



On Wings of Love

Kate Douglas

Hard Shell Word Factory

This story copyright 2000 by Kate Douglas. All other rights are reserved. Thank you for honoring the copyright.

Published by Hard Shell Word Factory.

8946 Loberg Rd.
Amherst Junction, WI 54407
<http://www.hardshell.com>

Electronic book created by Seattle Book Company.

eBook ISBN: 0-7599-1618-7

Cover by Kate Moore Photo

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

To Chris, for giving me back my wings. I can't thank you enough.

- [Chapter 1](#)
 - [Chapter 2](#)
 - [Chapter 3](#)
 - [Chapter 4](#)
 - [Chapter 5](#)
 - [Chapter 6](#)
 - [Chapter 7](#)
 - [Chapter 8](#)
 - [Chapter 9](#)
 - [Chapter 10](#)
 - [Chapter 11](#)
 - [Chapter 12](#)
 - [Chapter 13](#)
- ♦ [Kate Douglas](#)
-

Chapter 1

NATE MURDOCK stared at his cluttered desk and wondered if anything else could possibly go wrong. His staff photographer was out of commission with a broken leg, a pile of term papers awaiting grades covered his desk, and somehow, over the next six weeks, he had to figure out what was decimating the peregrine falcon population in his research project.

At least he'd managed to line up a decent photographer to take Will's place for the study, a last minute replacement with impeccable credentials. Nate rested his elbows on the stack of papers and studied the neatly framed photo on the opposite wall of his office, a life-size print of a peregrine falcon in flight, personally signed with a sweeping "A. Petersen."

The photographer, Andrew Petersen, had captured life and death in motion, the falcon's long pointed wings arrowed back along its sleek body as it launched its dive after prey, the black mask and dark eyes enhancing the impression of deadly predator.

The tables, though, had turned on the falcons. The hunters were now the hunted. The International Falcondai Foundation, the organization supporting Nate's research, mandated he find out what, or who, was violating the falcons' nesting site in the Trinity Alps, with the

investigation documented on film. Luckily, after Will's accident, the department secretary had hired Petersen, a man who obviously appreciated and understood the majesty of birds of prey.

Nate dug through a stack of magazines piled haphazardly on the cracked linoleum floor next to his desk and pulled out a tattered issue of *National Geographic*, the cover folded back to an article on eagles and other raptors. A picture of the famed photo-journalist appeared on the first page of the story. From the look of him, Nate figured he must be close to sixty, but the man was a professional and wouldn't have accepted the job if he couldn't handle it.

Nate wasn't looking forward to working with a stranger, especially under the rigorous conditions the project required, but Petersen had as much experience studying birds of prey as Nate. That experience could prove invaluable over the next six weeks.

There was just so much left to do if he was going to be ready to leave by morning. The research project in northern California's Trinity Wilderness was a dream assignment, but leaving before the end of the spring semester was a headache. He'd left the details up to the department secretary, everything from securing the grant from IFF to hiring the photographer.

Darlene could be a complete flake sometimes, but at least when it counted she'd come through. Just in time, too, because it was already April, well into the falcons' nesting season.

Sighing, Nate picked up the first of the term papers and began to read.

"ARE YOU SURE you'll be okay, Andy? I can't believe you're taking off for six weeks to share a tent with some guy you've never met. What if he's psychotic, or a serial killer or...?"

"I'll be fine, Donna. Don't worry. The man's a professor of ornithology at UC Berkeley, for crying out loud. The worst he can be is knock-kneed, bald, and old as the hills."

Andy Petersen pulled her thick, waist-length hair back in a ponytail, then searched through her jeans pocket for a rubber band. Failing to find one, she tied the mass of hair into a loose knot, then, hands on hips, faced her friend.

"Besides, Donn, they don't give tenure to serial killers. Anyway, I want this job." Narrowly avoiding ladders and saw horses, the wild movement of her hands punctuating her words, she paced restlessly around the cluttered room. "It's exactly what I need to build my reputation. It'll be good for the studio."

"Andy, the studio's just coming together. We've got at least two months of remodeling before we can open and--"

"And you're perfectly capable of handling it." Andy took a deep breath and looked directly into Donna's soft brown eyes. "I have to do this, Donn. Can't you see?" she pleaded. "This is the first time anyone of importance has wanted to hire me instead of my father. It's my chance."

"In spite of your father, you mean." Donna held up one hand, forestalling Andy's rebuttal. "I know that's not very nice to say, Andy, but it's true and you know it. He's taken jobs away from you. And we both know he's claimed credit for your work! He's not a very nice man even if he is your father."

"That's not fair, Donna. It only happened once."

"Well, it was a big *once*, and I don't know why you think you have to defend him."

"I don't know. I just do." Andy turned away. She knew what was coming next, and as usual, Donna didn't fail her.

"He should have married your mother."

Andy had her standard response ready. "My mother was a seventeen year old housekeeper. She'd never been out of her village. She didn't even speak English. She was

no more ready to get married than he was. He could have left me in her village on the Yucatan Peninsula when she died, but he didn't."

"He could have treated you with a little more affection than he would a stray cat...but he didn't do that either."

"He didn't have to, Donna," Andy answered softly, knowing exactly how to end every argument the two of them had about Andrew Petersen. "I had you and your mom and dad and all the affection I needed."

"It just ticks me off. When he does notice you, he acts like he's invented you or something. He's such a control freak. You're better off living as far from him as you can. It's like he has to compete with you and always let you know he's better. And you know what, Andy, you're better than he ever was!"

Donna flipped her blond hair back over her shoulder and glared at Andy. Andy couldn't help but laugh at her best friend's righteous anger. They had always argued like sisters. Short, blond, brown-eyed Donna. Tall, dark, blue-eyed Andy. Sisters in every way but blood.

"I know," Andy finally said. "It is frustrating, always living in someone's shadow, especially when he doesn't even know I'm there. I used to think Dad was embarrassed by

me, but I don't think having an illegitimate daughter bothered him in the least. Mainly because he never thought about me. He still doesn't. He's always left that responsibility to your folks."

"When you were small, he called you Shadow."

"Yeah," Andy laughed. "But that's only because my skin is so dark. I know better than to think of it as a term of endearment."

"You may have gotten your mother's coloring, but you are definitely your father's daughter," Donna answered wryly. "The world is not heavily populated with blue-eyed, five foot ten inch Latinas. I think you're more hard-headed than he is. And you know what?" Laughing, Donna pointed her finger at Andy. "You're just as much a control freak as he is. Worse!"

"Well I'd rather be in control of my life than give it up to some man. That's what my mother did, and look what it got her. Pregnant, unmarried, and dead at seventeen."

Fighting angry tears, Andy grabbed both of Donna's hands and squeezed them tightly. "Don't you see? That's why this job is so important. I'm the one the university wants, not my father. The secretary said my peregrine poster is the professor's favorite. *My* photo, not my father's. I know it's a last minute thing, but it's my opportunity to do something

important on my own."

"You might as well go," Donna finally conceded. "The contractor and his crew will be here in the morning. I guess I can handle the remodeling...and all those handsome young, half dressed construction workers."

"You can have 'em. I'm through with men." Andy grinned at Donna, then grabbed a stack of documents off the counter.

"This contract is my ticket. I can feel it. I don't care if Professor Murdock is short or tall, bald or hairy, or even if he has his bird watching binoculars surgically attached to his eyeballs. I'm going to spend six whole weeks in the Trinity Wilderness climbing mountains and taking pictures and doing what I love most. And getting paid for it! Wadda ya say?"

"I say go for it, kid." Donna laughed, pointing an admonishing finger at Andy. "But ya better take your own tent!"

"YOU'RE ANDY Petersen?" Dressed impeccably in ranger green, the helicopter pilot towered over Andy. His dark features split into a wide grin as he stuck out his right hand and pumped Andy's so hard she thought he might shake it right off her arm. "Boy, is Doc in for a big surprise."

Exhausted from her long drive north, Andy carefully extricated her hand and reached for one of her bags. "Oh, Dr. Murdock knows I'm coming. I think he expected me earlier, but I was late getting away."

The ranger grabbed the heavy bags Andy handed to him and tossed them into the helicopter. "I see you've got your own climbing gear. That's good, 'cus you'll be up on the rocks a lot. I'll get this baby warmed up and it'll only take a few minutes of flying time, then a short walk to camp. We can get you settled in real quick."

"Thank you, um, Mr...?"

"Dalton, ma'am. Roger Dalton. I'm sorry, guess I got carried away. Doc always says I talk too much, too fast."

"You mean Dr. Murdock?" Andy still hadn't spoken with her employer. By the time she'd tried to call him, he was on his way to Weaverville and the nearby Trinity Alps. "Do you know him well?"

"Yeah, Doc and I go back a long way. We played football together at UCLA, and he's done research on the falcons up here for years. I've been stationed with the Forest Service here since I got out of college, so we run into each other a lot. He's a good man to work with."

Dalton loaded the remainder of Andy's gear into the back of the helicopter and they both boarded the small craft.

"I've never met him." Andy buckled her seatbelt as Dalton flipped switches and checked gauges. They lifted smoothly into the air and talk was impossible over the roar of the engine. Which was just as well, she decided, because it gave her a chance to think about what Dalton had said.

If Roger Dalton played football in college with Nathan Murdock, then Andy needed to reassess her image of the good professor. She glanced at the pilot, his big hands dwarfing the controls, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. He looked like a football player. The man was huge and his muscles bulged under his uniform shirt.

Which meant that Nathan Murdock was probably not the ancient, knock-kneed ornithologist of her imagination. Andy tried to picture six weeks on site with a thirty-ish hunk, and her mouth went dry.

Of course, the man could be a jerk, but Andy wasn't certain if that could make things more, or less, complicated. She gazed out the window, mesmerized by the rolling green forest below, thinking of the man ahead.

DALTON KEPT his hands on the controls, but he couldn't keep the smile off his face or his eyes off the woman sitting next to him. Doc had spent the whole morning bragging about his new photographer, Andrew Petersen, the dean of wildlife photographers, gentleman photographer extraordinaire. Well, Dalton figured Doc was in for a big surprise, because this lady was no gentleman. She was something else altogether!

Even dressed in scuffed leather hiking boots, faded blue jeans and an old flannel shirt, she looked like a picture out of a fashion magazine. Tall and slim, her olive skin almost as dark as his own, all that black hair tied in a long pony tail — the woman was gorgeous.

And her eyes...brilliant blue, framed in thick black lashes and slightly tilted at the corners, eyes that looked right through a man.

Dalton chuckled, searching for the clearing below where he could set down. Yessir, Doc was definitely in for quite a surprise.

THEY REACHED the campsite after a short hike. Dr. Murdock had set his tent up in a secluded clearing deeply shadowed by towering redwood and fir trees. A ring of stones formed a fire pit, and two strategically placed logs provided seating by the fire.

The crisp pungency of pine and redwood needles crushed beneath her feet filled Andy's

senses. The muted rush of a nearby mountain creek blended with the soft trill of warblers hidden in the thick undergrowth. A sense of calm permeated the forest, the natural sounds underscoring the lack of man-made noise.

A sharp cry caught her attention. She looked to the east, at the towering cliffs nearby. The very top of the tallest pinnacle was bathed in the last rays of the setting sun, but Andy could still make out a pair of tiny dots, swirling and soaring against the pale blue of the evening sky.

"Look, Roger!" She pointed them out to Dalton. "I think those are peregrines. It's hard to tell from this distance, but I don't know of any other bird that flies like that."

"That's where the eyrie is," the big ranger agreed. "Most likely where Doc is, too. In fact, he's probably half way up the cliff. Knowing the good professor, he'll stay there until the light's gone."

Andy shaded her eyes, searching for a human form against the massive wall of rock, but the shadows were too deep and her binoculars were stuffed in one of her bags. She gave up the search and started unpacking her tent, smiling up at the ranger. "You don't have to stay, you know. I'll be fine here until Dr. Murdock arrives."

"I would like to get back to Weaverville before dark. That is, if you're sure you'll be

okay here alone," Dalton added as he watched Andy assemble her small blue dome tent. "I might as well get going." He looked toward the western sky where a pale orange glow faded into deep blue. "Doc should be here any time."

As Dalton turned to leave, the impact of his words hit Andy like a physical blow. *My God*, she thought, glancing around the isolated campsite, at the two nylon tents carefully arranged next to each other. The setting was so intimate! Donna's joke about a serial killer came back to her...along with the thought that she'd never met the guy but she was calmly unrolling her sleeping bag less than two feet from his.

She'd be sharing a mountain stream for bathing, primitive latrine facilities and all her waking moments with a total stranger, a man Roger Dalton had just described to her as an ex football player from UCLA with a penchant for rock climbing!

Images flashed through her mind; the comical figure of a Gary Larson cartoon bird watcher dissolving into a perfectly proportioned Chippendale dancer in bikini briefs and binoculars, a coil of climbing rope slung over one massive shoulder. Andy glanced at Dalton's retreating figure, suddenly wanting to know as much about Nathan Murdock as she could possibly learn.

"It must be hard on the professor's family, with him going off on research trips all the

time," she said, hoping Dalton would answer the unasked question. Working with a family man had a nice secure ring to it.

"Oh, Doc's not married. He was," Dalton added, frowning at the memory, "but she up and left him right after college, while he was doing graduate work. But you're right, it was the research that did it. He was researching birds...she was researching the new quarterback."

He laughed at what was obviously an old joke, then checked his watch and looked up at the darkening sky. "I need to get going. Doc's due back any minute. Tell him Hi for me, and remind him to radio in by Thursday evening. We keep regular contact while he's in the field." He flashed Andy a reassuring smile. "You take care now."

He turned to walk down the trail, but halted a moment, sensing Andy's uncertainty, and looked back. "You'll like Doc," he said. "He's a good man, dedicated, has a great sense of humor." Which was a good thing, Dalton figured, because Doc was going to need it when he met his new employee.

Smiling at her, he waved good-bye. She made quite a picture, standing alone in the clearing with the towering cliffs behind her. Dalton was still smiling when he climbed into the cockpit of the small helicopter, and he cut loose with a full throated laugh as the craft

leapt into the air. He could hardly wait for Doc's first radio contact on Thursday.

