back and you wash mine." She was graced with another heart-stopping smile.

"You can do that?" A small smile curved her lips. "You can actually get me naked and you naked, wash each other and not give in to the urge to make love?"

"I proved it just the other night, didn't I?" He peeled her shirt from her arms and let it fall to the ground. "Make no mistake that I want you, Melony Shepherd. But after living up here in isolation most of the time, I've learned to be a patient man when it comes to things I want badly. And I dare say you are the first thing I've ever wanted quite this desperately in all my years on this earth. When the time is right, I want you to come to me." His head dipped low to place a tender kiss at the valley between her breasts.

"You certainly are an enigma, McFadden." She closed her eyes at the ecstasy he awoke in her.

"No." He fiddled with the hooks at the back of her bra. "No mystery here. Just a man who knows what he wants and who is willing to wait for it. Although I can't deny that I want just a teasing glimpse of you to tide me over." He tossed the lacy bra aside that contrasted drastically with the severe clothes she wore. "Why would a woman hide behind such masculine clothes day in and out?" he asked, eyeing her shirt. "I know you're aggressive at your practice, but when alone, why would you choose to wear such boyish things over such a feminine body?"

She felt herself pulling back, but refused to let the past control this moment. "It's not like I'd wear a party dress while hiking."

He shook his head, sending a lock of hair down and over one eye. "It's more than that. Your clothes are masculine styles and labels. Why?"

"Let's talk about this another time." She pushed back the hair from his eyes and took his face between her palms, running soft kisses over his jaw.

“An’ that I will. Before we make love, I’ll uncover all of your secrets. I want you to come to me heart, mind, body and soul. And you will.”

Her eyes looked deeply into his. “Awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I’ve always been a confident man.”

Without another word, Melony pushed his head down to her breasts. Hunter groaned with sheer delight, laying his heated palms on the soft, white mounds. His lips closed around one rosy peak and Melony clutched at his hair. She knew what she was doing was probably wrong. Hadn't numerous disastrous relationships in her past proven that? But Hunter exuded something untamed and primitive, something soft and gentle, that she couldn't deny.

While his mouth savored each breast in turn, his hands went to work on her jeans, sliding them down her thighs, her panties taking the same silken trail a moment later. They had to separate their bodies so that she could remove her shoes and socks and slip her jeans and underwear over her feet.

Hunter ran his hands over her bare legs. “Mmm, how do you stay so silky smooth?” He rubbed his whiskered face against her abdomen.

“I brought a razor along with me,” she explained on a sigh as his lips traveled the same path his hands had taken. “I had no desire to smell, nor look like, one of the wild animals lurking out here.”

He growled. “You make me wild.” After placing a kiss on her navel, he stood up and smiled down at her. “My turn.”

A glow of desire lit her eyes as he brought her hands up to his chest. Her slightly trembling fingers worked at the buttons of his blue flannel shirt, exposing his silken chest. Boldly she slid each button of his jeans free. She noticed he wore no underwear. He removed his boots and socks.

“D’ye like what you see, Melony?” he asked a moment later when he stood before her, naked, hard and aroused.

All she could was nod. He was magnificent. And although her face was scratched as badly as her knees and hands, with Hunter standing there staring at her with those soft, admiring eyes of his, she felt more beautiful than ever.

“Only a bath, Shepherd.” He let out a short laugh before taking her hand and leading her to the river, bar of soap and shampoo in the other hand.

As they lathered and rinsed one another, her desire at an all-time high, Melony knew that this man was slowly, expertly, seducing her. With great ease and right under her nose he was breaking through every defense, every fear and phobia she had built up over the years. He was stripping away everything she had worked so hard to erect. And she was eager, yet afraid, to find the woman beneath.

Any further thought on her part was obliterated as she ran her hands over Hunter's soapy body and brushed her fingers over his erection that was still firm, bobbing with life under the clear, cool water. He gasped and her eyes raced to his. A smile curved one side of his mouth and a copper brow rose over one hazel eye that was flecked with gold. She wanted so badly to taste him, to feel him, to bring him pleasure as he had done for her.

Just as she reached for her goal, Hunter captured both of her wrists and brought her palms to his lips, placing a tender kiss on each center. “Only a bath, Shepherd, nothing more, hear me?”

Melony let out sound of frustration. This man wasn't going to be happy until she

begged him on hands and knees to make love to her. And the way he had her feeling, that wasn't too far in the future.

* * * *

By the time they finished their lengthy dip in the river, dried off, dressed and got back to camp, Melony was not only physically exhausted from their trek of the day, but her encounter with Hunter had left her emotionally drained as well. He was the most aggravating, frustrating, awe-inspiring, passionate and gentle man she had ever known. She warned herself once again about falling head over heels for the man. She came here a whole, if not slightly confused, woman. She intended to leave here as such, though hopefully not as confused. Going back home to nurse an aching heart was not on her itinerary.

"Have a seat." He gestured to the log that sat some ten feet away from the sanctity of her tent. "Let me take care of those scrapes."

"I'm perfectly able to take care of myself."

"Nonsense. I'll fix you right up."

Melony relented, all strength within her sapped. "All right." She took the seat offered, straddling the log.

Setting the plastic box at his side, Hunter went to work like a practiced physician, retrieving antiseptic, rolled gauze and cloth tape. "This may sting a bit," he warned before wiping the affected area of one hand with the medicinal-smelling pad.

Melony hissed a sharp breath between clenched teeth. Grabbing her hand, Hunter blew on the painful area. "Better?"

She nodded. It felt good having somebody fuss over her again after all these years. How long had it been? Her grandmother had died when she was seven, and she had never had a step-mother. Her father would have been the last person in the world to give her any TLC.

Letting the bitter thoughts slip away, she watched as Hunter wrapped gauze around her hand to protect the wounds, securing it with a piece of cloth tape that he ripped off between his teeth. She studied the intense concentration on his face; his brow furrowed, mouth firmly set as he repeated the procedure with her other hand before he went to work on her knee and face.

"All done!" he declared a few minutes later, kissing her bandaged palms and then the long scratch that ran from her cheek to the end of her chin. "Good as new, just as I promised you'd be."

Rising to his feet, he patted her still damp head and said he'd see what he could dig up for dinner. Melony told him she wasn't hungry in the least and with her last burst of strength she entered her tent, zipped it up tight and crawled into her sleeping bag.

An hour later, she was still tossing and turning. The bed was hard, and even the babble of the river and the murmur of the wind couldn't lull her to slumber. Insomnia plagued her, taking away some of the joy of traveling in this land of adventure. She couldn't sleep and she knew why: Hunter McFadden haunted her mind. With a mournful sigh she turned to her side, longing for a pillow instead of her rolled up clothes.

"You can't give in, Mel," she whispered in the murkiness of her tent. "It's for your own good as much as Hunter's. You cannot make love with him because you'll end up developing feelings for him." Even though it would be so easy and so incredibly magical

to jump into this, she wasn't one to believe in happy endings. It was better to avoid any further intimate confrontations with the man. No more kisses. No more baths in the river together.

Yes, that's all she had to do. But somehow, she knew it wasn't going to be as easy as that.

She thought about fishing out the vibrator she'd brought with her and relieving some of her tension, though after experiencing Hunter's brand of orgasm, she knew that cold plastic would leave her lacking. Damn him! Now he'd ruined a perfectly good outlet for her libido. *What else would that man destroy before she left here?* she thought with great bitterness.

Somehow, she had to put up that strong wall of aloofness that would keep him from entering her soul any more than he already had.

Chapter Ten

They were now nine days into their journey and Melony had done her best to avoid any further close contact with Hunter. Thankfully, he seemed to sense her trepidation and gave her the space she needed to sort through her jumbled feelings. At least that's what she hoped he was doing by not attempting to kiss her, touch her or bathe with her anymore. Or maybe he was just plain turned off because she didn't jump into the sack with him quick enough.

But that was silly, she counseled herself as they tramped over pleasantly level ground for a change; an open meadow brightly splashed with false azaleas, wild roses, violets and several types of berries. Hadn't Hunter told her he would wait until she was ready?

Now she found herself annoyed. He said he would wait for her as if he knew for certain that she would come to him one day begging him to make love to her!

Though isn't that just the thought that plagued her each and every night as she lay in her lone tent? While she listened to the wind and the songs of the night birds, she had resisted the urge to sneak into his tent and crawl into his bag with him.

Why hadn't she? Because she simply couldn't work up the nerve. And, more importantly, when she thought over all of the consequences of an affair with this man...

So she had stayed away, hoping that her detached friendliness would let him know that she did not intend to give in to the attraction between them. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

Then again, never was a long time.

"I think we'd better make camp," Hunter said, bringing her out of her musings. Her brain was her friend—and enemy—most of the time. The only time Hunter indulged in conversation was usually when they made camp for the night.

She noticed again that he was unusually stiff today, although his demeanor had been taking turns for the worse as the hours ticked by. He was once again that gruff army sergeant she had encountered when he'd first opened his door.

"Why are we making camp so early?" She stopped, grateful for the reprieve in their constant hiking. She bet they had hiked around the world twice by now, though according to Hunter they had barely completed little more than half of their journey.

"See those low clouds hugging the mountains over there?" He pointed directly in front of them.

"Yeah." They looked like great gray ghosts swirling around the face of the purple mountains.

"Could mean bad weather. I don't want to keep hiking and get caught in a thunderstorm. They can get rough up here." He shrugged out of his pack, resting it on the ground. "We'll make camp and see how it goes, that way if there's rain we'll already be set up and indoors where it's dry."

Melony didn't like the thought of rain. Trekking the wilds was good and fine when one was dry, but getting caught in a storm? She hoped he was wrong or that it would pass quickly.

"Okay." She looked at the man whose keen gaze was still focused on those smoky

clouds.

She set her pack down, and as had become habit over the past days, she started clearing the ground then set up her tent. A moment later Hunter joined her in the task and had his own up in no time. To Melony it seemed that he put up and took down his tent with the same ease as most people opened and closed umbrellas.

When they were finished with shelter, Melony hurried off into the woods in search of fuel for both night and morning. She found an abundance of branches, both big and small, and carried them back while Hunter readied their fishing poles. It was a nightly custom that Melony had quickly grown to anticipate. They would sit, side by side, lines cast into the water, talking in hushed tones, sharing in light conversation. The atmosphere was relaxing, though neither one delved too far into the other's life. For separate reasons, she supposed. And they would always walk away an hour or so later with dinner on the end of their rods.

Once she had told Hunter that she was growing tired of fish twice a day, whether it was trout, grayling, pike or Arctic char, and he had offered to hunt her a rabbit or any number of wild fowl. Just the thought of him using that huge, sharp knife on anything except a slippery fish made her queasy, so she'd eaten fish with a smile every day since then.

And now they sat side by side, as they had for the past nine days, near a wide stream this time. This evening she sensed something different in Hunter. He seemed tense, almost anxious.

"Hunter, is something wrong?"

"Let's just say that I don't like the looks of those clouds. They're getting too close, too low." Melony didn't like this tone of absolute concern and chose to remain silent the rest of the time they fished. When they got back to the campsite, Hunter started a fire and frowned. "See how the smoke lifts a short distance then beats downward?"

"Yeah." She held her still wriggling fish at the end of her rod. "Is that bad?"

"It just confirms my feeling that there's a storm brewing." He looked worried, though he forced a casual air. "Let's get dinner on, Shepherd, the sooner the better. You go over there and pick some berries while I dress and fry up the fish."

Melony went off in the area directed, on her nightly mission to find berries or whatever edible plants were handy. Hunter knew how she turned green whenever he'd start cleaning fish and hadn't said one derogatory thing about her weak stomach. Instead, he sent her on nightly berry hunts. She was grateful for his thoughtfulness where her stomach was involved and she usually searched a wide area for the blueberries, cranberries or salmonberries, but tonight she would be sure to stay close to camp. Hunter didn't like the look of those clouds. And she didn't like the concerned look on his face.

* * * *

After they ate and Hunter went off for his nightly bath, Melony sat in front of the fire. Not only did it warm her body, but the smell of the burning wood and the colors of the flames as they danced about were also food for her soul. It struck her as odd that she hadn't once thought about her practice back home since arriving here. Well, not in any great detail, anyway. No, her entire universe at the moment was focused on Alaska and Hunter McFadden. Her life was simpler at the moment than it had ever been, yet highly complex at the same time, mostly because of her twisting and turning thoughts where

Hunter was concerned.