ANDY WATCHED the big ranger saunter down the narrow trail, but it wasn't until he was out of sight that she realized how comforting his presence had been. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of alder trees growing nearby and the rich earthy smells of the damp woods.

The huge trees encircling the camp cast dark shadows across the small meadow. Andy shuddered, a brief shiver that shot across her arms and shoulders like an electrical current. She smiled briefly to herself. Donna's mom would say someone was walking across her grave. Not a particularly comforting thought while standing alone in a dusky clearing.

She wasn't afraid. No, uneasy, maybe. Definitely uneasy.

She looked east. The cliffs were in complete shadow now, the setting sun casting a pale orange glow across the evening sky. Dr. Murdock was due back any time. The thought of finally meeting him caused a tightening in her gut, a feeling she wanted to attribute to hunger but knew was merely a case of nerves.

She sat for a moment on one of the fallen logs near the fire pit and ran her hand along the scarred surface of the wood, trying to read the faint carvings left by other campers. The

long drive and longer day had caught up with her. She rolled and stretched her tired shoulders then gazed in the direction of the cliffs.

She thought about building a fire, about looking for something to eat, then realized she was nodding and dozing and not really thinking about anything at all. An early star hung brightly over the shadowed cliffs. An owl hooted from a nearby tree. Apparently Dalton hadn't been kidding when he said the professor would stay out until the last bit of light was gone.

"This is stupid." Her whispered comment was lost in the still forest. Andy rolled her shoulders again, trying to unkink tired muscles. "Well, Dr. Murdock, it's been great meeting you," she said to no one in particular. Yawning, she crawled stiffly into her tent and zipped the flap shut.

STARS FILLED the nighttime sky when Nate finally returned to camp, his back and shoulders aching from the day's climb. He thought about heading to the creek for a quick bath, but it was late and he figured he should welcome Mr. Petersen.

The quiet camp and tightly zippered tent were stark evidence he was too late. "Terrific," he muttered, dropping his heavy load of climbing gear in an untidy heap near his own tent.

He felt the myriad frustrations of a long and tiring day turn to disgust. Andrew Petersen was a perfectly acceptable target for his anger. The eminent photographer couldn't even stay awake long enough to meet his employer.

It couldn't be all that late, Nate thought, looking toward the dark western horizon. Barely ten o'clock, he guessed, and the man didn't even have the decency to get a fire going so Nate could heat up something for dinner. Grumbling, he dug through his fanny pack for an energy bar.

Chewing morosely on the stale bar, Nate gazed at the cliffs, now a dark wedge of rock against a darker sky. He tried to make sense of his day...all he'd found were empty nests, no sign of eggs or chicks, and the adults were unusually agitated.

Something was definitely amiss.

Nate finished the bar and wiped his hands on his pants, then pulled the leather thong loose that held his long hair out of his eyes. He'd worn it long since college, but at thirty-three it was getting harder all the time to remember ever being that young.

He didn't remember hurting quite this much the last time he'd climbed, either. Getting old was the pits. Nate stretched his legs out in front of him, and propped his booted feet on one of the stones at the fire pit. He'd roust Petersen out of the sack early tomorrow, see

what the fellow was like. Maybe they'd be able to get in a full day on the cliff.

Nate wished he'd met the photographer first, but there just hadn't been time. At least the man had a fantastic reputation. So much depended on this project.

An owl hooted softly in the trees near the creek. Nate felt a swoosh of wings as the bird took flight, gliding low over the camp. Moments later, a quick shriek sounded off in the distance, and Nate chuckled quietly. At least someone would eat tonight.

With a last disgusted glance in the direction of Andrew Petersen's tent, Nate crawled into his own.

Chapter 2

THE RAUCOUS call of a Stellar's jay perched just above the tent jolted Andy awake. Gradually, she recognized the tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee brewing over an open fire. Its lure was enough to drag her, shivering, from her warm sleeping bag.

She pulled on a pair of faded sweatpants that had at one time matched the shirt she slept in, then dug through her sack for a towel and soap. Stifling a yawn, she pushed her tangled hair out of her eyes. It took some tugging to work the elastic band out of the long snarls and finger-comb some of the worst of the knots.

Aware of the same knots in her empty stomach, she unzipped the flap to the tent, fully expecting to meet her employer. The coffee bubbled in an old tin pot, close against the campfire, but the elusive Dr. Murdock was nowhere to be seen.

Great...a chance to clean up and look a bit more presentable before meeting the eminent professor. She slipped her bare feet into hiking boots for the short walk to the creek.

She heard him first, off-key and high pitched, singing "Pretty Woman" in a poor imitation of Roy Orbison. She couldn't see him through the brush, but she paused a moment to listen, then laughed when he missed the high note. She was still grinning when

she rounded a sharp turn in the trail—and collided full on with a naked man.

The impact almost knocked her to the ground. "I'm sorry, I didn't...." She shut her mouth and turned away, but not before catching enough of a glimpse that proved he was definitely male and very definitely not the elderly ornithologist she and Donna had imagined.

Who else could it be but Professor Murdock?

Only this Professor Murdock fit the Chippendale version. His chest was broad and heavily muscled, smooth except for a narrow ribbon of dark hair that arched below his naval to...she covered her mouth quickly to prevent a nervous giggle when she realized she hadn't even noticed his face.

"Who the hell are you?" His demanding bellow destroyed any embarrassment Andy might have felt.

"Excuse me?" Who did he think he was, king of the forest? Hackles rising, she turned deliberately, holding out her right hand to him and glaring directly into dark eyes beneath furrowed brows. "I'm Andy Petersen, your photographer. Dr. Murdock, I presume?"

Thank goodness she'd kept the tremor out of her voice! She locked eyes with the man, willing herself not to flinch in the face of his anger.

And he was obviously very angry.

Unsure how to get out of such an awkward situation, Andy continued to hold her hand out, daring him to ignore her outstretched fingers.

It was a dare she didn't expect him to take, but suddenly his long, callused fingers grasped her hand and his rough palm grazed, then pressed against hers.

And a shock of awareness raced from their clenched hands to startle every cell in her body.

Locked doubly now, eyes and hands completed a circuit that held Andy immobile, frozen in time and space for a heartbeat. Fighting the sudden desire to pull away and end the contact, in fact to end the entire uncomfortable episode, she clasped his hand tightly. He was magnificent, standing tall and tan in front of her, and the seconds stretched on forever, an unscheduled battle between unfamiliar adversaries.

NATE FOUGHT to control his suddenly active libido, doing his damndest to disregard the fact he was stark naked in the forest, holding hands with one of the sexiest women he'd ever seen.

Obviously there had been a mistake, because he knew he hadn't hired a female, but she was certainly something to look at. Dark skinned with brilliant blue eyes, her face framed

in a tousled mass of black hair that fell loosely to her waist. Tall and proud, she dared him to cover himself, dared him with a look that chilled him and sent fire through his veins in the same instant.

Then her lips began to twitch and Nate saw a twinkle in the blue eyes that held him captive. She lost it completely, pulling her hand free and clapping it across her mouth to stop the laughter that suddenly exploded, full and throaty and free.

Nate grabbed a towel off a nearby branch to cover himself, libido abruptly extinguished, and wondered briefly what the proper etiquette was when one was caught literally, pants down, on a mountain trail. Miss Manners certainly hadn't covered this one, but he was positive laughter wasn't polite. His immediate reaction was anger, but the woman's mirth was too uninhibited and the situation much too ludicrous.

"I'm sorry, really." Andy grabbed a large white handkerchief out of her pocket, wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and tried to stop giggling. She looked away, refusing to meet his eyes, started to turn back to him, then halted. "You are decent now, aren't you?"

"I'm always decent, I just wasn't dressed," he said indignantly. "You can turn around."

She liked his voice. It sounded warm and deep, and she turned, hand outstretched from long habit, then dropped it when she realized his right hand was holding a very small pink

towel around his lean hips. She blushed then, for the first time since meeting him, and looked somewhere off to the right of his left ear, past the long auburn hair that curled damply to his shoulders.

"Look, you've obviously washed up already, so why don't I just meet you back at camp, after I bathe?"

"Okay." He stretched the word, and she could tell he was fighting to keep his lips from twitching into a smile. "And yes, as to your earlier assumption, I am Nathan Murdock, but I guess we can save the formal introductions for later."

He grabbed a small knapsack off a nearby branch and almost lost his towel in the process. He fumbled with it a moment, then headed back up the trail, obviously trying to look nonchalant and failing miserably.

Andy bit her lower lip to keep from laughing out loud again. The tiny pink towel molded his lean hips, his shoulders stretched impossibly wide, dark hair covered his long, muscular legs, and the whole masculine image was punctuated by the "flap, flap, flap" of rubber thongs slapping against the soles of his feet.

He really needed to lose those thongs, she thought, watching him disappear around the curve in the trail.

As soon as he was out of sight, she undressed and rinsed off in the icy creek. "Good Lord," she muttered, shivering as much from her first meeting with the professor as from the cold water. What a terrible way to start a new job.

The sun was peeking over the plateau to the east by the time she stretched out on a flat rock at the water's edge to wash her long hair in the swiftly running stream.

The sunlight warmed her chilled skin, and she wrung the water from her hair and lay there a moment, calming her jangled nerves with the mountain sounds of jays and warblers, and the quiet rush of the creek.

She felt his presence before she saw him, and turned quickly, grabbing a towel to cover herself. He stood about ten feet away, fully dressed, holding an extra cup of coffee.

"I thought you might like a cup," he offered nonchalantly, a broad smile on his face as he held the steaming mug out to her. His cavalier attitude angered Andy more than it embarrassed her. Typical, she thought, the way men always need to even the score.

"You might have waited until I was dressed." Her voice trembled with anger. She grabbed her sweats, and looked pointedly in Nathan's direction.

His position didn't alter, even though Andy ignored the coffee while she held the towel and the folded bundle of sweats covering her body. "Do you mind?" she asked, when he

continued to hold the cup out to her.

"Mind what?" His innocent look pushed her over the edge.

Damn you. She stood up and dropped the towel, giving Nate an unhurried look at her long legs, small breasts and the dark thatch at her center. Then she proceeded, quite slowly, to dress.

NATHAN STARED, transfixed, as she pulled her sweat pants on, then slipped the worn sweatshirt over her head. This wasn't quite the reaction he'd expected when he pulled his childish stunt, but she'd left him feeling embarrassed and foolish earlier. At the time, this seemed like a perfectly acceptable way to even the score.

But when she pushed her long hair out of the way and back over her shoulders, Nate's mouth went dry, and when she held out one slender hand, graciously accepting the coffee mug still clenched in his trembling fingers, he had to resist the urge to wipe the sweat beading on his upper lip.

The second the cup was out of his hand, Nate made the strategic decision to beat a hasty retreat back to camp. Gritting his teeth, he turned away and stomped along the brushy trail, muttering to himself as he shoved the rich, green foliage out of his way.

He wasn't certain who she was or what she was doing here, but there was no denying the fact that his body was painfully aware of every curve and line of her dusky figure.

It was bad enough she had interrupted his morning bath, but it really ticked him off to know he was responding deep in his gut to something as unprovocative as the sound of her footsteps stomping angrily behind him.

"JUST WHO THE hell are you, anyway?" Nate's long legs carried him to the space in front of Andy's tent. He stopped abruptly and spun around to confront her as she stalked into the clearing.

"I am Andrea Petersen. Remember, the photographer you hired, the one who does photos of birds and bunnies and other quick little creatures? The one you pleaded for, who kindly filled in on a moment's notice to replace someone who was injured? Or don't you recall any of that?" She threw her knapsack to the ground, almost spilling her mug of coffee in the process. *The nerve of him*. After all the hassle she went through to get up here at the last minute.

"I hired Andrew Petersen." Nate glared at her, hands on his hips, body tense with anger. "And I want to know where the hell he is!"

"Painting seascapes at Big Sur, you jerk," she shouted. She stepped closer and poked him none to gently in the chest. Nate stepped backwards, stumbling slightly over a tent peg in the wake of her aggressive attack.

She moved with him, furiously enunciating every word, punctuating each one with another jab to his broad chest. "He retired six years ago. When you called Andy Petersen Photography you called me. You hired *me*."

Sensing control, knowing she was right, Andy added, as if she were speaking to a small child, "So you'd better get used to me, because I have a contract with your signature on it. And unless you want to pay me off up front and send me home, then I would suggest you apologize for your rude behavior. Then maybe we can both act like grownups and get to work. What do you say, Dr. Murdock? Can you manage that?"

Finished with her speech, Andy backed off, took a very dignified sip of her rapidly cooling coffee, and hoped he wouldn't notice her trembling fingers.

She eyed him coolly over the top of her mug, but her calm expression hid the emotions churning within. All her professional life she'd competed with her father. Growing up, she had idolized the man, no matter how distant he remained. All that ended with the perception of an adult.

It was difficult enough for a woman to gain a name in her field, but Donna was right. The fact she was the famous Andrew Petersen's only offspring made the hurdles even higher.

Andy knew her struggle to succeed had cost her the one serious relationship she'd ever had. Jake's inability to accept her moderate success while his own photographs languished unpublished had eroded the foundation of their growing relationship until it collapsed in upon itself. At one time, she'd even considered changing her profession, figuring it would end the competition between them and soothe Jake's ego. It had been almost impossible for Andy to admit their joining was a failure, even after the love was long gone.

In its own way, Andy realized her studio was an admission of failure, an attempt to find contentment in her profession away from the wildlife photography that would always be her true love. Though weddings and graduations and family portraits might pay the bills, they would never take the place of photographing a mother lynx bringing her cubs to a desert pond for their first drink, or the thrill of capturing a peregrine falcon on film during its diving, soaring, courtship flight.

It came to her in a flash that she had given up too easily, had let Jake's criticism and her father's duplicity chase her away from the work she was meant to do.

Not this time, she vowed with calm determination. This was her chance, her future. Nathan Murdock was not going to take it away from her.

STUNNED BY the vehemence of her attack, Nate paused, speechless for a moment. Obviously, there was a misunderstanding of epic proportions, and just as obviously, the mistake was his. Or, more specifically, the department secretary's. Andy Petersen had to have accepted the job offer in good faith.

Time to regroup, he decided, furious but still not resigned to the idea of six weeks of work lost because of a stupid error.