She poked at the fire with a long stick, mesmerized by the glow of the burning wood. The day was unusually short, and long before it was time the sky had changed color from saffron to a deep blue. The moon had started on its pathway across the sky, though it was obscured by quickly gathering clouds.

"Your turn." Hunter's deep voice came from directly behind, bringing her out of introspection. "Don't take long. Only tend to the necessities, no frolicking about as you usually do. I don't know when the storm is going to hit, or how bad it will be." He handed her the items she would need. "The temperature is dropping quickly. It's going to be a cold night," he warned.

Melony remained mute and only nodded. She didn't like the look in his eyes. Hunter had lived here long enough, slept under the stars enough times to know what he was talking about. He had been blessed with a mountain man's sixth sense, and if he was uneasy over an approaching storm, she knew it must be a doozy. Without a word she went into her tent and retrieved her pajamas.

When she started walking to the area designated for her bath, Hunter called after her, "If you have any trouble, just yell."

"I will." Lord, she was only going to take a bath, not trudging off to the front line!

By the time she had finished a quick, five-minute bath, she understood Hunter's concern. A strong, chilly wind had picked up, and even though she sported her thermals, turtleneck, Windbreaker, wool socks and shoes, she still felt its cold bite all over her skin as if she stood there without a stitch on.

"I was just coming to find you. It's moving in fast." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, walking with her back to camp. Melony noted that the campfire was already put out. "We need to turn in early if we're to get an early start. If that storm is half as bad as it looks and smells we'll need to head back to the cabin come morn." The harsh breeze sifted through his hair and stirred up dead leaves all around them.

"Okay." Melony was infinitely grateful at the moment that she had Hunter with her.

When they reached the campsite, she saw that her tent was being whipped around like a sheet on a clothesline. "Will it hold through all of this wind?"

"Aye, the stakes should keep it in place come hell or high water. I don't want to scare you, Shepherd, but it looks like we'll be facing just that." He forced a smile. "Or, I could be wrong and we'll awaken to sunny skies."

"Don't lie to me, Hunter." She turned to face him, grabbing hold of strong, powerful arms. Right now, she wished those arms were wrapped tightly around her waist. She hated storms. "You know this land a thousand times better than I ever will. It's going to be bad, isn't it?"

Hunter reached up to tuck a stray lock of damp hair behind her ear, taking the opportunity to caress her cheek. "'Tis a far easier and better thing to candy-coat the truth than to frighten you, little one."

Her voice dropped, her eyes were pinned on his. "I want to know."

"I've a feeling we'll be heading back come daylight."

Reaching down, he unzipped her tent for her. With a peck on the top of her head, he watched as she crawled inside and got into her bed. "Don't hesitate to knock on my door if you find yourself in need of some body heat." He winked and bid her good night, zipping her tent back up.

Sometime later Melony could hear the pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof of her tent. It was a restful sound in the beginning, until the water began to fall in torrents; the wind whipped ceaselessly at her tiny nylon shelter, lightning slicing the otherwise darkness, and thunder rumbling the ground beneath her.

She scrunched herself into a tiny ball, feeling just as she did when she was a little girl and a storm would hit. Back then, she'd never had anyone to go to when she was frightened, unless she was staying with her grandmother. But for this very short time in her life, she had one big and rugged mountain man to which she could go.

Just when she began to chide herself for her childish case of nerves, a bright flash of lightning and another crash of thunder sent her scurrying out of her tent and into the raging storm.

"Hunter!" Water poured over her. By the time he had his flap opened and was pulling her inside, she was drenched clear through.

"I've been expecting you." The sky, though darker than usual, still had a twilight glow that allowed Melony to see clearly in the dry tent. Hunter stood before her on his knees, his hair tousled and the half-inch growth of beard and mustache covering his upper lip and chin. He wore a gray sweat outfit that wrapped around his chest and thighs in a way she yearned to at this moment. "What sent you over to my tent?"

She didn't want to admit to him that she was scared spitless by a little thunder, lightning and a whole lot of water, so thought of a quick fib. "My—uh—tent was leaking." In the morning he wouldn't know that she was lying since in her haste to reach the sanctity of his tent, she had left her own open.

He reached behind her and zipped the two separate flaps that instantly shut out the cold wind and rain. "I'm glad you didn't waste any time coming over then. You could have gotten much wetter than you are now." He grinned, leaned over to one side of the tent and produced a dry towel for her. "Although I can't see how that would be possible. In fact, you look very much like a drenched mouse." He placed the thirsty material over her head and gently blotted her hair until it was no longer dripping. Then, as if he had every right in the world to do so, he bid her to raise her arms as he stripped off her wet shirt, her socks, and pants.

Tenderly, he dried her entire body, not making any attempt to touch her in any sexual way. With gentle motions he dabbed the water away from her face, arms, legs and torso. When she was dry and her shivering had subsided, he fished around in his pack and got her some dry things to wear: A sweat outfit in a dark green color. She had seen him wear it before at night, and she secretly reveled in this knowledge, glorying in his scent that surrounded her and the fact that she would be spending the night with this man. At the moment, she didn't give a damn if she appeared feminine and fragile—that's exactly how she felt.

He smiled down at her, white teeth flashing in the murkiness around them. "A little large, but at least they're warm and dry."

"Thank you." Her words came out on a soft whisper. Never had anyone taken such gentle care of her before. She was reminded of the night he had tended to her scrapes, the night he had thought only to bring her pleasure while depriving himself. Yes, Hunter McFadden was severe at times, and his sheer size was intimidating, but he was the sweetest man she had ever met. She felt herself falling for him just a little more, though she tried to prevent it, tried to deny it and definitely tried to ignore it.

“Tis my pleasure. Now why don't we hit the sack? We'll definitely need to head back tomorrow. After a rainfall like this the ground will be like walking on miles of wet, muddy sponge.” He smiled, but his eyes still harbored a hint of concern.

Hunter led her over to his sleeping bag and Melony started feeling a little uneasy. She would actually be sleeping with him tonight. And she wondered if sleeping was all they would be doing?

*

Hunter knew she was having second thoughts about coming over here. Never had he met a woman he wanted more, and never had he denied himself the opportunity that he was denying himself now, what he had been denying himself of for over a week. When they finally came together as lovers, he wanted it to be as perfect for her as it would be for him. Though he had hoped that they would have already reached that point, they still had nearly a week ahead of them. A week in a dry cabin, with a nice soft bed at their disposal.

“Come, Melony,” he whispered near her ear. His hand slid up her back and softly massaged the tense muscles at the base of her neck. “We've got a long hike ahead of us come tomorrow. We need sleep.” He maneuvered her down and into his bag. He placed a soft kiss on each of her eyelids to close her eyes before his mouth found hers and sampled its sweetness for a moment.

Just as the kiss was escalating, he broke it off, planted a small peck on her nose and lay down beside her, tucking her into the crook of his body. Oh, how he liked to tease! He knew that having a bit of patience where Melony was concerned would make it well worth the wait. Just as he had an intuition when it came to the wilderness around him, so too did he know that Melony would be the most passionate lover that he had ever experienced. And he was trying, bit by bit, to bring her passion to the surface until she was insane with want of him.

And when she left, what would he do then?

He didn't rightly know. For the moment, he refused to think of the time when she would be leaving him and he would be alone again.

Pulling Melony closer to him, enjoying the sweet heat that radiated off her and was absorbed into himself, he breathed in her feminine scent, knowing that this woman had ingrained herself upon his senses for always.

“Why are you doing this, Hunter? She asked after they had lain there quiet for several minutes.

“Hmm?” She roused him from the threshold of sleep.

“Why are you behaving this way with me? It's incredibly confusing.” She tried to pull away from his embrace, but his arms only closed around her tighter.

“Behaving which way?”

“This is weird.”

“Weird?” His voice was a low, sleepy little sigh of confusion.

“Yes, weird. You're a man, I'm a woman, we're sleeping in the same sleeping bag, yet you've made no pass at me except for a good night kiss.”

Hunter propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her through heavy eyes and a furrowed brow. “I told you, I'm a patient man when I want to be.” He reached out to trace the line of her lips with a big finger. “I want you, but you've been hurt in your past, little one. That Jerry lad who you were engaged to burned you badly. And he's the

only one you've told me about. I suspect there are other men who have hurt you, too." His heart did that funny little flip as she looked up at him in the weak light.

He continued, "I'm hoping that your short time in Alaska will heal you so that you'll trust me enough to let me in here." He tapped a finger softly to her chest in the area of her heart. "When we make love we'll do it together. Giving, receiving, sharing, together as one. I won't take anything away from you without leaving something of mine in return. You have my word."

"What if I'm never ready?" Her voice sounded small and unsure. "What if that helicopter comes and I still haven't come to you?"

His lips twisted as he looked down at Melony, her hair splayed over his makeshift pillow, her blue eyes unsure—that was a look he wanted to erase. "I won't regret anything. And if you don't come to me, that will be your choice and I won't harbor the guilt knowing that I coerced you into making love."

"Will you kiss me again? Now?" She reached out to caress his cheek.

"Aye, it will be my pleasure." His lips found hers, as did his teeth and tongue. His hands wandered up under her shirt, running his palm along her ribcage, outlining each rib, before sliding upward to the outer slope of her breast. He wanted to take it all the way this time. He had no doubt that Melony would succumb to him. But that was just it: he wanted her to initiate, not submit.

With a feather light stroke of his tongue over her lips, he whispered good night.

Once again, Melony lay in the hollow of his body like two spoons nestled against one another. He realized how right it felt, and that realization scared him just a bit.

"My father never wanted me," Melony whispered in the quiet darkness around them while the storm raged outside their nylon haven.

"Now why would you be saying that? Any father would be proud to have a beautiful and talented daughter such as you." He held her even closer to him, if that was possible. This, the baring of Melony Shepherd's soul, was what he had been waiting for. Anticipation coursed through him.

"It's true." Her voice was low. "My mother died in childbirth. He always held animosity toward me for the fact, and I always felt that if I hadn't been born she would still be alive. He loved her very much."

"That should have made you all the more precious to him." His voice was soft as it winnowed through her hair. "He lost the wife he loved, but he had a daughter who was a part of the woman. A living legacy of the love they had shared."

Melony let out a little laugh. "It sounds so beautiful the way you put it. I wish my father could have known you. He died nearly a year ago of a heart attack." She turned to her other side so that she was looking at him. Her fingers traveled up the curve of his jaw and into his hair. Hunter asked her to finish what she had started. "When I was younger I would join any and all sports, hoping to gain his affection and admiration. When I got older, I followed in his footsteps and became an attorney. I started my own practice with my partner Brenda Zimmerman. I tried harder, pushed myself more and more. But it was never good enough, simply because I wasn't good enough. Because I wasn't a man."

"I don't like to speak harshly of the dead, but your father was a fool for treating you so badly. He lost his wife, but you lost a mother *and* a father since he was never there for you. All you had was each other, which should have brought you closer together." He held her against him, running his hand up and down her slim body. "Such a waste," he

murmured against her hair, his hand dipping down to run soothing circles all over her back.

Hunter no longer wondered why Melony felt she had to be so aggressive. Why she chose to dress in such unfeminine clothes. Now that her father had passed away, she didn't know how to un-mold herself from the hands of time that had shaped her. Little did she know she was doing a fine job of it as far as he could see. Even in this short amount of time, she was much different from the spiny woman he had met on his doorstep.

"Who hurt *you*, Hunter?" Melony said against his chest. "I see it in your eyes. Heard it in your harsh voice the first day I arrived at your cabin. Tell me about her."

He tensed at first, but relaxed as his hands wandered over her body in little rhythmical sweeps, from her neck to the end of her spine and lower still with each passing motion.

"My tale isn't nearly as sad as yours. The memories have faded over the years, as has the bitterness."

She propped her chin on her fist to look into his eyes. "Did you love her? Your fiancée?"

"I thought I did. For three years, I convinced myself that I was in love." His hands had roamed beneath the waistband of the sweat pants she wore and was sliding them over her bare bottom.