"You're absolutely right, Ms. Petersen. I was wrong and I am sorry." Nate smiled grimly, controlling his irritation with difficulty. "I assumed, a grave error on my part I might add, that Andy Petersen and Andrew Petersen were one and the same. Now," he continued, enjoying her obvious confusion over the sarcastic tone of his voice, "the problem is, I still need a wildlife photographer capable of climbing those cliffs," he pointed with a sweep of his hand toward the sheer wall just east of their camp, "and taking close-up shots of the peregrines, both in their nests and in flight."

He looked her long form slowly up and down, insulting her even as he explained the job.

"And you, Ms. Petersen, photograph little children in a studio while they sit on Mommy's lap. Somehow, I don't think that qualifies you for this job, do you?"

Andy coolly returned his smile. Her blue eyes twinkled as she dumped her cold coffee on the ground and carefully refilled her cup. She held the pot out to Nate. Confused by her calm demeanor, he let her fill his empty mug.

She replaced the pot, then sat on one of the logs near the campfire, took a long, unhurried sip of her coffee, looked up at Nate and gestured for him to sit down. Curious, he took a seat on the log across from hers, still not quite sure what to expect.

"I'm going to ignore your insult," she offered sweetly, taking another sip of her coffee, "and just chalk it up to the fact that you are a complete and utter chauvinist, devoid of the intelligence God gave women." She held up one graceful hand to stall his indignant protest. "But I would like to know why you wanted to hire my father. Was it a particular photograph he did?"

Controlling his temper with difficulty, Nate decided to take her question at face value. "Actually, there were a couple of things. One was an article in an old issue of *National Geographic*. The photographs were excellent. But foremost was a poster, one of a peregrine in flight. I have it framed in my office. I love the clarity of the picture, the

vitality, the life force captured on film."

Warming to his favorite subject, Nathan allowed himself to relax a little, but he couldn't ignore the contemplative look in her sea-blue eyes. "You've probably seen the photo I'm talking about," he said, matching her direct look. "Your dad caught the falcon just as it started its dive, and you know that whatever it sees has definitely met its match. There's such pride in those eyes, so much life. The photographer couldn't have taken a better shot. It's unbelievable."

"Well thank you, Dr. Murdock. I'll take your compliment, since I'm the photographer who took the picture. I understand it's not up to par with the photos of children and mommies, but I'm still quite proud of it." She took another sip of coffee.

"That's yours?" Somehow, it was impossible to imagine this exotic looking woman, loaded down with climbing gear and camera equipment, hanging from the face of a cliff. "If you're that good ..."

"Oh I am," she quipped.

"Then why the studio?" he continued without pause. "Why the children, and the moms and the graduations and all that mundane stuff when you ..."

"Can fly?" she asked softly, her eyes sparkling, brilliant with unshed tears. "When I can

scale the cliffs and capture that moment of freedom forever on my film? Well, I'll tell you why, Professor Murdock," she added sarcastically, wiping the back of one hand quickly across her eyes.

"It's because of men like you, Professor. Men who would rather break a contract than work with a woman. I'm good at what I do," she added vehemently, "but I'm getting damned tired of constantly having to prove that in spite of my gender, which, for some strange reason most men consider to be a liability, I am just as capable of doing my job as my father was. Better, in fact, because I'm younger and stronger, and I'm damned good with a camera."

"And, for your information," she added, her voice suddenly lifeless, "half of the shots in that *National Geographic* article about raptors were mine. I was only nineteen then, and my loving father convinced me that no magazine would publish someone so young, so he took the credit."

She stopped speaking a moment to gaze in the direction of the towering pinnacles where the peregrines flew, then faced Nate again. "He got a Pulitzer Prize for that series, and my name wasn't even on the by-line. I got a 'thanks, Andy. You did a good job, but I don't think it would be a good idea to tell anyone, do you?' Well, I haven't, until now, but I think

you ought to know what you're giving up."

Rendered speechless, Nathan gaped at Andy. The fire was gone from her eyes and her shoulders slumped. Her long fingers, so expressive in anger a moment before, fluttered uncertainly. She looked away, and he noticed the rapid pulse against the dark column of her throat.

"I'll pack my gear," she said quietly, her naturally low voice roughened with defeat. "Will you please radio for the pilot to meet me?"

"No, wait." He grabbed her arm as she rose to leave. Her muscles were taut beneath the thick sweatshirt. He was instantly aware of a spark of contact as she turned on him, impatiently brushing her long hair out of her eyes.

"I'm sorry." This time his apology was sincere. "I really am. I don't like to admit when I've made a mistake, but I was wrong, and I am sorry." He paused, then looked away to gather his thoughts and control the feelings that raged beneath her steady gaze.

Gently he released his grip on her arm, then held his right hand out to her. "Let's try this again, shall we?" He smiled, noting the subtle relaxation of her body, the slight shudder as she relaxed the tension in her shoulders.

"I'm Nate Murdock, Ms. Petersen, and I think we might be able to work together. That is,

if I can learn to keep my chauvinistic attitudes in check. What do you say?"

She paused a moment, then the corners of her mouth twitched slightly, and she grasped his larger hand firmly in her own. Nathan wondered if she prepared this time, as he had, for the tiny shock that seemed to jump between them each time they touched.

"Might? Why, Dr. Murdock, is that a bit of doubt I sense?"

"Oh, it's more than a bit, Ms. Petersen. Definitely more than a bit. But I'm sure we can work around that." He returned her smile and clasped her hand securely, aware of the calluses that marked her palm, the wiry strength of her fingers, the blunt nails. Then he released his grasp and automatically rubbed his tingling hand against the rough fabric of his jeans.

Andy rubbed the palm of her right hand with her left thumb. Nate realized she shared the same odd sensation with him. She looked at her hands, a perplexed expression on her beautiful face. Then she tilted her head and smiled at Nate. "Call me Andy, Nate." She emphasized his first name. The sincere warmth of her smile unsettled Nathan more than when she'd caught him stark naked at the creek.

NATE HAD HIS gear packed and ready to go within the hour, anxious to return to

the eyrie. He stole a glance at Andy, watching as she gathered her equipment. As before, he felt mesmerized by her beauty. He'd never be able to erase the vision of her, naked by the creek, her dark skin a rich mocha shade made even more exotic by the brilliant blue of her eyes and the thick length of her hair.

And the audacity of her, to drop that towel and effectively hoist him by his own petard. He had to give her points for that move. It definitely got his attention. In fact, it had kept his attention all morning long.

Now, though, she had pulled her long hair back into a single braid, tied just above her waist with a serviceable rubber band. She wore faded blue jeans and a sleeveless tee under a heavy plaid flannel shirt. All practical, nothing contrived. There was a natural honesty about her that Nathan admired. Her boots were light-weight and designed for serious climbing, selected for function, not appearance. All of her equipment looked comfortably used, including the large array of cameras and lenses she was carefully storing in a nylon pack.

She moved with a natural grace, an elegance at odds with her rough surroundings and practical clothes. Nate appreciated how completely focused she remained on the job at hand, totally unaware of his observation.

She squatted next to the bulging pack and lifted it once to check the balance, then carefully redistributed the contents. Her long fingers caressed each item, her reverence for the equipment as natural as the smile she flashed in his direction when she completed her job and stood up.

"Sorry to take so long, but if the weight's not right, it makes climbing more difficult." She lifted the heavy pack and balanced it over one shoulder, then grabbed her climbing gear with her free hand and smiled again at Nate. He couldn't help but smile back. Suddenly he realized they were both just standing there, grinning at each other.

"Can I help you carry that?" He reached for her pack. Andy's smile faded and she backed away.

"I'm fine, thank you. I don't need any help." Her voice was clipped, defensive.

"I'm sorry." He didn't try to control the sarcasm that colored his words. "I certainly didn't mean to offend." Nate grabbed his own gear and abruptly spun around and stalked down the trail, leaving Andy to follow.

She broke into a trot to keep up with his long strides. Nate grinned when he heard her mumble to herself while she struggled with the heavy pack and all her gear. He wondered exactly what he had done to upset her. His offer to help had been nothing more than

common courtesy.

She might be gorgeous, but *damn!* the woman was pig headed.

THE BASE OF the cliff was still in deep shadow when they reached the rubble-filled clearing. They dumped their gear in a pile while Nate explained his plans for the day. Andy tried to catch her breath without letting him see how winded she was.

She'd gotten over her irritation with Nate during the short, fast walk to the site, although she felt a certain sense of shame at her childish reaction. Donna had told her more than once to think first and sputter later. Andy realized, belatedly, Nathan hadn't been inferring she wasn't strong enough to carry her equipment. He was only being polite when he offered to help.

"What we need to concentrate on today," he said, "is the search for any viable nests." Startled out of her musings, Andy gave Nathan her full attention.

Nate swept his gaze across the wall of rock that rose up in front of them in a vain attempt to divert his awareness of the woman standing beside him.

It wasn't working. "There are a number of established nesting sites on ledges across the face of this cliff," he said, pointing at the rugged wall. In response to his gesture, Andy

moved a step closer, enveloping him in her distinctly feminine scent. Nate fought an immediate desire to touch her.

Without warning, his mind projected her image, naked by the creek in the soft morning light, and he saw Andy instead of the stark walls of the cliff. Coughing to clear the catch in his throat and the vision from his mind, Nathan tried to recall his scattered thoughts and professional demeanor.

Finally, in a voice reserved for the lecture hall, he added, "there should be a lot more activity around here this time of year." Nate bent down and reached into his nylon pack, searching for one of his hand-drawn maps.

Andy watched Nathan withdraw a role of graph paper and roll it out against a large granite boulder, one of many that littered the hard packed earth at the base of the cliff.

She moved closer to him, and peered over his shoulder at the rough diagram he had drawn. She focused on the sketches while Nate described the nests he had studied a few years earlier, but her senses were all wrapped up in the thick auburn hair tied neatly at the back of his neck and the muscles that rippled beneath his pale blue chambray shirt. She smelled the faint pungency of his shampoo and leaned even closer to inhale the scent that was just him. She listened intently, more aware of the deep rumble of his voice than the

actual words.

"Are you paying attention?" His words were teasing, but Andy noticed a slight catch to his voice. Was he as affected by his proximity to her as she was to him?

"Of course," she said, answering his question as well as her own. She'd need to think about that.

He straightened up then, and standing so close, Andy had to tilt her head back to see his face. It was a strong face, deeply creased and tanned, his nose beginning to peel from sunburn. He hadn't shaved this morning. She wondered if she'd interrupted that part of his morning ritual. Suddenly she realized Nate was aware of her intense scrutiny. Quickly she backed away. He watched her just as intently.

He turned then, still holding the diagram. "There are two ways up this thing," he said, pointing at the sheer wall of rock thrusting directly out of the ground in front of them. The granite face was weathered and seamed. Andy picked out a number of fissures and hand-holds, her experienced eye automatically calculating different routes to the top.

"We can either climb straight up the face or hike the long way around the back. The ascent's gentler that way. Once we reach the top of the plateau, we could lower ourselves down the front to an area directly across from the nests. I'll leave it up to you, since I don't

know your level of climbing ability or experience."

He's certainly all business, Andy thought, trying to read more into his comments than he probably meant. Was he insulting her, suggesting the easier route, or just being cautious for her sake? She didn't want to make the same mistake again.

"I did the photo of the peregrine when I was seventeen," she said in answer to his comment. "It was taken about two thirds of the way up El Capitan in Yosemite. You choose the route."

Mentally picturing the sheer granite face of one of the most difficult climbs in North America, Nate silently reassessed the woman standing proudly beside him. Wordlessly, he reached into his pack for his climbing helmet and put it on. With a grand sweep of his hand he directed Andy toward the wall of rock that rose majestically in front of them.

Chapter 3

THE LATE afternoon sun cast long shadows across the rugged cliffs as Andy rappelled the last few feet to the ground. Her cameras dragged at her shoulders, lead weights grown heavier as the hours passed. When her feet finally touched the uneven surface at the base of the cliff she would have fallen if a pair of strong arms hadn't grabbed and supported her.

"Thanks. Lord, I'm tired." She leaned against him for support, her chest heaving with the effort to catch her breath.

It had been an unusual day, working steadily across the face of the cliff, concentrating on the job at hand but always aware of Nathan. He filled her senses. On one level she quickly learned to count on his expertise and depend on his strength on the climb. On another she absorbed his scent and the rhythm of his movements, enjoying his grace on the ropes as if she watched a ballet.

Now she held on to his solid shoulder and leaned against him, breathing in the male smell of sweat and rock dust that clung to his skin and hair. Her muscles trembled as she let her heavy load of camera gear slip slowly to the ground.

Nate helped unfasten her climbing harness and hardware sling while Andy fumbled with

scraped fingers at the nylon chin strap on her helmet. His hands were no steadier than hers as they brushed softly against her waist when he lifted the heavy sling away to set it on the hard packed earth.

"You did a good job today." He sounded tired, his voice subdued. He looked away, as if he wanted to say more. She wondered if he might apologize for comments he had made this morning. She was surprised when he added, "I really underestimated you."

Andy started to say 'most men do', but they were both exhausted, and it didn't seem worth the effort when his compliment was so sincere. Besides, they'd both worked hard, and Nathan had treated her as an equal. He'd even given her the lead most of the day.

Or did she take it?

She decided it didn't really matter. Her hair felt damp and matted against her scalp, the long braid loose and hanging in curled tendrils around her face. She brushed the strands back from her eyes, and when she raised her head Nate was smiling at her again, an odd little half smile as if he wanted to ask her something. Then he turned away, question unasked, and picked up most of her gear as well as his own.

He paused a moment, as if waiting for her to say something sarcastic. Perversely she wondered if he was disappointed when, without comment, she grabbed the rest of her gear

and followed him down the rocky trail to camp.

She knew she'd been tested today. She had no doubt she'd proven herself. Not once had Nate complained about her proficiency on the climb. In fact, after a short time they'd fallen into a comfortable rhythm, anticipating each other's movements and needs.

But in spite of their successful working relationship, it had been a frustrating day. Of the half dozen nests observed and photographed, only one contained an egg. Nate had quickly noted the position of the nest on his graph, then motioned to Andy to move away so they wouldn't disturb the parents any more than was necessary.