"Ginger Wynne," he continued. "She was an accountant. I met her while walking the beat one day. She was just coming out of the office where she worked. I accidentally-on-purpose bumped into her. I apologized. She liked a man in uniform. We started dating and became engaged six months later." His tone was matter-of-fact.

"Don't stop now," Melony said when his hand stilled and his words stopped.

Hunter made a soft sound and continued both activities. "Ginger was very organized and had every day of her life planned in advance. She was very quiet and reserved, but she knew how to get what she wanted by using her body, or if all else failed, through tears. It worked for a while, but for the last five months of our relationship we slept in separate rooms. After the shooting, I decided I wanted more from my life than what she had planned. So, I sold the house and minivan—for our future children. Two," he added. "Through a friend I heard about this land for sale up here and I bought it, sight unseen. Been here ever since."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out for you and Ginger." Her eyes traveled over his face and landed on his lips. Hunter felt his heart quicken.

"I'm not. Two people shouldna' be together if they don't love each other. Besides, if I were still with her I would be a miserable cop in a miserable relationship. I wouldna' be here with you now; holding you, yearning for you..."

"Kissing me," Melony breathed on a silken sigh.

"Aye, especially that." His lips claimed hers, his hand working at the waistband of her pants until they were off. Melony didn't even try to resist him as he pushed her onto her back, lifted the hem of her shirt and fastened his mouth on one breast and then the other. Didn't protest one bit as he rained kisses down her stomach, over the skin of her inner thighs, and slid his tongue with expert moves over her clit.

When he brought her to climax, her hands gripping at his hair, willing him closer, Hunter nearly went mad with desire. His dick was pressed against the cloth-covered ground beneath them as he lay between her legs. As hard as he was, he bet he could dig

his way to China right about now. It was with the utmost restraint that allowed her the pleasure of release, while he denied himself yet again, willing away the rock-hard erection that had plagued him nearly every moment of every day and night since she first arrived.

For a moment, he wondered why the hell he kept putting himself through such torture. But when he felt Melony's body relax, heard the sigh of satisfaction on her lips and saw the look of total abandonment in her eyes, his resolve toughened once again. Slowly, he was luring her out of the tough shell she wore and turning her inside out.

When he slid every inch of himself into Melony Shepherd's sweet heat, he wanted to know that she was the woman she had come here to find. And not a moment sooner would he make love to her.

Chapter Eleven

Hunter awoke the next morning to the insistent sound of rain and wind battering the tent. His left palm closed around one plump mound and discovered that he had taken possession of Melony's breast some time during the night. He smiled. If only he could wake up this way always. Ah, but what woman in their right mind would like to spend the rest of her life in the Alaskan outback? Especially an attorney who probably had every amenity known to modern man and a flashy sports car parked in her garage back home.

But, he still had near another week with her. One he hoped would be filled with more moments of passion as they had shared last night. Again, he tried to ignore the looming day when she would leave.

He slipped from the warm bag clad only in his sweats, trying to ignore the insistent hard-on that plagued him. How he'd love to slip back into the sack and right into Melony, feeling her warm and slick and gripping his dick tight.

Hunter changed his line of thinking and into more appropriate clothing for the rugged trek home. It would be rough getting back to the cabin and staying here any longer in the name of sex, either real or fantasized, would only slow them down.

Luckily, he knew a shortcut that would take only a five-mile hike, though the terrain wasn't exactly friendly.

Just as he was pulling on his socks, Melony stirred, mumbling his name in her sleep. His body hummed with the slow, husky sound of her voice. She was dreaming of him.

Her eyes opened and a lazy little smile crawled over her lips. "Lay soft, little one." His voice was low and smooth. "I'll go fetch your things from your tent. If we're in luck your clothes might still be dry."

Melony scooted up into a sitting position, dragging her fingers through her hair. Hunter shrugged into his waterproof coat and slipped the hood on his head. He then disappeared through the flap, out into the driving rain, returning a moment later with her drenched pack, his own body just as wet. Zipping the flap closed again, he pushed the hood off. "I think your things are still dry, although I can't say the same for your sleeping bag and tent. There must be over an inch of mud and water in there."

"Does it look like it will let up?" Her eyes were still drowsy and he wanted nothing more than to kiss her soft lips and ride the storm out with her on top of him.

"Aye." He tossed her pack to the side of the tent. "I think we'll be in for a reprieve in an hour or two. And we've got to be ready."

Melony climbed from the warm bag and went to the other side of the tent where her pack lay. "How are we going to make it back to your cabin when it took us more than a week just to get here?" She dug around inside, pulling out dry clothes and under things.

"I know a short cut. My place is only five miles from here, but the route is rather treacherous." He saw her eyes grow wide for a second. "Relax, Shepherd. I have no doubt in my mind that you'll make it fine. You've already breezed through everything else I've put you through." He grinned.

"I hope you're right. Those hikes weren't through the pouring rain, though." She sighed, sitting back on her heels. "But, what choice do we have? Stay in the tent until the

storm ends?"

"That wouldn't be wise or possible. It could get worse." He looked right at her as he said, "I've complete faith in you, Shepherd."

Hunter turned and began to roll up his sleeping bag. Melony lifted his shirt over her head and folded it, setting it beside her. After a moment, she swiveled her head in his direction and saw that he was staring. He made no apology.

Melony crossed her arms over her breasts. "I guess I shouldn't be feeling so modest all of a sudden. After all, we shared a bath in the river and a couple of episodes in this very tent." She averted his gaze. "But do you think you could ... um...?"

Hunter threw his head back and gave a hearty laugh. "Take comfort in the fact that I willna' be attacking you, Shepherd. Now isn't the time, or the place. We've got to get back to the cabin where it's safe and dry."

"It—it's not that."

Hunter's smile faded and he pressed his lips into a thin line. Things were moving way too slow. He was hoping to start gaining her trust, especially after the soul-to-soul talk they had shared the previous evening while cuddling in his sleeping bag and the session of oral sex, but she was as skittish as ever. With a heavy sigh, he turned his back to her. "There." His one word came out somewhat harsh.

He heard her rustling around. "I'm dressed," she said after a few moments of strained silence. "Where are my boots?" She looked around the murky tent.

"Filled with muck and water. You'll have to make it back home in your running shoes." He looked at her then. "You should have closed your flap last night." His tone was soft yet accusing.

"What are we going to do with my stuff?" She ignored his reprimand.

"We'll have to leave it and come back when the storm's over. Lugging back a load of wet items wouldn't prove to be very comfortable."

By the time she finished with her shoes and brushing her hair, the rain had let up some. "Let's get a move on. We need to take advantage of the break in the storm. With any luck we'll be at the cabin before nightfall."

They hefted their packs up in unison, Hunter placing his hand at the small of her back, directing her outside. "We'll have to eat on the trail. I've got some squaw candy to gnaw on along the way. It isn't much, but it will tide us over until we get back."

Melony nodded and they started out, leaving the erected tents behind. The sky was oppressively low and a dingy gray color, so unlike the clear blue sky they had seen the past week. Hunter hoped they made it back before the storm got any worse.

* * * *

As they plodded along, water percolated into Melony's shoes and she again cursed herself for not zipping her tent last night. Her hiking boots would have been much more appropriate.

Occasionally, a fallen tree blocked their path, so they either had to walk around it or climb over it. Cold feet and an empty stomach helped to lower her degree of feeling. Her entire body was numb and humming, as was her brain. She knew that Hunter must also feel the pressure of trying to travel as quickly as possible before the rain started in again.

As they ambled along for some time in silence, Melony finally had to break the quiet around them. The only things she'd heard for the last half hour was the slosh, slosh,

slushing of their shoes upon the wet, marshy ground—the singing birds had evidently gone into hiding. “What’s a sourdough?”

He looked back at her. “Now where did you hear that expression?”

“Wally said you were the best sourdough around.” She laughed a little at her original preconceived notion of what Hunter looked like, and thought that maybe she was starting to become delirious.

“A sourdough is someone who has weathered a winter up here. I’ve weathered more than that out in the woods. They can be rough. It can also refer to someone who lives alone, and in earlier days it referred to the settlers whose main staple was sourdough bread. Wally probably meant it in the sense that I know my way around up here.” Melony saw the backpack rise and fall as he shrugged.

“Oh.” She was silent for a while longer then asked, “What’s squaw candy?”

“Curious today, aren’t you?” He flashed a wry smile over his shoulder.

“Just trying to pass the time and keep my mind off of the storm,” she truthfully replied.

Without missing a step or stopping at all, Hunter unzipped his jacket and reached inside, extracting a piece of cloth with something wrapped inside. “It’s a bit like beef jerky, although it’s made of dried fish.” He reached back and handed her a strip.

Melony took the desiccated, shriveled meat and tore off a piece with her teeth; Hunter was doing the same. “How do you like it?” he asked a minute later.

“It’s obviously an acquired taste.” She grimaced as she took another bite. And she thought sardines were fishy-tasting? But she was grateful to have something to eat.

He laughed and Melony felt that his grumpy mood was waning again. “It will at least satisfy the hunger in your stomach. When we get back to my cabin we’ll work on the rest.” The lilt to his voice left her no mistake as to what he meant and she couldn’t deny the thrill that coursed through her at the thought.

No longer could she hear the roar of the river or babble of any stream as they plodded over land that oozed beneath her feet like a carpet of jellyfish. The trees along this trail were a lot thicker and more abundant than what they had encountered previously. They wove in and out of the spruce and birch, slopping through the mud, climbing down ravines, climbing up steep slopes.

Melony lost her balance on a few occasions and went sliding through the mire, twisting her ankle a couple of times; it felt hot, throbbing and swollen. Hunter had tended to her injury, though she felt as if she had a bone protruding right through her skin. She knew it was only a sprain, but the chilly and wet weather decreased her pain threshold.

The rain had started up again and she was grateful for the drops that fell in an even cadence; they hid her tears of frustration. She wasn’t a baby, and if Hunter knew for one minute that she was crying she’d die, but she was tired, hungry, cold, wet and filthy. Her sprained ankle didn’t help. She bit her bottom lip and refrained from any whining and complaining. Hunter was used to the terrain, used to being alone or with men who had had some hiking experience. She knew they needed to get back home before the brunt of the storm hit.

Melony’s admiration for him grew as he trudged ahead of her, his footsteps always sure. He never slipped or fell, never lost his way. “Everything around looks the same to me. This tree looks like that one. That rock looks the same as all the rest.”

“Nonsense, nothing is ever the same, and is in fact changing all the time. You just

have to keep your eyes open, Shepherd. Pay attention to the little details.” He kept up his even paces. “Everything is different as we go along. The patterns of the leaves on the trees and beneath our feet, flowers, bushes, stones and fallen branches.”

All Melony could concentrate on was how badly her ankle hurt and the fact that frostbite and hypothermia were probably setting in. Against every ounce of pride within her, she gave in to her misery and said, “We’ve been walking forever, Hunter. How far left to go?”

“You’re in luck. If I had a fire burning in the cabin you’d be able to see the smoke curling up to the sky. In other words, no more than a mile left.” He then said in a warning voice, “We still have the river to cross yet. And with the storm it’ll be like wading through a witch’s boiling caldron.”

Melony grimaced. “Sounds fun.”

As they walked on, she could hear the distant sound of a river roaring, mingling with the falling rain and rumble of faraway thunder. Water dripped from her hair and into her eyes. She scrubbed a hand over her face to rid herself of the excess moisture. If she hated rain before, she literally loathed it now. “Are we coming up on the river?” She scampered closer to him as a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. The wind increased in violence. She reached out to grab a hold of his elbow.

Hunter looked over his shoulder and smiled, his hair dark and sodden. “The very river that runs only a few hundred feet in front of my cabin.”

Another bolt of lightning penetrated the air. The electricity didn’t zigzag across the sky in the usual manner, but filled the very air around them with blinding green, red and white flashes. Melony yelped and plastered herself against Hunter’s body. He laughed softly, stroking her back with one big hand. “I like having you close,” he bent to whisper in her ear, his cool, wet lips brushing her lobe. “Although I’d rather be dry and a mite warmer, perhaps in a more horizontal position.”

Thunder seemed to crack the sky like a fragile eggshell. Melony closed her eyes tightly. Hunter let out a low chuckle and said, “Let’s get a move on. I intend to have a hot meal tonight, not to be stuck out in this frigid rain.” He turned and started up a steep slope, creating a pathway for her to follow.

Melony gritted her teeth, falling into step behind him, anxious to get the last of their stormy trek over. A moment later when they were once again on level ground, a loud sound like wood splintering came from the thick nesting of tree branches overhead. Hunter and Melony both jerked their heads up in unison. Melony screamed just as Hunter dove into her, shoving her out of the way of a huge tree branch that had been ripped loose by the wind and was now crashing down toward them.

She was sent sprawling to the muddy, leafy ground, all air knocked out of her as she landed against the trunk of a nearby spruce. For a moment, she was disoriented as she tried to fill her deprived lungs with oxygen. When she managed to collect her dizzy senses and lever herself to her uncertain feet, she looked around for Hunter but didn’t see him anywhere.

“Hunter?” She walked a few feet ahead to where the giant leafy tree branch had fallen. The limb was as big around as her waist. It could have done some serious damage to her if Hunter hadn’t pushed her out of the way in time.

And then she saw Hunter lying beneath it. He was unconscious, blood oozing from one side of his head.

“Hunter!” She felt sick to her stomach and the ground seemed to sway and spin beneath her feet. Desperation set in as she tried to lift the huge branch off his so-still body. She took off her constricting backpack, wrapped both hands around the thickest end of the branch and heaved with all of her might. The wood budged and she dragged it off him. She raced back to his side, turning him over onto his back. There was a deep gash in the right side of his forehead and his eyes were firmly shut.

“Hunter,” she called his name on a choking gasp, shaking him by the shoulders, trying to rouse him. He gave no indication that he heard her. Frantically, she wondered if he had been killed. Tears clogged her throat, but when she lowered her head to his chest, she detected a heartbeat and his shallow breathing.

Rain was falling all around. The chilly wind froze her very bones. And Melony had never felt so helpless in all of her life.

She stood there looking down at Hunter, his softly bearded chin, his thick lashes fanned out over his cheeks, wishing this were all a nightmare. They had to get back to the cabin, but he was out cold. His wound needed tending to, also. Should she try to construct some sort of shelter for them and wait out the storm, wait and see if Hunter regained consciousness? “No.” What if Hunter went into shock? He had to be kept warm and dry.

Snapping out of her helpless trance and into survival mode, she looked around for Hunter's pack, seeing that it had somehow been ripped from his body and tossed several feet away. She went over, bringing it back to where he lay then reached inside and extracted the first aid kit. They had no shelter, and by the time she finished dressing his wound the bandage was already wet, though it was clean and would protect the large open gash from collecting any dirt.

Now what to do? She looked around as if help or an answer to her problems lay within the woods around her. She had to get them back to the cabin, there was no other alternative. They were nearly there, but they still had the river to cross.

All she had to do was travel in a straight path and she would find the cabin. But how could she get Hunter back with her? Even if she went in search of help, Hunter had told her that the nearest city was nearly fifty miles away. It was all up to her.

Several minutes later she had devised a stretcher out of two long branches about as big around as her wrist, and Hunter's sleeping bag. She would be able to drag him and his pack along the muddy terrain—as long as they had no more hillsides to climb. When they got to the river, she would then try to think of some way to get him across with her.

With a few grunts, she rolled Hunter onto the stretcher, secured his pack so it wouldn't fall off, and began pulling him over the relatively even ground, feeling like an ox with a heavy load.

For what seemed like hours, she slowly tramped through the wind and rain, oblivious to the foul weather around her, her mind only on one goal: to get Hunter safely home.

The roar of the river grew closer and closer with each baby-step she took, until she at last came to the roiling body of water. The relatively small and calm river she had seen when she first arrived now looked a mile wide and was racing by with all the force of a tsunami. That wasn't all that faced her. They were perched atop a high hill and the only way to get back to the cabin was to go down the side of this small mountain.

How would she get Hunter way down there? She peered over the edge and noticed that no bushes clung to the side of the giant slanted hill and no major rocks seemed to be blocking their path. There was only one idea in her head.

Hoping that her plan would work, feeling envious that Hunter was out cold and would not be witnessing the harrowing dangers they were facing, she dragged him over to the edge of the hill. Positioning herself so that she sat on the makeshift stretcher with his head lying on her lap to absorb any bumps they may encounter, she gave them a mighty push that sent them over the edge like a sled over snow.

Bumping and jostling, they slid over the slippery, slimy mud. Her stomach was in her throat and she kept her eyes tightly shut. If they were going to die, she didn't want to witness their grisly end.

For what seemed like an eternity they slid, scooting this way and that. At one point, she hit a sharp rock that jabbed her butt—she would be black and blue for sure.

At last, they finally hit bottom, toppling over onto soft, drenched grass. Melony let out a grateful breath of relief as she spotted Hunter's cabin just a few hundred yards away on the other side of the river. Nothing had ever looked so inviting.

She righted him on the mud-caked stretcher once again. "Now we have to figure out some way to cross the river." She shielded her eyes from the sheets of rain that beat down and saw the small dock where Hunter had a rowboat tied. Like a red buoy in a turbulent sea, she saw the tiny vessel bobbing up and down. If she could get to the other side, she could row the boat back over, put Hunter inside and row back.

Thankfully, she had developed some muscles over the past days, though she was nearing the point of exhaustion, operating on a hidden store of energy she didn't know she possessed.

Before leaving Hunter, she erected shelter for him out of the tarp from his backpack and some nearby branches, keeping him out of direct line of the wind and rain. With a prayer for his safety until she returned, she placed a warm kiss upon his cold lips and set out to attempt to cross the wild river.

Melony searched for an area that wasn't too swift, or too deep, and tried wading through to the other side. She soon found that she had better luck swimming, stroking hard against the harsh current that sent her drifting down stream. The water was like ice, though she scarcely felt the chilly temperature as her mind and body focused on surviving.

By the time she reached the other side, she was breathing hard and shivering to her marrow. Looking around, she saw that she was several hundred yards from her original destination. She raced over to the dock and the undulating boat. She had never been in a rowboat before, but figured it couldn't be too hard to control. If only the river current wasn't so swift.

Scraping her sopping hair from her face with an impatient hand, she went about releasing the knot from the thick rope that had the tiny craft secured. Once accomplished, she stepped into the rocking bottom and sat down in the very middle. Taking up the oars, she maneuvered the boat out into the river. The onslaught of water charged at her, requiring her to use all of her strength to progress even slowly. Since the river was quite shallow here, she was able to lodge the oars between rocks and use them as leverage. Soon her hands were blistered. How she wished for the bandages she had donned days before when her hands had been scraped raw. Her muscles ached from the unexpected work of rowing so forcefully, but she kept moving in a sloth-like fashion until she reached the other side.

Securing the boat to a large boulder, she went to get Hunter and, with great

difficulty, had him in the tiny craft with her some time later.

If she had thought that her first travel across the river in the rowboat was gruesome, with Hunter's added weight it was nearly unmanageable.

She finally made it just as the sun was going into its twilight reprieve. Once she was on the other side, about a quarter of a mile downstream from the cabin, she felt ready to burst into tears, but vowed to save the luxury until she had herself and Hunter safely inside the cabin and out of the elements.

* * * *

The living room was warm and bright with the fire Melony had lit. She watched in exhausted fascination as the flames danced across the logs, relaxing her aching muscles while the storm raged outside wilder than ever.

As a tremendous crash of thunder shook the small cabin, she smiled wryly, taking a sip of tea. There was no more fear left in her. The storm was going virtually unnoticed as she stared into the flickering fire.

Shock therapy. A small laugh passed through her lips. After getting both herself and Hunter to the cabin in the raging wind and rain, thunder and lightning, she had evidently developed immunity to it.

She thought of the unconscious man lying in the next room. She had gotten him into bed after stripping him bare, cleaning him up, drying him off and dressing his wound again. Afterward she had indulged in a humble sponge bath, dressing in one of Hunter's sweat outfits since she had somehow lost her backpack that contained all of her clothes along the way. She then made herself some tea, and scrounged some graham crackers and potatoes she found in the kitchen. The fare was simple and unimaginative, but was ambrosia to her ravenous appetite.

As she sipped another mug of Earl Gray tea, she ignored the throbbing of her blisters and ankle, and let out a sigh of pure satisfaction. She had done it. She had gotten herself and Hunter home safely. Now all she had to do was wait for him to wake from his unconscious state. She only hoped it would be soon. If not, help wouldn't be arriving for nearly another week yet.

After the fire died and the shadows grew long and dense in the house, the wind and rain still creating havoc outside the tightly shut door and windows, she went to the bedroom. Peeling back the covers, leaving Hunter beneath the sheet since he was buck naked, she crawled in beside him, not eager to spend another night on his slim army cot.

Melony smiled as she settled herself in, recalling the moments when she had hand bathed Hunter. Out of curiosity, she had searched for the bear bite he claimed he had acquired getting his rug, but found none. She *did* find that he was a magnificent specimen of the male species though. She had finished her job as quickly as possible after that, afraid that she would find herself doing something complete crazy such as taking that warm, soft dick of his in her mouth and offering him every bit of ecstasy he had given her on a few occasions now. Immediately she had abandoned the idea. She doubted he would enjoy it much when he was unconscious.

It was a relief to her weary bones to lie on a soft mattress with clean, crisp sheets, a warm blanket and a soft, downy pillow. She felt she had finally returned to civilization with all of its comforts. Wow, did she have a story to tell Brenda when she got back, she lazily thought as her eyes drifted closed. She frowned, not looking forward to the day

when she would be leaving.

For all of its discomforts and unpredictability, she found this place—and the man—seeping into her very heart and soul.

Turning to her side, Melony trailed a soft finger over Hunter's lips, a smile curving her own. She draped her arm over his naked chest, her palm resting over his heart so that she could monitor its steady rhythm, all the while trying to ignore the fact of how right this all seemed. How much she felt she belonged here, in this country, with this man.

With silly thoughts running through her mind of Hunter and copper-haired, hazel-eyed children in her future, she fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

“Can I assume that this is the invitation I've been waiting so long for?”

Melony's eyes flew open and she blinked a couple of times. “Oh! I was so worried about you.” Her hand trailed over the white bandage at the side of Hunter's head. “I thought you'd never come to.”

Hunter sat up, feeling dizzy, his head pounding like the wind outside. He looked around his bedroom. By the shadows that fell across the room at certain angles, he could tell that it was late morning. The last he remembered it had been late afternoon. “What happened? And how in the hell did we get back here?” His previous ecstasy at finding Melony in bed with him, warm and close and sleep-mussed, was quickly replaced by confusion as he realized that they were back in his cabin, in his bed, and not still out in the wilds in his tent.

“What do you remember?” She was sitting cross-legged next to him, her brows puckered as she examined him intently.

He frowned in concentration. “We were hiking back home because that storm came up on us. As I recall, it was getting worse the closer we got to the cabin.” He snapped his fingers and looked at her. “The tree branch fell and almost hit you, but...”

“But you pushed me out of the way.” Melony reached out to caress his hairy cheek.

“Aye. That I remember well.”

“It's still so incredible to believe we're alive and not crushed beneath that huge limb or drowned in the river.”

He nodded in affirmation, grabbed her wrist and looked into her eyes, puzzled. “What happened after that?”

She swallowed before answering him, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with a slightly trembling hand. “The branch hit you on the head. I was so worried when I saw you lying there unconscious and bleeding.” She dragged in a shuddering breath.

Hunter took her hand, entwining his fingers with hers as she continued. “But I knew there was nobody around for miles that could help us, so it was up to me. I made a stretcher out of tree branches and your sleeping bag—after I dressed your wound. I dragged you along until we came to the top of that giant hill on the other side of the river. I had no idea how to get us down, but I managed. Once at the bottom I made you a shelter out of the plastic tarp so you would be protected while I swam across the river to get the rowboat. I rowed it back over, got you inside and took us back across, and brought you here. An extra spurt of adrenalin, I guess,” she gave reason to her incredible feat.

Hunter listened intently, eyes trained on the amazing woman before him, his breath trapped in his lungs as he imagined what she went through ... just to save him.