At this time of year there should be at least two flecked and speckled reddish eggs in each nest. Nathan was right. Something was wrong here, and the peregrines were in danger.

"YOU LOOK beat," Nate said, holding up a hand to dissuade any rebuttal from Andy, "so I'll fix dinner. Why don't you go wash up, and I'll take my turn later. And," he added with a tired, lopsided grin, "I promise not to bring you any coffee."

"Works for me...I'm exhausted. By the way," she paused, "I wasn't worried about the coffee, because if you're as tired as I am ..." She let the thought dangle, then flashed him a quick smile and crawled into her tent to find a clean pair of sweats. She had to admit,

Nate's offer hadn't been at all condescending, no matter how critical she wanted to be of his kindness. Sometimes it was hard to realize not everyone's words contained hidden meanings or insults.

The cool bath in the shallow creek felt wonderful. Andy stayed longer than she'd intended. The sky was taking on the deep purple hue of dusk when she finally returned to camp. Nate had already eaten and was looking through his notes, heavy tortoise shell glasses perched half-way down his nose.

"Stew's in the pot. Hope you don't mind freeze dried." He pulled the glasses down to peer over the rims at Andy, and flashed her a tired smile. "It's boring glop, but I tried to keep everything quick and easy."

"No, it's fine." She scooped a lumpy spoonful of the brownish stuff onto her plate and grabbed a couple of warm biscuits from a second pan. There was cool water from the spring stored in a plastic thermos next to Nate's tent. She reached over and nabbed it without disturbing him.

"It's getting too dark for this." He took his glasses off and put the papers away, then pulled a small nylon pack out of his tent. "I'll be back in a few minutes, if I don't fall asleep and drown." He chuckled ruefully. "I didn't realize I was this out of shape. I'm gonna be

sore tomorrow."

Andy waved him off with mixed feelings. She was enjoying his company, enjoying her awareness of him, so much that she kept forgetting how rude he'd been this morning. She couldn't forget he'd rather be working with her father. Well, she should be used to that by now.

He was proving to be an enigma...a very sexy enigma. Andy watched him until he disappeared around a bend in the trail as he headed for the creek, silently contemplating his effect on her.

It didn't make sense, her awareness of him, the need she barely understood. The man didn't even want her here. Nate was tolerating her because he was stuck with her.

She'd spent the day thinking of how he'd looked this morning, sun-burnished and naked, standing in front of her like some heathen god. In fact, the image was indelibly burned into her brain.

He appeared to have dismissed her without a second thought.

"But I'll bet you're just as tired and sore as I am," she muttered. *Lord, what a petty thing to say.* Thank goodness he hadn't heard her. Andy stared at the dying embers and wondered if she would ever get over the need to have to prove herself to anyone other than

herself.

SHE WAS AN enigma. Nate rolled the word around in his tired mind as he traipsed the short distance to the creek. A riddle, not as she appeared. Andy Petersen could have stepped right out of the pages of *Vogue*, but she would have done it on her own terms, probably with a sarcastic comment or two. He chuckled as he pulled off his stained shirt and untied the thick laces on his leather hiking boots.

To think a woman with her looks was not only a skilled wildlife photographer, but a fine mountaineer as well, absolutely boggled the mind. Considering the way his luck had been running lately, he certainly hadn't expected someone like her to show up in camp, practically daring him *not* to hire her.

Watching Andy work above and beside him on the face of the cliffs had given rock climbing a whole new dimension. Thinking now of her well-rounded bottom swaying scant inches above his face on the vertical wall of the cliff suddenly shocked Nate with an intense physical reaction.

The erection he'd managed to control all day made him laugh. "Don't know who you're trying to impress," he muttered, unsnapping his jeans to relieve the quick pressure. He

peeled the sweaty denim down over his legs and stepped into the welcome coolness of the stream.

One thing for sure...as gorgeous as Andy Petersen was, there was no way in hell he wanted to get involved with her, no matter how strong the chemistry appeared to be. He couldn't deny that he wanted her, but at this point, he wasn't sure he even liked her.

Even after a full day of climbing, both of them dirty and covered with sweat, his libido had jumped into overdrive when he helped steady her at the bottom of the cliff. But she wasn't worth the risk. This project was too important, and Andy Petersen way too touchy.

Hell, he had to consider every word before he spoke, or risk her blowing up at a perceived insult. Look at what she'd done this morning to blow him off? Of course, she couldn't possibly realize what the sight of her dusky body framed in a mass of wild black hair had done to him.

He wasn't about to let her know, either. He'd just have to watch his step around her, take advantage of her skills, figure out what was threatening the eyrie. He'd keep it impersonal; employer, employee, as businesslike as he knew how.

But no sex, no flirting, none of the teasing comments that came so easily to his tongue. Not with a woman so quick to take offense. He lay back in the chilly water and scrubbed

the dirt and dust off his chest and shoulders, then washed and rinsed his hair. And even though he didn't want to, he thought of Andy, naked here at this spot in the creek when she bathed, her long hair flowing with the gently moving water.

Once again his loins tightened. *Damn*. This wasn't going to be easy, lusting after a gorgeous, hardheaded feminist. All he needed right now was a sexual harassment suit on top of everything else.

Finally, chilled and tired, Nathan waded to the edge of the pool and crawled out on the sun-warmed surface of a large slab of granite, stretching out lizard-like to soak up the last of the heat. He lay there a moment, drifting, almost asleep, feeling the warmth against his belly and the cool night air like a soft caress along his back and buttocks.

She was beautiful, but oh so prickly! Women always confused him, but Andy more than most. He wondered why she was so thin-skinned, always on the defensive, constantly looking for hidden meanings in everything he said.

Of course, if her father had actually stooped so low as to take credit for her work...Hell, most fathers wanted to show their kids off, not steal from them. Maybe she had her reasons.

Nate had to admit he'd enjoyed working with her. She was a hell of a lot better looking

than his regular assistant and definitely more agile with her long slender build and lighter weight.

He'd watched in awe as she moved gracefully across the vertical wall ahead of him, setting the pitons securely in the rock with practiced skill, marking a semi-permanent trail across the face of the cliff so they could reuse it throughout the full six weeks of their study. She followed his instructions exactly and without complaint, even though he knew the sleek muscles in her arms and shoulders must be knotted in agony from the strenuous work.

He was sorry Will had been injured, but already Nate realized Andy surpassed the young man's skill in every respect, except personality. Six weeks of walking on eggs could get to be pretty tiring.

Which brought him back to the whole reason for the study in the first place. The eggs, as in, why weren't there any up there? He and Andy had spent the day looking for evidence of weakened or broken shells in the nests, a sure sign of contamination in the food chain, but the eyrie was empty.

They'd spotted at least four mated peregrine pairs, all healthy looking adults including the parents of the single egg. But the only clue that something might be amiss, other than

the lack of eggs, was the birds' unusual level of agitation.

It wasn't just Andy and Nate scaling the cliff to their nests that had the birds so excited. Something else was after the eggs. Nate intended to find out what, or who, it was.

Tired and relaxed from his bath, Nate dressed in clean sweats and headed back to camp. He'd worry about the birds, and getting along with Andy, later, after he'd had some sleep.

He knew he wasn't perfect, but this project was too important to let a personality conflict between his photographer and himself interfere with their working relationship.

He might be a typical chauvinist, but for the sake of science, he was willing to be enlightened.

THE FIRE WAS reduced to a mound of coals by the time Nathan returned to camp. He spotted Andy in the shadows, curled up against the pile of climbing gear, her long braid looped over her shoulder and her hands tucked beneath one dusky cheek. Asleep, she looked like a child, her full lower lip slightly pouting, her forehead wrinkled as if in deep thought.

Nate set his pack down quietly and carefully put some extra wood on the fire. The dry kindling caught and flared up, casting a soft glow that flickered and danced around the tiny

glade. He opened the flap to Andy's tent and crawled inside. Her gear and clothing were neatly stowed in the small space, the sleeping bag zipped completely shut to discourage small visitors. As quietly as he could, Nate unzipped the bag and pulled the down-filled shell open.

He thought about trying to put her to bed without waking her, but rejected that idea immediately. He could just imagine her reaction if she were to wake up while he was hauling her off to bed. Gently shaking her shoulder appeared to be a more prudent decision.

"Andy." He whispered her name. She squirmed a bit, looking for a more comfortable position on the hard ground. "Andy, wake up. It's late and I know you're tired. C'mon, let's get to bed."

She grumbled a little, a sleepy child sound that brought a smile to Nate's lips, but he urged her to turn around and crawl the few short inches into her bed. She wriggled into the soft bag, never coming fully awake. As soon as her head rested on the small pillow, both hands went back to the same position beneath one cheek.

Nate smoothed her hair back and brushed the dark wisps away from her face. He lifted her heavy braid and placed it carefully along the outside of the sleeping bag. So strong and independent a woman throughout the day — there was a childlike vulnerability about her

as she slept.

Nate sat a moment watching her, listening to the rhythmic sound of her breathing. Gentle shadows cast by the light of the campfire played across her high cheekbones and heavy brows. He studied her finely cut features, seeing something beyond classic beauty, an indescribable combination of earthiness and strength and character.

Her sensuality was almost palpable, a third person in the small tent. Of their own volition, Nate's fingers brushed along the curve of her shoulder, feeling the warmth of her through the worn sweatshirt, wanting to reach beneath the fabric and cup the softness of her breast. Instead, he pulled the sleeping bag up to cover her and tugged the zipper higher.

She'd worked so hard today, as if she had something to prove. Maybe she did. Nate was willing to give her that. Practically everyone had something to prove, if not to someone else, then to themselves. He'd be a fool to deny that aspect of anyone's personality, especially since that same drive had cost him a marriage.

He wondered if Andy had been married. There was no wedding ring, not even a mark on her finger. In fact, she wore no jewelry at all except for the tiny silver studs that sparkled in both ears. Nate realized there was very little he actually knew about her, but he intended to make good use of the six weeks he had to find out whatever he could.

His feelings for Andy confused him, but he hesitated only slightly before he leaned over and gently placed a very chaste kiss on her forehead. Then he quietly crawled out of the tent and zipped the flap shut behind him.

ANDY AWOKE once during the night, much too warm in the heavy sweats and down bag. She tried to push the edge of the sleeping bag back, then realized it was zipped all the way to her chin. She always slept with it open. She wondered how she'd gotten to bed and why she was wearing all her clothes, but it was too confusing to figure out in the middle of the night so she unzipped the bag and crawled out on top, then fell asleep again.

The morning chill woke her before it was fully light. She grimaced in pain as she rolled over and tried to sit up. Her back and shoulders felt like they'd been tied in knots and her legs refused to straighten out. She wanted to crawl back into her sleeping bag and enjoy her misery a moment longer, but nature was calling and she really didn't want to meet Nate at the latrine. It was bad enough to have caught him naked at his bath.

She hadn't wanted to think about that yesterday, at least not once they started working, but the vision of him standing tall and muscled in the woods, the stream tumbling wildly behind him, had intruded off and on all day. It returned full force this morning.

He could have come from another time, with his broad, tanned shoulders and the thick auburn hair reaching to his shoulders. Later, he'd worn it tied back with a leather strap, the heavy tail of hair protruding beneath his climbing helmet.

Then she pictured him stalking back up the trail, back stiff and thongs flapping, the towel pulled tightly around his rear. He'd been holding it so snugly in front, she figured he really had no idea how great he looked in back. Stifling a giggle, wondering why her thoughts were leading her this way, she quickly slipped on her boots and headed for the latrine.

WHEN NATE awoke a few minutes later, it was to the clunk and rattle of pots and pans. He lay still, enjoying a moment of pure male pleasure at the image of Andy fixing his breakfast. He'd thought of her most of the night, sleeping just a few feet away, wrapped in the safety of her own tent.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee finally lured him out. He grunted a quick 'good morning' as he headed for the creek to shave. He hadn't shaved yesterday, not after their rather unique introduction. The heavy stubble was beginning to itch. That, and the fact he'd recently noticed parts of his beard were coming in gray even though the hair on his head

was dark.

Vanity, thy name is man, too, he thought, wondering why it even mattered how he looked working on site. He was thinking of Andy as he hurried down the trail.

LATER, AFTER breakfast, they cleaned up the dishes in companionable silence. When the chores were finished, Andy dragged out her large bundle of climbing gear to organize her things for the day's work.

"I don't think we're going to need that stuff today," Nate said. She sat back on her haunches, an expectant look on her face.

Nathan rubbed the base of his neck, massaging the overworked muscles from the previous day's climb, and explained the change in plans. "What I really want to do is hike around to the back side of the plateau. There's a good trail over there, an old road that the forest service no longer maintains, but at least it beats trying to go straight through the woods. There are a couple of things I want to check out. Besides," he added, twisting his head to one side, working the sore muscles, "I don't think my body could take another day of climbing quite so soon."

"Works for me. What do you expect to find up there?" Andy was already changing out of

her climbing boots, putting on a pair for hiking. This morning she wore light brown jeans that molded her hips and thighs, and a blue plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves tied around her waist over a faded yellow tee-shirt. If she turned just right, the dark centers of her nipples showed faintly through the knit fabric. Nate decided he'd better find something else to look at if he wanted to give her an intelligent answer.

"I don't know, but I have some ideas." He reached into his bag and pulled out the graph and map he'd worked on the night before, then searched a moment in a side pocket before finding his reading glasses.

"All of these nest sites, the empty ones, are easily accessible from the top of the plateau. If you were to drop a rope down from here," he pointed to a long, straight line drawn to represent the top edge, "you could rappel down the face even if you didn't have a lot of skill. The only nest that has an egg in it is here." He pointed to a circled X marking the one viable site, located under a large overhang.

He folded the paper carefully and put it back into his pack. "That nest would only be accessible from the ground, a much more difficult climb." He chuckled to himself, then smiled at Andy. "As we both well know."

"So, what are you getting at?" she asked, tying the heavy laces on her boots.

Nate settled more comfortably on the log next to the fire. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. With his hands clasped under his chin he took a moment to stare into the cooling embers.

"There probably never were a lot of peregrines to begin with," he said, "but they're one of the few species of birds found all over the world. Every continent and most of the larger islands have had one or more sub-species of peregrine falcon, but they were probably best known in Europe. In medieval times they were used by royalty for sport, to hunt smaller birds."

He looked at Andy. She gazed steadily back at him, a pensive look in her sea-blue eyes. "Lots of different raptors have been used as sporting birds throughout history, but the peregrine is the aristocrat of them all. They're so regal, so fierce. They're still a status symbol in many countries."

"And you think foreign interests are behind the peregrines' disappearance?" Andy finished tying her boots and sat down next to Nate.

"It's just a guess, but the market for raptors has grown in many Middle Eastern countries, as well as Japan and Germany. Imagine the lure when a single falcon can sell for close to \$200,000. There's so much profit to be made smuggling falcons, and so few agents to make

arrests, it could be anyone, local or foreign."

"I can't believe birds could be worth that kind of money!" Andy stood up and looked in the direction of the shadowed cliffs, gray monoliths in the early morning light. "I guess they take the eggs, too, hmm?" She sighed deeply, her attention still directed toward the vertical wall of granite.

"Yeah, they take falcons any way they can get them. The eggs are easier to transport than live birds, so there's less risk to the smugglers."

Nate stood next to her, then spotted two tiny specks whirling and diving in the distant sky. Peregrines, playing on the air currents. They were exquisite creatures, but so fragile wherever man invaded.

"There was one case," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "a few years ago. In less than a year and a half, two foreign smugglers made almost a million dollars on North American birds. They took over a hundred in just one season...the treatment of the live birds was terrible, a lot of them died.

"Out here, even with strict laws to protect them, less than ten percent of the breeding population has managed to survive," he said, pounding one fist into his open palm for emphasis. "I think that's why smuggling angers me the most, that anyone, for their own

personal gain, would harm one of these beautiful birds. The idea of trading a peregrine's freedom for a life on the arm of some Middle Eastern sheik...I'm sorry." *Back on the old soapbox*, he thought, feeling chagrined and a little sheepish. He hoped Andy would understand. "I tend to get carried away," he explained. "It's just...I find the whole thing so abhorrent."

He smiled at Andy, gazing into her deep blue eyes, reading compassion in them, then understanding when he said, "Imagine putting you in a harem, locked behind stone walls for the rest of your life."

He saw Andy, dressed in silks and jewels. He couldn't help himself, that the image of her in harem costume fit her exotic appearance, if not her personality. He let his mind wander along that imaginary trail until her soft words dragged him back.

"If you did that, I would die." Her voice was grave, thoughtful. He knew she considered the horror of a life without freedom. A subtle change came over her face. Nate wondered at the deeper meaning behind her shifting expressions.

"I think," she said, her low voice conveying determination and strength, "that if you really believe someone is stealing the eggs, then maybe we'd better get busy." She walked over to her tent and began to repack her camera gear. Nate followed her.

"I really hadn't thought this through before," he said, "but if we are dealing with poachers and smugglers, it could be dangerous." He considered his words, wondering how he should phrase his request. "I think I'd prefer you wait here at camp, at least until I check things out."

That was the wrong thing to say, he decided, as she whirled about and stood, hands on hips, to face him.

"I thought we got past that," she hissed, altering her image in Nate's mind from pliant harem girl to virago in a heartbeat. "You hired me. If you don't want me to go, then fire me. But quit trying to protect me."

He held his hands up in front of his face in mock fear. "I'm sorry. You're right. Don't hurt me. I apologize." He grinned, forcing Andy to smile in return. "Old habits die hard," he said. He grabbed one of her bags and slung it over his shoulder, daring her with his cheeky smile.

She swung a teasing right hook at his chin. He dodged it, laughing. But he couldn't help but worry over what awaited them on the plateau.

Chapter 4

"YOU CALL this a road?" Andy stumbled over a tree root, but caught herself before falling. She'd followed Nate along the rough trail for over an hour, winding slowly upward and around the back side of the cliffs where the peregrines nested.

"You okay?" Nate reached out to steady her, but she waved him off. "I think it must have been a logging trail, or maybe it went to one of the old mines," he said. "It hasn't been used in years, that's for sure."

"I didn't realize there was any mining up here." Andy glanced at the dense forest along either side of the trail. She wasn't about to admit how much she appreciated Nate's strong presence.

"You haven't heard of the Trinity Mines?" Nate stopped while Andy caught up. "They took a lot of gold out of this country during the late 1800's, but the Mother Lode in the Sierra Nevada got most of the press. Hard to imagine all the activity now, as peaceful as it is." He glanced briefly at the quiet forest, but his gaze returned to Andy.

She wiped the bright sheen of perspiration from her brow with a large red handkerchief, then took a long drink out of her canteen. The column of her throat was long and smooth,

the skin an all-over shade of mocha. Her eyes closed and she sighed when she swallowed. Nate swallowed convulsively, his eyes focused on the line where her soft lips touched the canteen's mouth.

When Andy finished her drink, she wiped the top of the canteen carefully and replaced the lid. She glanced up and caught him staring. Nate reached out with one fingertip to catch a tiny drop of water that clung to the corner of her mouth. Still staring at her full lips, he rubbed the moisture between his thumb and forefinger.

Startled by his touch, she returned his steady gaze. The air felt charged around them, a palpable sensation that whispered over Andy like a warm breath.

His eyes were dark, a deep hazel, the center a chip of black obsidian that reflected Andy back upon herself.

They stood, caught in their own reflections, drawing imperceptibly closer, lips parting in anticipation. A piercing shriek rent the air.

"What was that?" Andy jerked back to reality and looked wildly about.

"It's a falcon, and it sounds really pissed!" Nate grabbed Andy's hand, and pulled her after him along the rough trail. They rounded a large outcropping of granite and burst out of the thick forest on top of the plateau. Together they raced across the uneven surface to

the cliff's edge.

The sky was filled with falcons, diving and soaring in splendid anger, screaming their outrage at some unseen invader.

Nate dropped to his belly at the cliff's edge, pulling Andy down beside him. Together they crawled to the brink of the precipice, dislodging pebbles that tumbled out of sight to the valley floor over five hundred feet below.

Their campsite, the tents like tiny game pieces in the small clearing to the south, were partially hidden by a copse of trees. But the campsite didn't grab Andy's attention, not like the surrealistic scene directly below.

At a spot near where she and Nate had started their climb the morning before, sat a small helicopter, the kind that always reminded Andy of a big dragonfly. One man dressed in military camouflage leaned against the clear bubble canopy and held a large rifle crosswise in his arms.

Another man, heavysset but neatly dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots and a white cowboy hat, stood directly below, partially hidden by an out-thrust granite ledge. Horrified, Andy realized she and Nate were directly above the only peregrine nest with an egg in it...a nest someone was obviously climbing toward.

The peregrines were frantic, diving and attacking in a vain attempt to dislodge the trespassers from their eyrie. As Nathan and Andy watched in dread, the man near the helicopter raised his rifle and fired, aiming for one particularly aggressive falcon.

The bird plummeted, diving directly toward the ground, then rose to soar safely away. The bullet hit about a dozen feet from Andy, dislodging a small avalanche of rocks and pebbles. Nate grabbed the waist of her jeans and pulled her away from the edge, out of the line of fire.

"What can we do?" Andy's words exploded in quick puffs.

"I know what I'd like to do, but I'd probably end up in jail." Nate rolled over on his back, crushed by a sense of helplessness. "I thought this might be the problem, but I never expected to actually see them, least of all, catch them in the act." He rolled back on his belly and inched forward along the rough granite surface until he could see over the ledge again. He heard Andy digging through her pack, then suddenly she was beside him, close enough he felt her body heat through his shirt.

She raised up on her elbows and eased her camera over the rough edge of the cliff. Her hands were steady as she aimed her largest telephoto lens at the illegal activity below.

Nate's respect for Andy's skill moved up a notch. He watched with admiration the cool

precision with which she took her pictures. Her hands were steady, her mouth a grim line. The only signs of her inner turmoil were the damp tracks of tears shimmering over her flushed cheeks.

Her shutter clicked over and over. When a scrawny little man rappelled out from under the overhanging edge and down the cliff, again when the large man at the base of the precipice reached up to grab the falcon's egg, then again when the man in camouflage took aim once more at the falcons.

Nate heard her sigh with relief when none of the whirling, soaring birds fell to earth.

He had his binoculars out now, staring intently at the faces so far below. He thought he recognized one of the men. "Damn," he cursed, rolling away from edge. "The radio. I forgot the damned radio. We need to get back to camp, call Roger and tell him what's going on."

Andy was unloading a roll of film, beginning to put a new roll in the camera, but she nodded silently and quickly repacked her equipment. Nate crawled back out to the edge of the cliff, grabbing one more quick look at the men below.

Andy felt the impact of the bullet's ricochet before she heard the sharp report, a spattering of brittle rock fragments that cut her face and shoulder. Nate grabbed her, pulling

her down and out of sight.

"I think he saw us," Nate gasped, flattening himself into the dirt.

"I think I could've figured that out," she answered dryly, wiping a trickle of blood off her arm and grabbing her camera bag at the same time.

A rhythmic *thrump, thrump, thrump*, warned them the helicopter was taking off. Nate grabbed Andy's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"The trees," he shouted as he hauled her along behind. "We have to get under the trees where they can't spot us."

Stumbling at first on the rough ground, Andy quickly caught her own rhythm. They raced hand in hand across the open plateau. The forest loomed dark and secure a hundred yards away, but the distance felt like miles as the roar of the helicopter grew.

Gasping for breath, they dove beneath the sheltering canopy of the trees. Andy's legs folded and she crumbled to the ground in relief.

"Don't stop, we have to keep going!" Nate dragged her to her feet, pulling her deeper into the woods. "C'mon, sweetheart, you can make it." He led the way, protecting her with his body from the heavy undergrowth that slapped them across legs and faces.

Andy struggled for air, but she managed to yell, "I'm not your sweetheart!" just as Nate

shoved her behind a massive downed redwood, then lay beside her in the damp earth and crushed ferns.

She heard it then, in rhythm with the pounding of her heart, the sound of the helicopter as it cleared the rim of the plateau. The noise grew louder. The craft hovered close against the edge of the forest, just beyond the trees where she and Nate lay hidden.

A sob caught in her throat. She pressed tightly against Nate's broad chest, welcoming the comfort of his strong arms and the steady beat of his heart against her cheek.

The helicopter hovered, suspended directly in front of their position. The blade-driven wind whipped the branches and filled the air with dust and debris. Suddenly the air stilled, and the forest was silent. Nate held his breath. Andy trembled beside him, shuddering with the effort to control her gasps for air.

"They gotta be here, Mark." The guttural voice was accented, the words punctuated by the unmistakable sound of a shell sliding into a rifle chamber just on the other side of the log, only a few feet from their hiding place.

Andy's trembling increased. Her blue eyes widened in her flushed face. Nate looked over his shoulder. A shadowy figure advanced into his line of vision, then moved parallel to them, partially hidden in the undergrowth on the far side of the log.

Nate glanced at Andy. She'd flattened her body against his chest. He saw barely controlled hysteria in her glittering eyes.

His gaze was drawn to her parted lips, to the tiny beads of moisture above her mouth, the smudge of dirt to the left of her nose. Suddenly, his entire existence spiraled down into the space between her lips and the scream that threatened.

He covered her mouth with his, silencing her, gently invading the tiny cleft that opened on her sigh to admit him.

Her eyelids fluttered against his cheek and her trembling eased when their tongues met and touched and explored, oblivious to the danger a few yards away.

A loud crash nearby ripped Nathan back to reality. Andy's eyes flew open and she pulled out of his arms looking shocked and disoriented. Nate shivered at the unexpected abandonment.

The noise drew the poachers' attention. When Nate heard the one closest to them hurry off to investigate what was probably a frightened deer, he exhaled a long, deep sigh of relief.

Nathan gave Andy's shoulders a quick squeeze, wondering briefly at the rigid set to them, then eased up over the log to see if anyone else was around. He still tasted Andy on

his lips and tongue and he had the irrational desire to stand up and ask everyone to just go away so he could kiss her again. But footsteps crunched in dry grass nearby and Nate flattened himself against the rough bark of the log to conceal himself once again in the shadows.

"No sign of them here." The voice sounded too close for comfort. Then the sound of footsteps moved away, back toward the open plateau.

"C'mon guys. Let's get back to the mine and load the eggs. We can be out of here in a couple of hours. It'll take 'em at least a day to get back to civilization, whoever they are."

"Probably just tourists." The accent again, thought Nate, so it must be Ed, the one who looked vaguely familiar to him.

"I don't know. I think I spotted a tent when we circled around to come up here. I want to check it out."

"I think we should, too." A new voice, probably the unseen Sid. "I saw fresh pitons in the cliff when I went up today. I didn't have a chance to tell you, Ed. Someone else has been climbing there."

"You think they steal the eggs?"

"No, I don't think so." Mark's voice again, sounding perplexed. "They would have taken

the last one, don't you think?"

"Ya, you are probably correct. Let's check the campsite."

CONCEALED BEHIND the rotting log, Andy and Nathan lay side by side, avoiding each other's eyes, waiting for the sound of the departing helicopter. Finally, the engine coughed and roared to life. They heard the chopper take off, then hover a moment over the plateau before the sound diminished and finally disappeared altogether.

Andy touched her swollen lips with the tips of her fingers, uncertain whether to be angry with Nate or to thank him. Never in her life had she been so afraid. His kiss certainly took her mind off the danger.

She still felt a heaviness deep in her belly, a warmth that even fear couldn't chill. Had Nate been affected by the kiss as much as she had? "Why did you kiss me?" she asked.

"I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time." He paused a moment, not looking at her. Taken at face value, his answer sounded flip, but his voice was husky. She decided he wasn't completely unaffected. "If I upset you, I apologize."

She really didn't want an apology, but she wasn't certain if she wanted him to kiss her again, either. It confused her too much.

"You don't have to apologize. I'm not upset, but...I'd rather you didn't do it again. It, it never happened, okay?"

Nate nodded in agreement. The tension that had been building around them eased. Still they waited, not looking at each other, unwilling to move, hesitant to leave this place of quiet and comparative safety. Finally, Nate broke the silence.