“By the time I got you undressed and cleaned up I didn't have the strength to put you in any pajamas,” she said in way of explanation as to his bare state. “I made sure you were warm though.”

He peeked under the covers, discovering he was quite naked, and his mood shifted to lustful. “You didn't take advantage of me, did you?” He smiled wryly, one brow arched high in mock accusation.

“Hunter!” She slapped at his chest. “I barely had enough energy to drag myself into

bed after all I went through, forget about taking advantage of a comatose man! I did have enough energy to notice you didn't have a bear bite though." She lifted a light tawny brow at him in return. "On *any* part of your body."

Hunter frowned. "Are you sure you looked well enough? Sometimes it's hard to see."

"I searched every inch of you from head to toe, and every place in between."

He saw her blush from the neck up. "Did you now?" His voice was a satisfied purr. He liked the fact that Melony had taken the liberty to explore his body, although he much rather would have been awake for the experience.

"Yes." She didn't resist as he pulled her closer to him. "And you know something?"

"What?" He nuzzled the side of her neck, ignoring his pounding temple.

"I think you were teasing me. You don't have a bear bite anywhere on your body, of that I'm certain. And I think you probably got that bearskin rug at a garage sale somewhere. Or maybe it was a housewarming gift from your friend Wally." She teased him in return.

"Do you?" His lips had traveled up her neck, growing closer to her mouth, and Hunter couldn't deny the anticipation that burned deep inside of him knowing that he was going to kiss her again.

"Uh-huh." She gave a little nod, her hands wandering to the smooth skin of his upper torso.

"Is it so amazing to believe that I killed a bear? After all, you got me here—all two hundred pounds of me. I'm nearly as big as a bear myself."

"That's true," she said in a voice that lacked oxygen.

"You're amazing. Incredible." He planted a soft kiss on her delicately parted lips.

"You saved my life, Melony," he said in a low, silky tone, his breath mingling with hers.

"I can never thank you enough." He drew her nearer until she was draped over him.

"Such a brave woman," he murmured, running his fingers through her fine blond hair, massaging her scalp in a relaxing rhythm.

"Me?"

"Aye, you, Melony Shepherd."

"I only did what I had to do."

"Isn't that all any of us can do?"

She shrugged, her eyes on his lips. "I couldn't leave you out there to die."

He whispered something under his breath about wanting to die in her arms before his lips came down upon hers again. His body felt weak, but his passion for this woman was as strong as ever. She was brave and beautiful, and he not so suddenly found himself wanting her for more than just a few days of fulfilled desire. Melony was a life mate. But would she settle for a life in the wilds?

He didn't think she would, so he let the thought of forever with this woman slip away as his hands caressed her bare skin beneath his baggy sweats. Smooth, taut muscle covered her skin. And he had never felt so aroused in all his life. "Should I take advantage of the fact that I've woken to find you in my bed?"

She was still for several heartbeats, but pulled back and out of his arms. "I only have four days left, McFadden," she tried to sound dismissing, even harsh. "I thoroughly intend to leave here unscathed. I only crawled into bed with you because you were unconscious and I had no desire to sleep on that awful army cot of yours again."

She slipped off the bed, yet lingered by his side.

Hunter heaved a heavy breath through his nose, closed his eyes and rested his aching head against the headboard. "I want you bad, Melony. You know that." He thought to tell her that he wanted her for all time, but refrained from doing so. She couldn't even handle a casual fling of four days right now, much less a vow of forever.

"I know." She was in the doorway, holding on to the frame. "Believe it or not, I want you, too. More than any man ever."

His eyes snapped open, wild and fierce. "Then lie with me. Now. In my bed." He threw back the covers to reveal his aroused state. Although he had been knocked out for over a day, hadn't eaten in two, he was still eager to make love.

He saw her thinking as her eyes roamed over his body. Hunter wrapped his fingers around his shaft and started stroking. "Come to me, little one. Let me love you." He held a hand out in invitation.

"I—I can't." She tore her eyes from his groin and met his eyes. "I don't want an affair."

"Who said anything about an affair? And I already told you I wouldn't take anything from you without leaving something in return." His gaze was unrelenting, saying more than he knew she could believe in at the moment.

Melony let out a little gasp, her eyes wide as some realization came to her to which Hunter wasn't privy. "I'll get you something to eat," she said in a mere squeak. Quickly, she left the room, Hunter's hard, bewildered gaze on her back.

* * * *

Her mind spinning as she entered the kitchen, Melony leaned on the table for support. Her legs were about as boneless as her head must surely be as she realized she had fallen in love with Hunter McFadden.

How did she let this happen? She had been so careful to avoid any emotional attachment. They hadn't even had sex, for cripes sake! How could you lose your heart to someone when you hadn't relinquished your body?

But wasn't that what had captured her very heart and soul? He was waiting for her until she felt ready. And that touched her more deeply, stroked her spirit so profoundly, that she hadn't stood a chance of avoiding total emotional surrender. Not to mention the fact that Hunter was also gorgeous, muscular and had a heart-stopping accent.

She went to work in the kitchen, occupying her mind with preparing coffee, corned beef and sliced potatoes. If it didn't come in a can or was otherwise imperishable, Hunter didn't have it in his kitchen. And his extensive vegetable garden was surely under a foot of water by now.

Since no electricity ran to the house, a refrigerator was nowhere to be found in the small room. What couldn't be hunted or fished or picked or grown from the land, his once-a-month trips to Fairbanks provided canned goods and other necessities, he'd said.

As she poured the coffee and dished up the hot food, she marveled over her state of weakness when it came to that man and his wilderness. At first, all she had wanted to do was prove to herself that she could trek the wilds and hopefully find some answers to the problems that plagued her. Well, she had indeed accomplished all of those things, but she had also fallen in love with the simplicity and beauty of this land and unwittingly given her heart to the very man who lived in it.

Her only hope was to avoid him, avoid any close calls that would have her

submitting to their desires. And she would go home, slightly worse for wear, but stronger—spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally—from having spent time with this mountain man.

Just as she was placing two plates on the table, wondering if she should serve Hunter in bed, he came ambling in from the living room. His hair was damp and his face was as smooth as his golden chest. He wore a pair of snug, faded jeans, nothing else, as the fire she had lit in the living room warmed the whole cabin. He also wore a look on his face that was slightly grim.

“I see you managed to stay upright long enough to take a shower,” Melony said lightly, trying to avoid his overwhelming presence and the extreme scowl on his face.

“Aye. I’m glad to have the pipes in working order once again. Thank you for lighting the pilot.” He had told Melony that a year ago he had rigged up a system that would allow at least one of the fifty-gallon water containers that sat in a separate room of the house to provide hot water.

“No problem. I plan to indulge in a shower myself later on.” She tried to appear at ease, though every muscle in her body was experiencing a case of the jitters. Did he have to sit around without his shirt on?

She heard a chair scrape back along the wood floor and Hunter settle his body down. He let out a small groan. When she turned to lay a fork next to each of the plates, she saw that his fingers were busy massaging his temples. “Your head is bothering you, isn’t it?” She only stated the obvious.

“I’ll live,” came his short reply. Avoiding her gaze, he picked up his fork and dug into his food like the famished man she knew he must be.

With a shrug, Melony pushed up her sleeves and took up the other chair, only picking at her food. He was mad and had every right to be. She wanted him. He wanted her. She had teased him, unintentionally, along the days up until now. Yet she avoided what she knew would ultimately happen—if she allowed it.

“How’s your ankle?” He made an attempt at smalltalk.

“Much better.” She didn’t make an attempt to prolong the conversation.

After they had both remained silent for several minutes, Hunter asked, “What did you do to make that ex-fiancée of yours feel that you were clinging to him?” He was still frowning, looking intently at a slice of potato that he had just stabbed with the tines of his fork.

His voice startled Melony and she dropped her own fork. Oh, great, she thought with a vast amount of bitterness, they were going to sit and dissect her sorry excuse for a life—again. Then her mind did an abrupt turn. Hey, why not? They had nothing else to do since the storm was still coming down fierce outside. They were also stuck together for the next four days. Once she left here she would never see him again. What could it hurt to strip away any remaining shred of dignity she had? May as well lay out her entire life, open old wounds, let him laugh, find out who she truly was, and be done with it. At least maybe then he’d stop wanting her.

“Oh, things like getting jealous when I would find other women’s phone numbers on him. He said they were clients of his. He was stock broker.” Her eyes were fastened on her food. “I’d want to know where he was going if we had plans and he suddenly had somewhere else he had to be. He said I was being too possessive and suspicious. Toward the end of our relationship he said I had all of the passion of a frozen fish.” She flinched

as if the words had just been thrown at her again. “Funny, but that’s how I always felt about him, although I considered him to be *safe*. There were other smaller things, us bickering all of the time and so forth, but those were the biggies that made him ultimately do what he did.” She inhaled a shaky breath, her eyes refusing to meet his.

Hunter reached out to grab a hold of the hand that was impaling her food with a vengeance. “What did he do?”

“He...” She cleared her throat of the annoying lump of humiliation there. “He cheated on me. The very man who seldom had sex with me twice a week said that I was a lousy lover.” A tear spilled and she impatiently swiped at it.

“Hush.” He rubbed a rough thumb back and forth over the back of her hand, creating an arousing friction. “Did you ever stop to think that maybe he was having the affair simply because he was the type to do so? That he couldna' settle for only one woman? Those things you mentioned—clinging, possessive, jealous and all that, if a man were truly in love he would thank the heavens above for such an attentive woman in his life.”

“You think so?” She finally dared to meet his eyes. They were soft on her, filled with a tenderness that had never been bestowed upon her by any other man—not even her father.

“Tis a fact, not a thought.”

She gave him a wobbly little smile of gratitude. “Perhaps I was wrong, too.” When he lifted a light-auburn brow in inquisition, she elaborated. “I realize now that I never loved Jerry. I never knew my mother. I grew up with only my father and never had a step-mother. Once in a while we'd go to Wyoming to visit my grandmother, but it wasn't often. She died when I was seven. I never knew much love, so I invented it with Jerry.”

She laid down her fork, suddenly needing to purge these feelings from her soul. “I told you my father always held a grudge against me.”

Hunter nodded then said, “And that's why the severe clothing and domineering attitude. You wanted to compete with the ideal male your father had wanted.”

“Yes.” The one word was solemn as she realized how utterly foolish this charade had been her whole life. “I'm a damn good attorney, Hunter.”

“I've no doubt about that.” He smiled, his food forgotten. “You're a damn good woman,” he said honestly.

Melony felt herself flush. “Thank you.” She wasn't used to hearing such compliments, and felt slightly embarrassed, even disbelieving. What if he was just saying what she wanted to hear?

If so, he was doing a damn fine job of it.

“Tell me more.” He leaned back in his chair.

Melony gave a laugh of self-recrimination. “I only live for my practice. I have an ulcer, allergies, migraines—all due to stress and diet.” Her lips curved ruefully. “I took this course in an effort to change all of that. I needed a drastic change in my life to snap me out of the crash-course to a heart attack I was on. I was so afraid of ending up like my father, dead at fifty—or sooner, the way I was going.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” His eyes were bright and alive with an emotion Melony didn't want to ponder, yet filled her with contentment at the same time.

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “And so much more.”

“Is that a good thing?” His head was tilted to one side as if trying to read her thoughts.

“I honestly don't know yet. But I'll let you know as soon as I find out for myself.” The air was growing heavy with the weight of expectancy and denial. Melony became uncomfortable, rose to her feet and carried her plate over to the counter. Walking back to the table she reached for Hunter's half-finished breakfast. “Are you done here?”

Hunter grabbed her wrist, forcing her to meet his hungry gaze. “Shepherd,” he said her name in a low growl. “I haven't even started yet.” Melony knew that he wasn't discussing food.

Chapter Thirteen

Later in the afternoon Hunter settled himself in a chair in the living room, working on a piece of wood. For the better part of an hour he sat there—still shirtless—whittling with that small, sharp knife of his. His concentration was solely on his project and it wasn't hard for Melony to picture him carving during the winter months when he was forced to stay indoors. He probably never experienced a single moment of cabin fever. He looked perfectly relaxed. The muscles of his shoulders and arms rippled in a smooth, even rhythm that had Melony hypnotized, as the glow from the fire caressed the planes of his body with light and shadow.