"Do you want to go back to camp, or try to make it cross country to the ranger's station?"

"I think we should find their camp. That's where the rest of the eggs must be."

Nate grabbed her shoulders. "You're crazy, you know. They'd kill you in a minute. They're not playing around. This is big business, big money."

"I know. But what they're doing is wrong." Andy shrugged her shoulders and pushed away from Nate. After what had happened, she needed the distance, the sense of control. She sat up and began untangling twigs and leaves out of her hair.

He hesitated a moment. She knew he was thinking about that damn kiss, wondering about her stupid reaction.

"I'd like to go back to camp first, see if the radio's still intact, okay? I'd rather call Roger first before looking for their camp. I'll feel better knowing we have help on the way."

She had to agree his idea made sense. Why was it so hard to accept his suggestions?

Without answering, Andy began to gather her bags, looping the heavy straps over her shoulders. Nate reached over to help her. He recoiled at the stains of her fresh blood on his hands.

"Were you shot?" His voice was harsh, unbelieving.

"No. Just scratched from the rocks. The bullet must have ricocheted." She looked down at her arm, bleeding from a dozen tiny cuts, then turned to look at Nate. He saw blood along her cheek and high on her forehead. Tiny spots, not painful to her, but frightening to him.

"God, Andy. You've got cuts all over you." He grabbed his handkerchief, poured water on it from his canteen, then swabbed at the drying blood on her face and arm. She winced. He forced himself to move slowly, to calm the frantic motion of his hands. Some of the cuts were deep, the pebbles still imbedded. He cleaned them out carefully, wondering how he could have missed seeing them when he kissed her.

"Do you think you can make it back to camp?" He held her arm firmly and wiped at the blood, trying to staunch the flow from the deeper wounds. She shrugged, but her motion appeared tense, her smile bleak.

"Yeah, I'm okay." She looked around, slightly disoriented in the aftermath of danger, and

attempted to organize her equipment without pulling out of his grasp. Why did his hands feel charged against her flesh? It was such an unfamiliar sensation.

Absently, she pulled her arm away, and rubbed the stinging, tingling flesh. She was ready, and all her gear was packed. It was time to head down, now, while she still had the strength.

"We've got your gear," Nate said, looking for his own pack, "but I don't see mine anywhere. I guess I forgot it when we ran over here." He laughed ruefully, and shook his head. "It's amazing, the effect gunshots have on an otherwise civilized man."

He reached for Andy's bags, still chuckling, and threw them over his shoulder. He grabbed all of them, the heavy one with cameras and lenses, the other with her lunch and canteen. When she protested, he ignored her and they started down the hill.

Andy followed a few steps behind. Nate realized she was completely exhausted, her adrenaline spent. He wondered if she could make it all the way to camp.

It took them longer than it should have, but an hour after the attack on the plateau, they slipped quietly through the heavy woods a few hundred yards from their tents. Andy appeared relieved for a chance to sit. She rested against a huge fir tree. Nathan noticed her legs trembling from their rapid hike.

"Look," Nate touched her hair, then the side of her face where more blood had dried. "I'm not trying to put you down, or tell you what to do, but you're hurt and I know you're exhausted. Just stay here. I'm going to go into camp, see if they found it, if they're there." She quickly struggled to her feet, but he stopped her protest.

"I promise to be careful. Please." He grasped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "They could be there. What they could do to me is nothing to what they would do to you."

He looked away for a moment, gathering strength, controlling his emotions. This possessiveness he felt, the desire to protect, surprised him.

"I just want to see if the radio is intact. If it isn't, I'll come back and get you, and we'll get the hell out of here."

Andy understood that sentiment exactly, even though she didn't agree, but she smiled at him. Then, before she had a chance to think about it, she leaned forward and kissed him.

She intended it as a simple act of encouragement, but the instant their lips touched, the kiss became much more. She felt his mouth move on hers, soft, questioning, a gentle exploration of the taste and texture of her lips.

Someone else, some other person, had to be instigating this, she thought, as her lips moved over his, as they parted, allowing his tongue to gain entrance, to search, touch her

teeth, the tip of her tongue, the sides of her mouth.

He was crawling inside, becoming a part of her, all through a simple kiss. He plundered her mouth with his tongue and the contours of her body with his hands. His palm was firm against her back, his fingers left points of molten fire along her spine. She heard herself groan softly when his hands slid low to cup her buttocks and press her tightly against him, where she nestled in the cradle of his hips.

His other hand molded her breast, kneaded the soft flesh until her nipples hardened and rubbed almost painfully against the knit fabric of her shirt, against the rough calluses of his palm. She was drowning in him, losing herself in the waves of primitive desire that threatened her last remnants of control. She was becoming desire, becoming the touch of lips and tongue, of mouth on mouth, of hand to breast and flank.

She was losing control.

The kiss ended by mutual consent. He pulled away as awareness returned to her and the two of them lost themselves, each in the eyes of the other. Andy was the first to completely break contact, glancing away, briefly over her shoulder, then pulling out of his arms. When she looked back, he was grinning at her, a lop-sided smile formed with lips swollen from their kiss.

"You don't have to apologize," he whispered, diffusing the moment by mimicking Andy's earlier statement. "You didn't upset me one bit."

There was no way she was going to get out of this gracefully. "Well," she fought to control a smile, pinching her lips between her teeth. "Don't do it again."

"Me?" He flashed her a wide-eyed, innocent look. "I didn't do a thing." Suddenly, his expression turned serious. "I'm going." He held her face in both his hands. "I'll look for the radio, then get the hell out. Wait for me here."

"I'll wait." Were those her words? Already it was happening, the subtle handing over of her life. Nate making the decisions, expecting her to agree without question. And she, fool that she was, did exactly as he expected.

Donna was right, thought Andy. She was a control freak. But the minute she gave a little, some man expected a lot. Nate was no exception. Their kisses suddenly took on new meaning.

She watched him crawling away through the thick underbrush. The passion burning through her moments before was now a cold, empty feeling under her heart.

Moments later he was back. She heard movement in the brush, and for a moment feared the smugglers had returned. Nate popped out of the undergrowth and Andy breathed a sigh

of relief.

"It's gone. They busted the damned thing in a million pieces." He sounded discouraged and frustrated.

"Then we need to find their camp." Andy spoke as if there was no other choice. Nathan looked at her like she was crazy.

"What we need to do is get out of here and find a phone somewhere." He was already putting the knapsack over his shoulder, preparing to leave, not even looking to Andy for confirmation.

"I'm not going with you." Her eyes narrowed, and she held her body rigid. When Nate reached for her, she pulled away.

"By the time you get to a phone, they'll be gone, the eggs will be gone." She tried to reason with him. "They won't expect us to come after them."

"And do what?" Nate exploded, grabbing Andy's shoulders, as if he wanted to shake her, or kiss her, anything to make her see reason. "They're armed, remember? Big gun, big bullets? What are you planning to do, hit them with your camera?" Shaking his head in exasperation, he let go of her and reached for her bags.

She pulled them out of his hands.

"I'll think of something." Andy knew she sounded stupid. Her eyes burned, unshed tears, anger, it didn't matter. What she wanted never seemed to matter. It was always the man's choice, his decision that counted. She took a deep, steady breath.

"Look, we're wasting time." She fiddled with the clasp on her camera bag, open, closed, open, not wanting to look into those eyes, afraid of what she would see. "If I could get photos of their camp, the helicopter, anything else to help convict them, that would help, wouldn't it?" Now she did look at him, gauging his reaction, wanting him to at least think about it.

To her surprise, he actually appeared to consider her suggestion. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, all the while staring at Andy as if he were weighing her abilities. Finally, she could tell he'd reached some sort of decision, one that didn't seem to make him particularly happy.

"I didn't tell you before, but I think I recognized one of those men." He looked beyond her, toward the cliffs. "I think he's a member of an international smuggling ring, one that was pretty well broken up a few years ago. He must have eluded authorities, because the others are still in prison. I'd give anything to help catch him."

He looked back at Andy, and she knew he had judged her, found her worthy. "It could be

really dangerous. I hired you to take pictures, not put your life at risk going after a bunch of crooks with guns."

"You mean it's okay if I die falling off a cliff, just don't get shot," she quipped, smiling broadly at him.

"I don't want you to get hurt. This is serious business. But," he smiled at her then, "if you can come up with a plan ..."

"Me? I thought you were leader of this rescue team," she said, then realized she was offering him control. But, as long as he treated her equally, she thought she could accept that.

"Actually, that's the only way I'll consider it." His light touch on her shoulders forced her to look directly into his eyes. "Andy, I know you're tough, and from what I've seen, you're the best climber I've ever worked with. But if we go after these men, you're going to have to promise me you'll follow orders." He held up one hand to forestall protest.

"When it comes right down to it, I hired you. That makes me the boss. I don't want you, or me, taking any unnecessary risks. This idea is stupid enough. I have to be able to trust you."

"Well," she looked away, toward the cliffs. "It's pretty much a lost cause, anyway, since

they've been gone now for over an hour. We don't even know what direction they headed after they trashed our camp."

"I know where they are."

"What? But how...?" She sat down again, legs suddenly shaky.

"I've been giving this a lot of thought. There's only one mine I know of in this area. It's not far, but there's plenty of water nearby and a huge cavern. It would be a perfect base for their operation." Nate pointed north, along the face of the cliffs. "If we're really careful, we might be able to get close enough to grab some of the eggs and get them back in the nests."

"You're crazy, you know." She was grinning broadly, amazed he would even consider an idea she had tentatively suggested.

"Yeah, I know." He smiled back at her, basking in her sudden approval, wondering why it was so important to him that they work together. Wondering how in the hell they were going to pull this off.

The eggs, the peregrines, were important. They were the whole reason for this trip in the first place, weren't they? But Andy was important too. After only a couple of days she mattered to him, more than he thought she should. He wanted more time to think about that, but for now, they needed to get moving. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her

feet.

"Grab your lightest camera, film, and plenty of water." He looked around the small clearing, finally walking over to a rotted tree. "Let me have the rest of your stuff. We'll leave it here so we'll have less to carry."

Andy finished loading her small 35mm camera, then handed Nate the exposed rolls of film and the rest of her equipment. He enclosed everything in the waterproof sack, then stuck it deep in a hole in the rotten wood. Andy was opening the smaller bag, pulling out a sandwich and a couple of apples. She offered half of the sandwich to Nate.

"Thanks." He grabbed it and took a bite out of it. "My lunch is somewhere on the plateau. It's amazing how running from gunshots changes your sense of priorities. Peanut butter and jelly didn't seem all that important at the time."

"I'd rather eat it than carry it," Andy said between bites. "What about the stuff at camp? Did they find the storage locker?"

"It's all gone." Nate shook his head sadly, thinking of the needless waste of expensive supplies. "They ripped up the tents, destroyed all the food, scattered everything. It's a mess."

"What about your notes, all your records?"

"I didn't look that carefully. All I was thinking about was finding the radio. Once I saw it'd been destroyed, I wanted to get back here and make sure you were okay." He reached out to touch one of the tiny cuts high on her cheekbone. She'd wiped away most of the blood, but the scratches still showed. Nate forced down the rage they made him feel.

"I'm okay." She seemed to know what he was thinking, to understand his anger. "Do you have any kind of plan?"

"Not really." He flashed her a quick smile. "C'mon. This was all your idea in the first place."

"Well, then I'd suggest we find their campsite and take it from there." She offered him an apple. When he declined, she stuck both of them in her fanny pack. "We'll think of something."

Nate wondered if either of them had any sense at all.

They filled their canteens at the spring, then explored the disheartening remains of their camp, stepping over ripped tents and sleeping bags torn and trampled in the dirt. Nathan checked the food locker and salvaged a couple of granola bars, discarding the remainder of the ruined supplies. Andy looked for her extra camera equipment, but that, along with all their climbing gear, was gone.

Nate found a scrap of paper, part of one of his notebooks, and wrote a quick note to Roger Dalton. "Roger's going to get worried if he doesn't hear from us in a day or two." He tacked the note to a nearby tree. "I generally call in every other day or so, and I'd planned to call him this evening. You can bet if he doesn't hear by Thursday, he'll be up here to check on us."

He looked around the cluttered campsite, allowing himself a brief moment of mourning over the disruption of his research project. So many months had gone into the planning for this, and it had all been destroyed in the name of greed. Somehow, he would make them pay.

"We'd better get going." He sighed, then smiled grimly at Andy. "If they're where I think they are, it's only about half a mile away, but the going's rough and we'll have to sneak in. The only chance we'll have is if we surprise them."

With a final glance at the ruined camp, Nate led Andy north, parallel to the towering cliffs where they could stay hidden in the forest running along the base. The dark woods seemed oddly quiet, the only sound the fierce screaming of the peregrines, still circling in the skies over their plundered eyrie.

Chapter 5

"LISTEN." NATE'S voice was a harsh whisper, softened by a warm, steady hand on Andy's shoulder. He crouched beside her, hidden in tall ferns and scrub willows growing damp and thick along the border of the woods. Perfect cover for the two of them.

She heard it then. A man's voice. Talking quietly, just beyond the edge of the forest. "It sounds like the guy with the rifle, the one they called Mark." Andy's lips brushed his ear. "What's he's saying?"

She was so close. Nate felt the words she whispered into his ear and the heat where her body touched his. "Don't know...they've gone back into the mine." Nate put his finger to his lips to caution silence, then moved away from Andy. On his belly, he slithered through the heavy underbrush.

He needed to put some distance between them before he grabbed her up into his arms again. Something was happening that had nothing to do with peregrine falcons or smugglers.

More than chemistry, more than physical need. Andy felt the same way. She must. So why did she deny it?

Inching forward through the heavy brush, he decided he didn't understand anything at all about Andy Petersen. Passionate one moment, cold and remote the next. She leaned into him and practically purred when he held her, then pushed him away and built walls between them.

A twig crackled beneath his knee and he stopped. When nothing terrible happened, he cautiously pushed the thick branches aside to get a better view of the meadow.

The insect-like form of the helicopter dominated the small clearing, an alien intrusion among the wildflowers and grasses. The area directly under the craft and for a short distance to the rocky wall of the cliffs was trampled flat, the grass and flowers crushed from the passage of many footsteps.

Nathan motioned to Andy to wait for him, then slipped out of the forest and climbed a pile of rock that must have fallen long ago from the cliff. He reached the top then crawled out on a huge slab of granite balanced over the opening to the mine. Pressed against the warm rock, he listened to the men inside.

The voices echoed, distorted by the interior of the mine, but Nate understood enough to realize the poachers were preparing to leave. Unless he or Andy acted quickly, the trio would soon be airborne. There'd be no way to stop them.

The voices moved nearer. He couldn't let them see him. He had to get back under the cover of the woods. He glanced toward Andy to warn her to move deeper into the trees.

She was gone! Frantic, he looked across the clearing and along the edge of the forest. Where was she? He crept forward on the rock, exposing himself should someone below choose to look up, but he needed a better view of the surrounding woods.

He didn't see her anywhere.

Startled by voices directly below him, Nate realized he'd stayed too long on his rocky perch. He was trapped here, unprotected on a slab of rock a dozen feet off the ground. He held his breath, waiting while the conversation continued directly beneath him, then exhaled a long sigh of relief as the voices faded, and retreated into the mine.

Suddenly, movement, a slight motion near the small craft caught his attention. What the hell! The imprecation was silent, but as if Andy had heard the words, she glanced his way. Across the distance he felt the connection. What was she doing?

Nate started to back down the rock, but he paused momentarily when he realized she was reaching into the helicopter's engine compartment, doing something to the vast array of cables and wires that were the guts of the thing.

Inwardly laughing at her audacity, but cursing out of fear for her, Nate slipped,

accidentally dislodging a small cascade of pebbles the size of marbles. They bounced and skittered down the steep surface. The clatter stopped him, stopped his breathing and his inaudible cursing. Nate clung there, suspended in time and space, praying that no one in the mine had heard the noise.

"Hey Sid." Mark's voice, coming from deep inside the mine. "Did you hear that?"

"Yea. It's just Ed."

"No, he's with me. Check on it, will you?"

Nate's fingers scrabbled at the loose rock. His grip on the steep surface gave way. He saw Andy running away from the helicopter, back to the safety of the trees. He struggled to hold on for a moment longer, to give her enough time to hide herself in the thick forest.

Skidding, tearing the skin from palms and fingertips and cheek, he slid the rest of the way down the slanted rock and landed with a thud almost at Sid's feet.

"Hey, guys, look what we have here!"

Nathan raised his head, then reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes. Suddenly he felt cold steel against his temple.

"Sit up. I want to get a look at you." Sid emphasized his command with increased pressure against Nate's temple. The rifle barrel bit into his skin.

Slowly, so as not to offend Sid, Nate rolled into a sitting position and raised both hands in the air. He linked his fingers behind his head, then stole a glance in the direction of the helicopter. Andy was gone. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"Well, well." Without turning, Nate recognized Ed's voice. The familiar accent grated on his nerves. It was the poacher Nate remembered, a man responsible for smuggling thousands of falcons, hawks and eagles over the years to sell on the black market.

"It looks as if we have caught ourselves a big one, eh Sidney?" Ed walked around in front of Nate and motioned to the smaller man to pull the gun barrel back from Nate's temple. Nathan felt the slight hesitation before Sid complied.

"It is okay, Sidney. This one, he is not going anywhere. But," and here Ed knelt down, putting himself on eye level with Nate, "I think maybe he should tell us where his friend is."

"I came alone." Nate's answer drew a cruel smile from Sid, a sadistic cackle from Ed.

"Ah, but if you are alone, why do you have two tents, eh? And, do you also wear the pink lace underthings, the ones with the cute little flowers embroidered all over?" Ed stood up, still chuckling, a nasty sound that crawled over Nate's body.

Rage coiled through his gut. He struggled to control his anger, to save it for later. "She's

gone," he said. "She went for help. I came here to see what was going on. I...Hey!"

Ed's pointed cowboy boot caught Nate just under the ribs and sent him sprawling into the dust. Pain stole his breath. He lay there, gasping for air, face down in the dirt.

Long seconds passed before he struggled to raise himself to his knees and elbows, only to catch another glancing blow, this time from Sid who swung the butt of the rifle against the back of Nate's head.

The shock stunned him, knocked him back to the rocky ground. Lights flashed and pain shimmered in nauseating waves.

"You would like to talk now, ya?" Ed's question came from far away. Nate considered it a moment before the words made sense. "And this time, maybe we hear the truth."

Nate was suddenly yanked upright and more pain coursed through his skull. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. "Now," Ed repeated, "you will tell me where the woman is."

"I...don't...know." He had trouble forming the words, making the sounds. Fireworks exploded out the top of his head, but his mind was clearing enough to know the longer he could stall these men, the farther Andy would be able to run.

"We don't have time for this, Ed."

"You are right." Ed pushed Nate with one pointed toe, tumbling him back to the ground.

"What should we do with him?"

"I'm not crazy about adding murder to my resume, but we can't let him go. There's too much at stake here." Sid was beginning to whine a little. Nate heard an underlying question in the man's statement. With a sinking feeling, he realized whatever Ed ordered, Sid would do.

"Find Mark. We will let him handle this one."

"He was loading the chopper, last I saw." Nate heard Sid walk away, probably to look for Mark.

"I don't see him in the mine."

The footsteps returned. Struggling to open his eyes, Nate focused on the worn toes of hiking boots, inches from his nose.

"I'm over here." Mark's voice sounded distant, distorted by the pounding in Nate's head. "I thought I saw something moving behind the trees, but whatever it was, I lost it."

Good. Andy got away. Nate let himself relax a little, imagining her running cross-country for help, those gorgeous long legs carrying her closer to safety, closer to Roger and the other rangers, the ones who would rescue him.

"Sid, take this one back in the mine and tie him up. We haven't got time to mess with

him now, not if we're going to get those eggs to San Francisco in time for the pick-up."

Rough hands grabbed Nate by the collar and belt and jerked him upright. Someone shoved the sharp barrel of the rifle into the small of his back to keep him walking into the mine without incident. Andy was free. She'd bring help. He could hang on until she got back.

"TIE HIM GOOD and tight, Sidney. There, against that beam."

The interior of the mine was cool and dark, the narrow entrance heavily reinforced with thick redwood timbers. Nathan still felt groggy, his vision blurred by either sweat or blood. Before he had a chance to see where Ed was pointing, Sid had slammed him against a rough-hewn redwood beam, then pushed him to the ground.

The ropes bit into the flesh of his wrists and hands. It felt as if his shoulders would dislocate when Sid wrapped the heavy twine behind the huge timber, then back around again to tighten the ropes from his wrists to his elbows. His hands started tingling almost immediately and the pain in his shoulders intensified when Sid gave the bindings an extra tug to check the knots.

"I don't like this, Ed." Sid bent to tie Nate's feet together. Nate fought a suicidal urge to

kick the weasely little man in the face. "He's seen us. If the girl's gone for help, they'll know where we're headed. I don't like it a bit."

"I know, Sidney. I'll have a little talk with Mark. I hate to be so close to success and maybe leave just enough of a little problem around to become a big problem."

Sid chuckled at Ed's comment, a nasty sound without humor, then stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. "Well, pretty boy. Your face don't look nearly as good as it did a little while ago. So sorry."

Nate glared at him, the taste of blood hot in his mouth, his anger and frustration boiling in his veins. He had never thought of himself as a violent man, but right now he wanted nothing more than Sid's scrawny neck between his hands. He tried to clench his fists but the ropes were so tight he'd already lost the feeling in his fingers.

Ed and Sid left the huge cavern, discussing Nate's future as if he were no more than a bug on the wall. As soon as they were gone, Nate struggled against his bonds, but the ropes held fast. It was useless. He leaned his head against the heavy beam, then winced in pain, quickly reminded of the glancing blow from Sid's rifle butt. He definitely owed Sid a few bruises.

He studied his surroundings, searching for a means of escape. He'd never been inside

this particular mine before. It was bigger than he would have expected, supported in many places by heavy redwood timbers. Stalactites grew across the ceiling, strange rock formations lost in the darkness along the far wall.

Stalactites? But this was a mine, not a cave.

An engine coughed to life. *The helicopter!* Whatever Andy had done to the engine must not have been enough. Nate recognized the steady whirring of the blades, and knew the eggs were lost.

ANDY SHOVED her fist into her mouth, biting down so hard on her knuckles she tasted blood. They were killing him!

Nathan fell to the ground in front of Sid. She felt the blow herself. Sobbing, Andy turned away from the violence, pressing her back into the rough bark of a towering fir tree. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she covered her ears to hide the sounds of the blows. She had to be patient, to wait for an opportunity to help him. That was their only chance.

She heard someone nearby, quietly searching. The third man, the one dressed in camouflage, was looking for her! She plastered herself against the tree and tried to keep her breathing as shallow and silent as possible, but she couldn't stop the pounding of her heart.

The footsteps halted directly beyond her tree. She heard him clear his throat and the nasty sound of his spittle hitting the ground. A scream tried to work its way up her throat. She clenched her teeth, praying to halt its escape.

Finally, the quiet crunch of boots against dried pine needles and leaves announced the man's departure. Andy took a long, slow breath to still her thundering heart.

It was quiet now in the clearing. She slowly crept around the side of the tree, almost afraid to look. Her hands flew to her mouth again, stifling her cry as she watched the two men drag Nate, barely conscious, to his feet. Blood dripped from his face and head. One man prodded him sharply with the barrel of a rifle, forcing him into the mine.

A few moments later, Andy watched Sid and Ed come out alone, deep in conversation. Mark was at the controls of the helicopter. Andy knew a moment of abject fear that whatever she had done, the cables she had loosened and the parts she had fiddled with, would keep the craft from leaving. Right now she wanted them gone. Nathan needed her.

Andy gasped her relief when the engine roared to life. She ducked back into the trees and worked her way swiftly through the tangled brush, moving closer to the mine entrance and Nate. A few times she glanced toward the small craft. Sid and Ed were aboard now, their attention on the pilot as he checked the controls. The helicopter lifted slowly away

from the ground.

As soon as the craft disappeared from view, Andy ran across the open clearing and slipped quickly into the mine.

"NATE! NATHAN, where are you?" The entrance was a narrow tunnel, roughly hewn through the silvery granite of the cliff, but once Andy got a few feet inside the mountain, she stumbled into a large, natural looking cavern. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness. Before she could see well enough to get her bearings, she heard a low moan coming from the shadows.

"Nathan? Is that you?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" It couldn't be. Nate tried to clear his head but the pounding wouldn't go away. Neither would the image of a beautiful woman kneeling in front of him.

Her strong hands gently cradled his face and he saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes. "What are you doing here?" He repeated the question, softer this time, confusion in his voice. "You're supposed to be going for help, remember?"

"Oh, Nate, what have they done to you?" She tugged at the ropes holding his wrists and

gasped when she saw the bloody streaks running down his arms where the tight bonds had cut into his flesh. Frantically she searched the dark interior of the cavern for anything sharp.

"In my pocket. There's a knife in my front left pocket." His voice was a harsh whisper, coming in weak gasps, but he twisted as much as the tight ropes would allow, giving Andy access to his pants pocket.

"You'll certainly go to great lengths to get a woman into your pants, won't you, Dr. Murdock," she whispered softly, forcing her fingers into the tight pocket.

"Only you, Ms. Petersen."

Andy forced a smile, and tried to hide her concern. She couldn't tell how badly he was hurt. "I feel honored, Professor. I just wish your pants weren't quite so tight." She poked around a minute longer, then finally found what she was looking for.

"That's a knife?" she asked wryly, holding up a miniature Buck knife with two very small, narrow blades.

"That's the best I can do, lady. You wanna fight about it?" He grinned then, a lopsided smile that broke her heart with the pain he tried to hide.

"I thought they were going to kill you." She kept her voice calm, conversational, but the

little knife was dull and it was taking so long to cut through the twine. She had to keep talking to keep from screaming.

"Haven't you noticed, I've got a hard head. Takes more than one knock to get my attention." His words came out in shallow puffs. "Kind of like a woman I know."

"I'm sorry, Nate." She looked at the rope, avoiding his eyes. "I should have gone for help, but I couldn't leave you."

"I'm glad." Nate smiled again, feeling the ropes begin to loosen on his wrists. He pulled against them, but there were too many knots and the bonds still held. "I thought for sure they were going to kill me. They were talking about it. All I could think of was at least you were out of here, on your way back to safety. But now," he looked directly into her eyes, falling into their sea-blue depths, "now I'm just damned glad to see you."

The last of the strands gave way. Just as Nate tried to pull them loose, Andy stopped him, pushing hard against his chest.

"Ouch! What'd you do that for?"

"I'm sorry. Listen." She held her finger to her lips. Nate heard it, the sound of the helicopter returning.

"Quick Andy...find a place to hide." He looked around the empty expanse, then back at

Andy. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere except deeper into the cavern.

"Oh God, Nate. I hate dark, enclosed spaces." She looked frantically about, at the deep shadows hiding the walls, at the blackest of the shadows disappearing into the depths of the mountain.

They could hear voices now, Mark and Ed talking and coming closer to the mouth of the cave. With one wild look in their direction, Andy leaned over and kissed Nate full on the lips, then raced into the hidden recesses of the cavern.

Pressing his back against the heavy timber, Nate bowed his head, feigning unconsciousness. He heard the men enter the cave.

"I told you, Ed, he's still here. You just thought you saw someone coming in after him. Hey, you. Wake up!"

Mark kicked Nate in the thigh with one heavily booted toe. Nate grunted, then slowly raised his head. These were faces he would never forget. Anger filled him. He wanted to pull his arms free from the severed ropes and go for Mark's throat, but dampened the feeling. Andy was too close, too vulnerable.

Mark hunkered down in front of Nate, his rifle cradled in his arms. His eyes had a feverish brilliance to them, a crazed look that cautioned Nate to stare straight ahead without

speaking, without offering a challenge.

Slowly, Mark raised the gun, placing the cold steel of the barrel against Nate's forehead. Nate prayed for Andy to stay quiet, to remain hidden in the back of the cavern, no matter what happened. Just when he thought Mark would pull the trigger, Ed placed a restraining hand on the other man's arm.

"No, Mark. Not this way." Ed walked back to the entrance to the cave, then called Mark. "I have a better idea, one that I think even you will enjoy."