Hunter had offered her a book from the many he owned when she had emerged from her shower, and she had accepted it gratefully, eager to keep her mind on something beside this virile man and the storm outside the small cabin. But she hadn't read a single paragraph of the murder mystery, as her eyes and brain were too enthralled with Hunter McFadden.

He worked the round slab of wood with such gentle care that Melony could easily imagine that he would be just as gentle a lover with any woman he was with. Indeed, she had been the recipient of just a small taste of it. She recalled how he worked those big, artistic hands over her body with the same fluid motions he was demonstrating now.

He ran a palm over the piece of wood, testing its smoothness—just as he had her skin. He examined it thoroughly, paying close attention to every sweep of his knife to make sure it suited his pre-planned idea. She fantasized about those same eyes on her, smoky green, examining every hill and valley of her body then his lips traveling the same course.

Her body heated quickly at the thought. Never had she been witness to such an act of seduction. And all he was doing was carving a piece of wood! But that's how it was with Hunter. He exuded a natural air of sex appeal, making everything he did seem like an erotic show. And that's how it would always be—if she allowed herself the privilege to think of an *always* with him.

Sensuality seeped from his every pore. A barely tamed lust and desire that matched the untamed beauty of the land in which he lived. And though Melony knew that she would be going home in just a few days, and taking the giant risk of leaving her soul behind, she decided to take the chance. Their relationship had gone way past the simplicity of attraction and mere physical lust. Now she found herself aching for his big, beautiful body down to her very core.

Mustering up every ounce of boldness she possessed, she got up from the chair she sat in and walked over to where Hunter was in front of the fire. As she approached him she detected the aroma of wood chips and his own body's natural scent; a fragrance that she would always relate with the great outdoors.

"Hunter?" Tentatively she reached out an uncertain hand and placed it on his bare shoulder. She could feel his muscles flexing beneath her palm, the warmth of his skin.

The scraping motion of his hand upon the knife, knife upon the wood stopped, but he didn't turn in her direction. She knew he wanted to hear the words from her lips.

Melony inhaled a shaky breath, letting it out slowly before she spoke. "Will you..."

Will you make love with me?"

Hunter turned in the chair, a stray lock of copper hair falling across his forehead. There wasn't the slightest hint of victory in his voice as he said, "Aye, Melony. I'll make love with you." Instead, his words sounded almost grateful.

His knife and slab of wood were carelessly dropped to the floor with a thud as he twined his big arms around her waist, nuzzling his face between the layers of clothing until he found the soft, sensitive skin of her abdomen. "D'ye know how long I've waited for this? Day and night I dreamed of the moment you would come to me, little one. I swore I couldn't take another moment of waiting." His words were hot and thick, mumbled against her rib cage as he worked his way up. "But at last you've come to me."

Melony's breath caught in her throat as his hands claimed her bare breasts. Hunter made her feel precious and cherished and brazenly female.

His hands trailed down, then up again to the side of her hips and waist, taking the black sweatshirt with him until he pulled it off altogether. She was bare beneath since her only bra and pair of panties she possessed right now had been washed out just a while ago. When he removed the baggy sweat pants he simply sat there staring at her. "You're beautiful, Melony Shepherd. Delicate and strong and beautiful." And then he kissed her stomach again, his lips wandering a little lower with each flick of his tongue until he nuzzled the silken nest between her thighs.

Melony threw her head back. "Why did I wait so long?" Her voice was a soft whisper. Ecstasy. It was pure ecstasy. And she never wanted it to end.

"Because you're stubborn and don't know what's good for you." In one fluid movement, Hunter was on his feet with her in his arms, heading toward the bedroom. "I want to make love to you on a cloud of silk and satin, but all I can offer is my bed." He bent his head for a gentle kiss then placed her on the mattress.

"It's enough for me," she assured him, her eyes taking in the sight of his bare chest and his hands as they worked at the buttons of his fly.

"No. It isn't nearly enough, but it will have to do." And then he was naked.

Hunter positioned himself over her so that their bodies barely brushed each other. As soon as she arched toward him, he gathered her up in his arms, holding her close and tight beneath him. Melony lifted her face. Hunter lowered his. And their mouths fused.

Melony shuddered with the sheer pleasure his kisses aroused in her. Her hands slid greedily over the corded muscles of his velvet back and shoulders. A tingling sensation twisted through her at the knowledge that she was finally giving in to the need that had been building between them for the past ten days.

"I've wanted you ever since I saw you bathing in my tub," he revealed, his mouth blazing trails over her entire body, heating her from the outside, in.

"I've wanted you since you opened the front door and stood there almost naked," she returned.

He let out a soft laugh. "I was mad as hell that you were a woman. I've not once led a woman on my course."

"And now?"

He growled in her ear. "Now I thank the fates that brought you to me."

As his kisses became more intimate, Melony said, "Would it turn you off if I told you I was a little nervous right now?" She tried to laugh, not liking the feeling of exposing her weak side—again. "This is all so ... real."

“No. In fact, your honesty arouses me even more—if that's possible. And you're right; this is very, very real.” Melony lifted a disbelieving brow. Her eyes opened as Hunter said, “I've not once met a woman who wasn't in the habit of using her body to get what she wanted. Past experience, you know.” He cupped her face with his hands.

“I'm sorry she hurt you.” Melony turned her head to press a kiss into his palm.

“We've all had our share of heartache, but the past is just that; the past. We canna' let it rule our lives and direct the future.”

“No.” She reached up and caressed his face, the soft skin there. “We can't.”

Hunter kissed her eyes closed, then his lips drifted to her mouth. Melony could feel the tense muscles in his back and shoulders as he fought to hold on to his barely leashed passion. He was taking it slow and easy, for her. And she loved him all the more.

“I want to please you, Hunter.” Her eyes were intense on him. “I want to make you crazy with desire, just as you make me.”

He looked down at her with that unnamable emotion glimmering in his eyes again. “Touch me.” He rolled to his side and Melony's hands streaked to his smooth chest.

“Touch me all over. And kiss me in those places, too.”

“My pleasure.” She skimmed her palms over his skin, brushing his nipples again and again. She smiled with satisfaction when Hunter gasped in delight. “Your chest has fascinated me since day one. It's so smooth. So soft.” She leaned forward and placed a kiss on the center of his chest over his heart, ran her lips over his flat nipples, bringing them to tiny peaks, bringing another low gasp from him.

He chuckled. “An' yours has fascinated me from day one, as well.” To prove his point he pressed her back against the mattress, lowered his head and captured one taut nipple with his lips—taunting, suckling, teasing. Melony was feeling things she never knew existed. When she had been with Jerry, he always sought to satisfy his needs, leaving her hanging.

With Hunter, she couldn't have asked for a more attentive lover. He went back to kissing her, concentrating on nothing in particular, but everything in general: her neck, her lips, her shoulders and back to her breasts until she was moving restlessly beneath him.

She felt the rigid way he held his body, the tautness in each and every limb, and she knew that he wanted her. “Mmm... I want to feel you inside of me.” She was trailing her fingers through the copper strands of hair on his head.

Hunter stopped his languorous worship to look into her eyes. “Why the big hurry?”

She averted eye contact. “Well, I just thought that you'd like to...”

“Melony, I'm doing exactly what I like to. And I'm doing it to you.”

She tilted her head against the pillow and smiled. “Okay.”

“Haven't I proved that to you over the days we've been together? Everything I do is as much for my pleasure as it is yours.”

Melony felt her entire body shudder at his blatant statement. “Jerry never wanted to spend more than five minutes total while we were in bed.”

Hunter sighed, resting his chin on her stomach as he looked up at her. “I'm not Jerry. And I would be greatly overjoyed if you wouldna' think of another man while I'm loving you.”

Melony grinned. “It's a deal.” And then his mouth traveled lower, finding a deliciously sensitive spot just to the very right of her clit she never knew existed. “Oh!”

“Hmm? Does that feel good?”

“Good?” She moaned. “It feels sensational.” The pleasure was so intense, building with each passing moment.

He grunted with satisfaction, his tongue and lips continuing their exquisite forays.

She felt sensations building in her like glitter that spread all over her body until she was enveloped in the magical sensation. And then she called out his name, her orgasm stronger than any she’d ever known. Hunter’s tenderness soon gave way to passion. Placing himself above her, he looked directly into her eyes as he slid inside, groaning as she hugged him with her warmth. “Ah, I do believe I’ve found heaven.”

Melony looked up at him, a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow, the fierce light of passion burning in his eyes. Hunter withdrew then penetrated again and again, deeper each time until he ultimately came deep inside of her, a rough cry of release coming from his lungs. Waves of climax pulsed through his body as he held her tight against him. Melony’s arms and legs were wrapped around him, glorying in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

“We were wonderful together,” he murmured against her lips, holding her close against him as he rolled to his side, nestling her in the crook of his body.

“Yes, we were, although I don’t think wonderful is the right word.”

“What else would you call a session of lovemaking as we just shared in?”

“As you said ... heaven.” She let out a satisfied sigh, staring across the room at the smooth paneled walls. But even if the most magical thing transpired before she left and he ended up falling in love with her, she couldn’t ask him to leave his wilderness, and she couldn’t leave her law practice.

Hunter chuckled and bit into her shoulder. “And that it was.”

“It was special, wasn’t it?” She gave herself up to the moment, determined to relish these feelings for all they were worth. When these few days were over, when she was back home, sitting in her office, looking over the smoggy, crowded city, she would allow herself to ponder over what had been lost—and gained. But for now, she would simply abandon her pessimism and bask in the afterglow of Hunter’s loving.

“Aye.” He inclined his head to capture a pink nipple between his lips. “Now that we’ve lain on my bed, what’s say we go try out that bearskin rug in the living room?”

Melony giggled, her body growing fevered at the thought of having sex with this man again. “So soon?”

“Are you saying you’re not up to it?” He then whispered wickedly in her ear, “Because I certainly am.” He took her hand, sliding it down to his pelvis where Melony wrapped her fingers around him, finding him hard and throbbing.

“Let’s go,” she murmured the words against the side of his neck.

* * * *

“Tell me about your dreams,” Melony asked as they sat at the kitchen table after sharing in a breakfast of sourdough hotcakes and Spam slices. Though she would have preferred bacon or sausage, it was much more palatable than fish twice a day and fireweed salad.

“Having a little heart-to-heart now, are we?”

Melony shrugged. “I just have a sudden desire to know. Usually I know all there is to know about a man before I sleep with him. Not that I’ve slept with all that many.” Her

lips tipped up in a pitiful smile.

“You know quite a lot about me already.” Once again, he had opted to leave his shirt unbuttoned, though Melony no longer had to control her roving eyes. She suspected that he did it just to arouse her, anyway. More than once, she had given in to her craving to feel his soft, golden skin and had indulged in the act of caressing and kissing every inch of him.

“That's true. Being out in the wilds and then spending the last three days in bed tends to bring two people close together. But I want to know more. Tell me about your dreams. What your plans are for the future.” Ever since she had gone to him those days ago, they had spent most of their time making love, talking and eating to regain lost energy. The storm had let up last night, yet they had decided to stay in the cabin until Wally came back. Which would be tomorrow. Her heart suddenly felt heavy as she watched him run water into the left side of the sink and put the dishes to soak for a few minutes while they finished their coffee.

She had hoped that Hunter would have made some declaration as to his feelings for her by now. Said he loved her, wanted her to stay with him. But he hadn't. Neither had she, for that matter. She knew he was a stubborn Scot who refused to make the first move. And she may very well lose him because of her own stubborn refusal to speak her true feelings. But she couldn't take that step. If he cared for her as she did him, he would tell her. If not, then they were never meant to be and this would all be a bittersweet memory for her to look back on.

“My dreams?” He carried the empty plates over to the counter. “Are you all right?” He was at her side, placing a cool palm against her forehead. “You haven't contracted some flu-bug, have you?”

“I'm fine.” She forced a happy smile, forced herself to look into eyes she dreamed of getting lost in for the rest of her life.

He didn't seem totally convinced, but carried the cups from the table to the sink. “What were we talking about now?”

Knowing he wouldn't let her touch a dish, she leaned against the counter and watched as he performed the tedious duty that her automatic dishwasher performed back at home. “What your dreams were for the future.”

“Ah, yes.” He avoided her eyes as he concentrated on his task. “Someday I hope to build about ten cabins around my property so that other people can enjoy the peace that I do everyday. They can have a slice of nature for a few weeks out of the year.” He sighed and she wondered what had suddenly changed his mood, but didn't ask. “I'm also thinking of having courses during the winter, although I'm not too keen on freezing my arse off out in the snow. You'd be surprised at how many letters I get asking about winter courses.” They shared in a moment of companionable silence before Hunter asked, “What about you? What are your dreams?”

Her eyebrows slid together in a harsh frown. “Me?” The words were foreign to her.

“Aye.” He tapped a soapy finger to her chest. “You. Melony Shepherd.”

“Well, I suppose if one went by all of the things I've accomplished in my life they would think I've realized all of mine.”

“You haven't?”

She shook her head, and revealed, “I don't want to go back home. I'm so afraid that the peace and inner tranquility that I feel now—a feeling I've never, ever known in my

past—will vanish the moment I leave here and step foot back in the city.”

“Have no fear, little one.” He looked at her and Melony saw something in his eyes that she couldn’t decipher. “Alaska’s wilderness has already seeped into your soul; it will never leave you again. As the river engraves itself into the land, so too does the peace this state brings. And I guarantee that you will never be the same again.”

No, Melony silently acknowledged, she never would be the same again. More so for having known this man than the country in which he lived. This rugged, gentle man had left an indelible mark upon her soul.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms, to beg him to ask her to stay, to say that he loved her. But he would do neither. Because his pride refused to let him and because he was leaving the final say up to her.

Or perhaps for the very real possibility that he didn’t want anything from her other than some wrestling matches between the sheets.

Melony pushed the sobering thought away, took the towel from the counter at her side and started wiping off Hunter’s hands just as he finished the last dish. Her eyes watched his face, trying to record each and every inch of him for all time. “Let’s make love.”

He blinked hard, then smiled. It looked somewhat small and broken, just as she felt inside. She wanted to ask him what he was thinking, what he was feeling about her looming departure, but was afraid that she may not like the answer. So she remained silent, giving a little tug of his hands, needing to show him without words her deep feelings for him.

“Are you seducing me, Melony Shepherd?” He allowed her to pull him along with her with great ease.

“Aye, Hunter McFadden. That I am.” She led him to the bedroom and over to the bed. “Now, tell me, what do you think about that?”

Hunter groaned as she slipped his shirt off his arms, letting it fall to the floor, and began raining gentle kisses over his chest. “I think I’m in for another trip to heaven.”

* * * *

Hunter lay on his back with Melony in the crook of his arm, thinking. Tomorrow night, and for the rest of his life perhaps, he would go to bed alone.

He toyed with a strand of her hair, trying to force away the burning sensation in his throat as he thought of those nights, and days, without this woman.

“When I was lad in Scotland, I found a small, injured bird laying in my yard one morning.” His voice was a low whisper. “I took the little thing in and vowed to give her all of the love and care she would need to recover. I built a cage in my spare time after school, fed her, kept her warm. My father put a splint on her wing where it had been broken.”

Melony looked up at him, her hand running gentle circles over his chest.

“As the days and weeks passed, I grew to care for that little bird quite a lot. She brought me so much happiness whenever I would hear her singing as if only to me, thanking me for taking her in and caring for her. And her feathers were so soft. Often I would take the bird from its cage simply to hold her.” Hunter ran his hand along Melony’s back, remembering a time of long ago.

“One day my father came to me and told me it was time to let the bird go, that her

wing had healed and was ready to go back to her home in the wilds. I pleaded with him to let me keep the bird, told him that she was mine, but he said it wasn't fair to keep something against its will. That you couldn't force something to stay where it didn't want to be. And that if I let her go and she came back to me, then she truly was mine." The motion of his hand stopped and his words came out soft and strained. "With tears in my eyes I opened the cage. The bird peeked her little head out at me, cocked it to one side as if bidding goodbye, then looked at the sky above and took off into the clouds."

"What happened to your bird?" Melony asked as a heavy mist forming in her eyes.

"I never saw her again," was his grim reply. And he held Melony fast and tight, knowing that tomorrow his little bird would fly away. Would she return to him? Or was she never meant to be his?

"That's so sad."

Lifting her body up until their lips met, Hunter claimed her with a kiss that spoke of his need to keep her with him always, and the knowledge that he would have to let her go.

* * * *

"I think that does it." Melony tossed her shampoo into the paper bag Hunter had given her. "You'll send me the rest of my things when you collect them?"

"Aye." His tone was clipped.

He made a production out of changing the sheets. As if he was trying to rid his home and his memory of any trace of her. He banged his shin on the foot of the bed and cursed fiercely. The air in the small bedroom was thicker than the lump of emotion Melony felt growing in her throat. Was he merely dismissing her, or was he as unhappy over her eminent departure as she was?

"I can't just leave my practice," she blurted out as he stood in front of her, back stiff, head bent.

"No," he agreed, refusing to face her. "Not if it means that much to you."

Did it? she wondered. She had been so wrapped up in doing what she felt her father wanted her to do that she had never taken the time to follow her own heart's desires.

Hadn't that been the same trap Hunter had found himself in five years ago? Wasn't that why he moved out here? He had followed his heart. His own longings. Not what he felt other people expected from him. Unfortunately, she wasn't quite so confident in her thoughts, and couldn't even begin to uncover any longings her heart may harbor.

"You'll probably be glad to get back to civilization," he made an attempt at smalltalk as he folded back the top of the deep green spread.

"I guess so." They lingered in the bedroom, Hunter sitting on the side of the bed, Melony standing a few feet away, not wanting to leave the place where they had come to spend so much time not only making love, but building a bond between them that neither one would admit to.

When neither one spoke for several heavy heartbeats, Hunter turned away from her. "Here." He reached into the nightstand and withdrew the wood piece he had been working on. It was a picture frame; ornately and lovingly carved by Hunter's artistic hands. "Whatever picture you decide to put in here, I want you to think of me and the time we shared together."

Tears burned in Melony's throat as she took the frame from him, noting the twisting

vines, flowers and leaves he had painstakingly carved into the hard wood.

Just as Melony was going to swallow her fears and uncertainties and admit her love for Hunter, ask him to not let her leave here—a place she had come to love in such a short amount of time—the steady whir of helicopter blades fast approaching could be heard.

No! She wanted to scream. It couldn't end like this. So severely, so completely, so eternally. “Hunter,” she hesitantly began.

“You're going to miss your ride, Shepherd.” He rose from the bed and stood before her, a dark tower of indifference.

Melony took it as a cold dismissal.

Bowing her head so her tears wouldn't be seen, she started for the doorway, paper bag filled with a few toiletries, and her wallet containing her personal items and plane ticket back home tucked into the back pocket of her jeans. “Thank you, Hunter. For everything.” She stopped just on the other side of the doorway. “For giving me my life back. For believing in me and making me believe in myself. For saving my life.” She gave a soft laugh. “The list seems endless.”

“Think nothing of it, little one. I would do it all again, given the chance.” His voice was soft and somber and oh, so close. So close that she could feel his warm breath on the back of her neck, his body heat radiating out to her, beckoning her to stay. He lifted a hand and ran the back of it over one of her cheeks.

With a guttural sob, Melony bolted from the room and nearly tore the door off the hinges as she opened it and ran to the waiting helicopter.

And she never looked back as she took off with Wally into the sky while Hunter's cabin in the woods became a small speck then was completely swallowed up by the towering spruce that surrounded it.

Chapter Fourteen

Melony drove through the stop-and-go traffic on the way to her office in her tiny Honda. She had traded in her red Corvette for the unassuming blue Honda a year ago. Every time she had driven the sports car she would hold her breath each and every mile, praying that she wouldn't be carjacked at the next stop light or get into a wreck. Aside from the tremendous cost of the car in the first place, her insurance premiums were yet another motive behind her trade-in.

Flipping on the radio, she tuned into a soft-pop station, leaned back as traffic came to a standstill underneath the gray and gloomy late September sky, and hummed to the old song that was playing, realizing she hadn't heard it in years. Humming, she hadn't done that in years either. It was a soothing habit that had rubbed off on her from Hunter. She smiled wistfully. That man was forever humming or whistling, it seemed.

Her smile turned grim. Two long, miserable months without him. Instantly, she chased the morose thoughts away. Every time Hunter would slip into her thoughts, she would force them out with all of her might. When would she realize that it was a one-time thing between them? Two weeks of pure frustration, aggravation, soul-searching, friendship and breathtaking sex.

Trying hard not to think of her copper-haired lover, she resumed her slow ride through early morning rush hour and was parking at the side of *Shepherd and Zimmerman* at ten before nine. After switching off the engine and tossing her keys in her purse, she opened the car door, got out and adjusted her skirt so that the kick pleat was at the exact center in front.

For some reason when she had returned from her Alaskan adventure she had gone out to buy a few skirt sets. She had even added some frilly blouses to her staid, stuffy and too, too masculine wardrobe.

After closing the car door, she started up the short walkway and inside. With easygoing steps, she walked past her secretary's desk and bid her good morning.

"Good morning, Miss Shepherd." The young woman who had been acting as Melony's secretary for the past seven weeks smiled. "Here are your messages."

"Thank you." She grabbed the stack of pink slips and continued on to her office, knowing that Christie had no idea of the record she had broken weeks ago being Melony Shepherd's secretary for so long. And she did not intend to let her go.

Melony let out a long breath as she slid behind her desk and into her wing chair. Her trip way up north had definitely changed her life. And for the better, she felt. The only problem was, she now felt emptier than at any other time in her life.

For a while, she had prayed that she was pregnant, to have a child to remind her of the man she loved but had left behind. But a week after she returned, Mother Nature paid her a visit and she couldn't help the tears she'd shed when she realized that there would be no auburn-haired child in her future.

She bit down on her pink-painted lips as she shuffled through the stack of messages, separating the urgent from the not so urgent.

Once again she reprimanded herself for falling into that well of self-pity she had often floundered in since coming back home. She simply had to get on with her life, as

she was sure Hunter had. He hadn't wanted anything more from her than a quick fling, had he? Of course not, she told herself for the thousandth time. After all, hadn't he let her go without so much as a, "Please stay?"

The phone on her desk rang, jerking her out of deep introspection, sending the slips of paper in her hands flying into the air and onto the floor.

"Oh, damn," she muttered, and fought back the tears that burned in her eyes again.

* * * *

Her day was busy, but not overly so. She talked with most of her clients on the phone and chose to decline several potential clients until she finished up with the cases she had acquired over the months before her trip.

At noon, she had eaten the lunch she'd brought with her instead of ordering out as she used to do, though she scarcely tasted the turkey sandwich and apple she'd packed this morning.

Closing the last file she intended to work on for the day, she glanced at her watch. Five o'clock. The days seemed so much longer now.

Getting up from her chair, she turned and stared out of the second-story window at the gray blanket that hovered over the city outside. The skies hadn't dropped any measurable amount of rain within the last two days; instead, they emitted a bone-damp drizzle that seemed to add to her ever-present gloomy mood.

"Are you going to mope for the rest of your life, Mel?" She turned to see Brenda perched on the edge of her desk. "I've been sitting here for at least five minutes watching that glum look on your face. It's been two months; don't you think it's about time you get over this guy?"

The picture frame that Hunter had made her and now took precedence on her desk captured Melony's eyes. She had left it empty though, not wanting anything to detract from the beauty of his work. "I really wish it were that easy."

"You know, I'm almost sorry I convinced you to go on that trip. It was supposed to give you a chance to think things through, and make a change in your life..."

"I think it has," Melony interrupted. "I'm working less. The same secretary the employment agency sent over a week after I returned is still here. I've thrown out all of my medications since I no longer need them. I no longer yell and scream. I bring my lunch instead of ordering that greasy stuff I used to. I sleep like a baby. I'm dressing like a woman now." She gestured to the mint green outfit she wore. "What more could I ask for?"

"How about a mended heart?" Brenda's tone was soft as her worried gaze traveled over her. "Oh, Mel," she groaned. "Why did you go and fall in love with him, especially after Jerry? You know you're prone to falling into relationships whether or not it's a healthy one."

"Hunter was nothing like Jerry, or any of the other jerks I dated over the years. And, after loving him, I finally know what true love is all about. Those other men," she waved a hand in the air with impatience, "I was only clinging to them because I was craving love my father never gave me. I was trying to live up to somebody else's expectations."

"So what makes this situation any different?"

"Hunter made me realize what I had been doing for so many years because he had been doing the exact same thing himself. Was engaged, had a house, a steady job on the

Chicago police force, and he hated it. So he ditched it all and moved up to Alaska. I admire him for his courage in chasing after what he truly wanted.”

“And that's why you fell in love with him?” Brenda asked in disbelief.

“Please.” Melony rolled her eyes. “Give me more credit than that. It was everything. He believed in me, Brenda. He pushed me every step of the way, whether it was crossing a river, climbing a mountain, saving his life in the middle of that storm or asking him to make love to me; he made me do it all myself. I discovered how strong I truly am, that I didn't have to try to live up to anyone's expectations except my own. Aside from all of that, he's sexy as hell, great in the sack, and has a Scottish accent that makes my blood thrum.” Melony held a hand to her heart that was suddenly beating overtime.

“Thrumming blood,” Brenda repeated, deep in thought. “That sounds pretty serious. Then why did you leave him?”

Melony let out a sharp breath of dismay, plopping down into her chair. “For one thing he never said he wanted anything more out of me than an affair. For another thing, he won't leave the mountains, and how can I just throw away everything I've worked so hard for to go live a life in the boonies?” Her voice was incredulous and she lifted her hand in a palm-up gesture that conveyed her aggravation at her friend's lack of understanding.

“How about this?” Brenda ignored the irritation in Melony's voice, walking back and forth in front of her now perfectly organized desk. “Yes, you've worked hard these past years to prove that you're a great attorney, so you should be satisfied. But,” she stopped directly in front of her and held up a finger, “was becoming a lawyer your dream, or your father's?”

Melony thought about it for only a second. “My father's,” she admitted.

Brenda nodded in an I-thought—o gesture. “Did you have a dream, Mel?”

She let out a small laugh, leaning back in her chair. “Hunter asked me the same thing.”

“And what was your answer?”

“That I had never really thought about it.”

“Well, think about it now. What did you used to dream of being when you were a little girl or a teenager?”

She thought again then gave an embarrassed smile. “You'll laugh.”

“No I won't. I promise.”

“I wanted to be a ... a wife and mother.” She got to her feet and stood over by the window looking out. She knew that when she drove home the clouds would act like a dome over the city, trapping in all of the exhaust fumes on the freeway. “I know in this day and age that sounds pretty Victorian, but I guess I grew up watching too many Ozzie and Harriet reruns. Since I never had a happy family life, never had a mother.” She shrugged. “I always dreamed of having a loving husband, a nice, cozy home, laughing children. I'd stay at home gardening, cleaning, cooking, eagerly waiting for Hunter to come home, then we'd eat dinner and make love by a roaring fire after the children were tucked into bed.” She sighed wistfully at the fantasy woven in her mind.

“Waiting for *Hunter* to come home?” Brenda smiled. “Why don't you go to him and tell him how you feel, Mel?”

“What?” She spun around, her eyes wide. “How can I just pick up and leave, going to reclaim something that might not even be there when I go back?”

"How can you just sit around and ponder the what-ifs every day for the rest of your life? What if this is finally a chance for you to find true love and happiness? Are you just going to let it slip by without a fight?"

Melony frowned, her eyes distant, remembering something Hunter had said. "Hunter told me about a little bird he had taken in while living in Scotland. Though he loved her dearly, when she healed he let her go, knowing if she was meant to be his, she would be back." Melony focused her eyes on Brenda. "She never came back."

Like an amnesiac suddenly recalling every bit of memory at once, Melony leaned heavily against her desk to support her quaking limbs. "Oh, no!" she whispered.

"I think he was trying to tell you something, Mel," Brenda said in a hushed voice.

"Yes." She sat down for fear her legs would crumble at any second. "It happened to him again. I was the second bird he cared for, helped to mend. Do you think he was trying to tell me that he wanted more than just a quick affair?"

Brenda held her hands up and shrugged. "If you ask the romantic in me, yes."

"And I flew away, just like his bird did. How could I have been so blind?" She bent over to retrieve her purse that was in the bottom drawer of her desk. "I'll book a flight back to Alaska this very evening. I don't have any clients for the rest of the day, and..."

"And I'll take care of everything," Brenda offered.

Melony went to her friend and gave her a giant hug. "Thank you for listening, and for putting up with me all of this time."

"Hey, what are friends for? Send me an invitation to the wedding," she called after Melony as she started out of her office.

She turned back to look at Brenda. "I don't want to get my hopes up. I could be wrong." Her eyes suddenly looked bleak.

"I don't think so, Mel. I think this is it." Brenda gave her an encouraging thumbs-up.

"I hope you're right." Melony walked out of the building, nearly running to her car in newfound eagerness.

* * * *

Hunter sat before the crackling fire trying to ease the chill that had seeped into his bones the moment Melony had left two months ago. Would he ever feel warm again? Or at least numb?

He thought for sure she would have come back to him. Hell, he never thought she would have left. He thought that they had something special. Evidently, he was wrong.

What was she doing in her life in the city? Had she resumed her prickly persona? Or was she the sweet, passionate woman he had uncovered? And was she being passionate with another man?

"Damn!" He threw an unfinished carving into the fire and watched as it was quickly consumed by flames and burned along with the other pieces he had tried working on but had ended up tossing in there as well. Not even carving could bring him the solace he so craved.

The day after she left, he had gone in search of their tents and her missing backpack. When he'd seen the trail she had taken him over when he'd been unconscious, his heart had clenched with a tumult of emotion. How had she managed to get him all the way back to the cabin? She had risked her life for him. She had made love with him in a way that was so wondrous he knew he would never find it with any other woman.

And then she had left him. As if nothing more had happened between them than a hike through the wilderness.

Maybe all women were the same, he tried to convince himself, feeling that if he became embittered toward Melony her memory wouldn't haunt him so. It was no use though. Instinctively, from the moment he had laid eyes on her, he had known she wasn't like the Gingers of the world. In just two brief weeks, he had shared more with her than he had with anyone ever.

She had told him once when they were snuggled beneath the covers how brave she thought he was for living in this wild, uncertain land. He laughed at those words now. If he was so damned brave then why hadn't he had the guts to tell her he loved her?

As he sat there musing over these depressed thoughts, the distinctive sound of a helicopter approaching caught his attention. No longer did his blood pulse with anticipation when he heard the sound.

The first three times Wally had come, he'd thought for sure that Melony would be with him. But she hadn't been. Instead, it was Wally come to check up on him, Wally bringing the mail—no letter had been sent from Melony, either—and the last time he had brought with him another city marshmallow who wanted to rough it for a few weeks. Though the arrival was unannounced, the man, a friend of Wally's had his money in his hand, and Hunter had wanted to get out of the cabin for a while. To get away from the phantom sight of Melony walking around his place, nestled in his bed, her voice haunting his walls with that husky, sweet sound of her laughter.

But her memory had followed him along every trail, every stream, every tree. As if he had engraved her name into each trunk with his knife, she was there to remind him of what he'd had for just a little while.

Levering himself out of his chair, he brushed the wood shavings off his lap and lumbered over to the door.

*

When the helicopter touched ground, Melony's heart lurched up into her throat. What if Hunter didn't want her to come back? What if she was making a big mistake?

"Need help with your bag, ma'am?" Wally said around the unlit cigar, trying to hide the smile that threatened to split his face in two. Melony hoped that Wally wasn't just a tad old-fashioned and longed for a happy ending in this particular story.

"No. I'll get it myself." Melony reached behind her and extracted her suitcase that had enough clothes to get her by for a while—if Hunter accepted her.

She couldn't believe how cold it was now in late September as opposed to her trip in July. It felt as if the thermometer had dropped sixty degrees in as many days. She hoped that the clothes she brought would be warm enough. Hoped that the white angora sweater and peach silk slacks she wore would do her talking for her and capture Hunter's attention.

Smoke was curling from the chimney, carrying with it the glorious scent of burning wood, reminding Melony of the episodes she had shared with Hunter before the fireplace, laying on the bearskin rug, naked, entwined in passion.

The sun was already setting and it was only four o'clock. The leaves on the trees that had been lush and green with her last trip were now turning bronze and golden, falling with the chilly wind to the ground.

A moment after she had both feet on the ground, Wally gave a salute and took off

into the darkening sky. Melony tried to fight off a wave of unease that washed over her, fiddling with the gold barrette that held her hair back, then tugged her coat collar up. She was being very presumptuous thinking that Hunter would want her back at all, much less for an entire lifetime.

Just as she started up the sturdy wooden steps that led to the wide porch, the door opened and her heart raced at a frightening pace. There was Hunter looking just as sexy and just as dour as the first day she had laid eyes on him. He didn't utter a word and his expression didn't change the slightest bit when he saw her, except perhaps that his eyes grew a little darker. Maybe she had made a mistake in coming here, but there was no turning back now.

Hunter walked right up to her, wearing his customary attire of jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, though she could see the collar of a gray thermal shirt peeking out. He gazed intently at her as he took her heavy case. "I've been expecting you, Shepherd," he said in a low, gruff voice. "Your side of the bed is getting cold." Melony laughed through tear-blurred eyes.

They walked inside, Hunter closing the door behind them, shutting out the cold. "Winter's nearly here," he said as if they were carrying on any normal, mundane conversation. As if they hadn't been painfully parted for the past two months. "The river's already icing up and snow is creeping down the higher mountain tops. We've got plenty of wood and provisions to last us though. Aye, we'll stay plenty warm, I'm sure." He stood behind her and slipped off her coat without saying a word, hanging it over his on a nail beside the door.

Melony turned to look into those green, green eyes she had missed so much. She wanted to run her fingers through that copper hair every day for the rest of her life. And she wanted to be with this man even longer.

"You look like hell," Hunter said, running his thumbs over the violet circles beneath her eyes. "I can see your insomnia's back."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his warm chest, glorying in the scent of his body. "I was miserable without you all of this time." She looked up at him and finally said it, "I love you."

He placed a large palm on each of her cheeks and raised her face to him. "And I love you too, little one." He closed his eyes and let out a pent-up sigh. "But will you be happy living out here in the wilds with no TV, no shopping mall, no fancy sports car, no people around for miles?"

Melony nodded as two fat tears fell down her cheeks. "As long as I have you by my side. I love you and I love the world you live in. I want you to share it with me. I want to share in it with you."

"What about your practice?" Somehow, they had found their way into the bedroom and Hunter was already lifting her sweater. "What about your dreams?"

"I left my part of the practice to my partner Brenda. I finally realized that I was only following my father's dream, not mine. As for *my* dreams." She smiled as he pulled her sweater off and his eyes turned a smoky olive color as he viewed the black lace teddy that she had worn just for him. "I want you to build those cabins. I want other people to have a piece of what we will have every day for the rest of our lives."

He looked at her, quirked a copper eyebrow. "Can I take that as an invitation to spend the rest of our lives together? As in marriage? Husband and wife? Babes?"

She laughed as he slid her slacks off and threw them aside. “Yes. That's exactly what I'm asking.”

Hunter slid the satin straps of her teddy over her shoulders to reveal her soft breasts and aroused nipples. “Then I accept your proposal of marriage, Melony Shepherd.” He held her breasts in his palms, running his tongue over each nipple, then finished stripping off the teddy, kissing each area of skin he uncovered then quickly did away with his own clothing.

In the next moment, they were lying on the bed, Hunter covering her eager body with his own. Melony cupped his face in her palms and softly whispered, “Will you make love to me?”

“Aye, Melony. Only you. Always.”

And he touched his lips to hers.

The End

About the Author:

A lover of romance and strong characterization, Kelly believes that any story worth reading should have a hero/heroine that the reader can fall in love with. She is currently living her dream, writing sizzling tales of suspense with paranormal elements, as well as contemporary and humorous romance. All of her books contain highly sensual love scenes and sexual tension that will make your heart race!

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