With a last nudge of the barrel against Nate's forehead, Mark stood and followed Ed out of the cave. Nate heard the chilling sound of Mark's laughter.

The first shot echoed throughout the cavern. A small cascade of rocks and dust fell from the ceiling. The second shot dislodged something larger and the timber behind Nate began to tremble. Suddenly, Andy was at his side, tugging at the severed ropes, pulling at the bonds that held his feet.

The third shot from the high caliber rifle seemed to vibrate within his skull. Nate grabbed Andy to his side, pulling her back from the huge timber. Slowly, it twisted and rolled away from the wall it had supported for over a hundred years, then tumbled to the floor. One end of the huge beam caught across an errant slab of rock. Forcing his numbed

arms to obey, Nate grabbed Andy around the waist and rolled with her under the narrow shelter.

The vibration became a rumble, the rumble a roar, and with a last loud *thump* the huge boulder atop the pile of rock outside the mine slipped, then toppled to completely block the entrance.

ANDY WAS momentarily disoriented from the concussion and the swirling dust. It was dark, so dark she was tempted to hold her hand in front of her face to not see it. Nate's body covered hers. She felt the roughness of his beard against her cheek, but she couldn't see him. She felt the lumpy bulge from the two apples in her fanny pack resting under one hip and the stinging cuts along her left arm where she'd been hit by flying rock. But most of all, she felt Nathan's weight pressing down on her. He wasn't moving.

"Nate," she whispered his name, her lips pressed tight against his throat. "Nathan, are you okay?"

"I've been better," he answered wryly, his arms still tingling from returning circulation, his head pounding. He was aware of Andy's softness flattened beneath his body and he tried to lift himself off of her, but his arms wouldn't respond.

A few rocks still clattered and bounced in the darkness, some bouncing off the strong timber that protected the two of them. Andy's body conformed to his, alive and warm beneath him. Nate decided there wasn't an urgent need to change his position.

"My arms are still a little numb. I hope I'm not crushing you. Are you okay?" His voice rumbled in her ear. Oddly, Andy wanted to laugh. Donna always said she attracted problems the way flowers attracted bees. She did seem to have a talent for bad luck, but there was no way Donna would ever believe Andy's current situation.

"I'm fine, really." Her voice broke on a suppressed giggle.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm just wondering how I'll explain all this to Donna. She's my best friend. She was convinced I was taking a job working for a serial killer." Andy's body shook with laughter, a reaction she admitted to herself didn't really fit the situation. Nate probably thought she was crazy. Or hysterical.

"Anyway," she added pragmatically, her voice calm against his cheek, "I've decided you probably aren't a serial killer but I'm not so sure about your little friends. They play rough."

"God, lady, you're something else." Nate's lips were buried in her hair. He kissed her lightly, honoring her courage the only way he could under the circumstances. "Trapped in a

cave by members of an international smuggling ring and you can laugh? Either you're too dumb to be scared, or you're braver than any woman I ever met."

"No one ever said I was too bright," she quipped.

"Well, I don't think we have to worry about our friends coming back." He eased himself off of her, rolling to one side and grabbing her hand as he slid away from her body, unwilling to completely break contact with her in the total darkness. "I don't think they could get in if they wanted to."

"How are we going to get out?" Andy asked as Nate pulled her to her feet, then grabbed her shoulder to keep himself from falling. His head spun. In the absolute darkness of the cave, his vertigo increased. He definitely owed Sid a few bruises.

"We'll find a way." He tried to project a sense of confidence he definitely wasn't feeling. "Got any matches? It's dark as the inside of a cow's stomach in here."

"How would you know what the inside of a cow's stomach looks like?" Nate heard the laughter in her voice. He wondered if she realized how desperate their situation was. They were trapped by tons of rock and the only people who knew where they were certainly wouldn't be sending a rescue party.

Suddenly, Andy pulled her hand free and moved away. Nate heard the sound of a zipper

opening. His first guess had to be wrong, but the image of Andy peeling her tight jeans down her long legs brought an immediate end to his dizziness.

There was a shuffle and a click in the darkness, then a tiny beam of light flicked over Nate. Andy burst into laughter.

"It works!" She flashed the narrow beam across the room, turning the dust motes into diamonds. "I forgot I even had this dumb little flashlight, but I stuck it in my fanny pack before I left home. It's tiny, but it's better than nothing."

"Not much better, but it might help us get our bearings."

"Thanks loads for your support," she replied dryly, and pointed the narrow light in the direction of the entrance.

Nate didn't mean to sound unappreciative, but the fantasy of Andy's long legs was a lot better than the reality the miniature penlight exposed. Its small beam wasn't any brighter than a low voltage firefly. He'd already learned that a single kiss from Andy could set off brighter fireworks than that.

He grabbed her hand and the two of them stumbled across the uneven floor of the mine to the massive pile of rocks and dirt that blocked the entrance. Miniature avalanches of pebbles and sand continued an intermittent cascade to the floor. Nate studied the pile with a

growing sense of hopelessness. They were trapped.

"The shots from that jerk's rifle must have dislodged the rock I was climbing on." Nate's fingers tightened around Andy's.

"It looks like he brought the whole mountain down." Her voice sounded small, like a child about to cry, alerting him to the moment when their desperate situation finally hit her.

Nate held out his arms and she went into them willingly, looking for comfort, finding his male scent and broad chest a soothing haven. He smelled of sweat and dust and the tang of fear, but Andy found that comforting as well. He hadn't tried to brazen through their situation, the way most men would. He merely offered her warmth and comfort and the feeling they would get through this together.

Nate took the small flashlight out of Andy's fingers and shut it off. She knew they had to conserve the batteries, but the darkness didn't seem as absolute in his arms.

She molded herself against him, wrapping her arms around his neck in the cloying darkness. Her fingers tangled in his long hair. His hands burned a path along her spine, then suddenly shifted to cup her buttocks and lift her against him.

She was molten wax, flowing into and over all the crevices and angles and lines of him. When he found her mouth in the darkness, it seemed perfectly natural her lips would be

parted to receive him.

She expected a kiss born of fear, a desperate joining. Instead she felt the slightest flick of his tongue across her lips, a subtle request. Gently he tasted the soft inner flesh of her mouth, running his tongue along the edges of her teeth, until she drew him in, a mating of tongues and mouths and breath.

His tenderness was her undoing, and the hard-won control that had kept her from hysteria over the past terrifying hours suddenly abandoned her to desire. Her hands slipped beneath the loosened tail of his shirt. She pressed her hips against his and absorbed the tension vibrating between them.

He pulled back first, gaining control, breaking the contact. Breathing heavily, his body tense and shivering, he rested his forehead against Andy's. Finally, he chuckled, a rumble she felt deep in her chest, as if the sound had come from her.

"Oh, what you do to me, lady." He rolled his forehead gently against hers, then kissed her, chastely, on her temple. "This isn't going to get us out of here, is it?" He spoke against her hair. She loosened the hold she had around his neck, draping her arms lightly over his shoulders.

"No." She drew the word out on a long breath, like a sigh. "But I'm not nearly as scared

of the dark now, either." She smiled against his throat, her lips turning the smile into a light kiss. "Got any other ideas, Professor?"

"All kinds of ideas, Ms. Petersen. But not a one of them's going to get us out of this cave."

Chapter 6

"WE'LL GET out okay. I promise." He held her against his side, a welcome contrast to the cold stone wall against his back.

"I know."

"I mean it. Somehow we'll get out of here."

"I know we will. I'm not afraid."

"I'll figure something out. Just give me a minute."

"Who are you trying to convince, Nathan? Me or you?"

If only he could see her face. But it was lost completely in the endless night of the cave. Her voice was its usual deep timbre, no fearful quaver betrayed it. She sounded perfectly at ease, sitting here on the floor of the mine so close to Nate he felt her imprint from knee to hip to shoulder.

He had a sinking feeling that her brilliant sea-blue eyes held an extra twinkle at his expense. Damn it, didn't she realize they could die in here?

"I don't know what to do!" *Damn*. The last thing they needed was for him to lose control. He didn't want to scare Andy. He was frightened enough for both of them. Ashamed, he

stood up to pace in the darkness.

Andy huddled against the cold stone wall. If she tried to say anything, anything at all, she knew she'd lose the fine thread of sanity holding her together.

She sensed when he turned in her direction, but when she tried to see him she looked into a great black hole...darkness in whatever direction she faced.

"Have you got any brilliant ideas, Andy?"

Damn him! "Your sarcasm isn't very becoming, Nathan."

"Well, this whole thing was your idea, remember?"

"My idea? My idea?" she shouted, and her voice cracked.

Her shrill words echoed in the darkness. For the first time since the cave-in, Nate felt her underlying hysteria. She was afraid. She just hid it better than he did. He felt terrible for baiting her. He started to apologize but she cut him off.

"As I recall, Dr. Murdock, you were the one who wanted to get the poachers. I wanted to recover the eggs, but you were the one with the big vendetta against the bad guys. And," she stood, now, unseen, but he pictured her facing him, hands on hips, eyes glittering, "you wanted to be the boss, so it's your responsibility to get us out of here. You promised, remember? So, Boss, make a decision," she whispered. Her voice broke, and the tension

left Nate.

"So you're fired, okay?" She really was as frightened as he was! He felt awful. She wasn't laughing at him at all. "Andy, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. C'mere, okay, Hon." He reached for her in the darkness, quietly sobbing a few feet away.

Something soft, lumpy and twisted caught his foot. Suddenly Nate was sprawling in the dust, his feet trapped in twists of rope and nylon. He cursed as he went down.

"Nate, what happened? Where are you?"

"Here. I'm okay. Let me get the light." The narrow beam of the tiny penlight was a small beacon leading Andy to Nate. Once she reached him, he turned the light on the pile of equipment that had snared him. All of their climbing gear and a couple of smaller bags, left behind by the three smugglers.

"What's this doing here?" Andy started digging through one of her bags.

"I forgot all about this stuff. They stole it from our camp." Nate was untangling his feet when the cavern suddenly lit up with the brilliant beam of Andy's halogen flashlight.

"Sure beats the heck out of this little thing!" Nate flicked off the tiny penlight and put it back in his shirt pocket. He grabbed another bag. "What have we got here?" He moved closer to the beam of light and began to search the nylon pockets.

"It's a veritable supermarket," Andy laughed. "Look. Energy bars, a hammer, a full canteen, matches ..." She smiled at him, her face ghostly in the brilliant beam of the small flashlight.

"Same here. I've got some granola, too, and dried fruit and plenty of rope." He looked at her, then took a deep breath. "Andy...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell." God, how he hated to apologize. Linda always made such a big deal out of his admitting the errors of his ways. Every error, in great detail.

"I'm sorry, too. I was so scared." She looked beyond him. "I've been afraid of the dark since I was a little girl."

Nate glanced at the flashlight in her hand. He hated what he had to tell her.

She beat him to it. "I know, we have to conserve the batteries. I'll turn it off."

"We've got matches. Help me find some kindling and we'll build a fire."

Nate shredded some tissues, built a small teepee of splintered wood, and within moments, the interior of the cavern was alight with a soft orange glow that repelled the darkness. Together they watched the smoke as it swirled up against the ceiling, then disappeared into the gloom.

Nathan sat back against the stone wall, fighting the dizziness and nausea that returned

whenever he moved too quickly.

"How long do you think we've been in here? Do you have any idea what time it is?" Andy's voice sounded calm, but Nate sensed her anxiety. She was trying so hard to control her fear.

"You don't wear a watch either? I have absolutely no idea. A couple hours, maybe." He studied the stone walls around them. The tiny bits of quartz in the granite shimmered in the reflected light from the fire like so many tiny, flickering stars.

"It's probably getting dark outside," he finally said, then turned his attention back to Andy. She sat a few inches from him, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees. She looked as if she were holding herself together, literally to keep from flying into a million tiny pieces. "My stomach tells me it's at least dinner time." They both laughed when Andy's stomach answered him with a long, low growl.

Nate reached into the pack and found some dried fruit and a couple of energy bars. He handed one to Andy. "This will have to sub for steak and potatoes. I think the cook has the night off."

"I don't usually eat red meat," Andy said. A wide grin split her features. "Right now I could eat the cook. Hand me that bar," she demanded, then laughed when Nate backed

away in mock fear.

They sat together in companionable silence, munching on their energy bars and fruit, savoring each sticky bite. Nate stared at the smoke swirling against the stone ceiling, an idea nagging just beyond conscious thought.

"I didn't think mines had stalactites." Andy's statement broke the silence.'

"They don't, normally." Nate finished the last bite of his energy bar then stood up, using the wall for balance. His head hurt and his ribs ached where Ed's cowboy boot had found its mark. The ends of his fingers were raw from sliding off the rock, and his shoulders felt wrenched out of place.

"I never thought of ornithology as a contact sport, but I feel worse right now than I used to after a football game." He walked across the cavern and stood beneath the wax-like formations hanging from the ceiling along one side. "I would imagine these took thousands of years to form." He grinned at Andy. "Now if it was a bird, I could tell you all kinds of things about them, but I skipped 'stalactite 101.'"

"You and me both." Andy crossed the floor and stood beside Nate. "I've seen fantastic formations in caves before, though. On assignments with my father. I know they grow very slowly."

Nate listened to Andy, but he watched the smoke from the fire. An idea was forming, swirling through his mind much the way the smoke drifted and swirled along the ceiling. He walked out into the center of the huge cavern, away from the fire, licked his forefinger and held it in the air.

"What're you doing?" Andy started to cross the room. Nate motioned to her to stand still.

"Don't move. Don't disturb the air currents."

"I don't get it," she said, but she stood motionless.

"The smoke, Andy. Don't you see? It's got to go somewhere, or we'd both be choking right now. That means there's an opening someplace big enough to create a draft. It's drawing the smoke outside." He licked his finger again, turning slowly to face the far end of the cavern. "I feel it, over there." He looked back at Andy, a smile splitting his carved features. "This cave must go back into the mountain. There's got to be another opening."

"What about Roger? Won't he come looking for us? Shouldn't we wait here?" Andy stared past Nate, into the black nothingness beyond the glow of the fire.

"He may not come looking for us for a couple of days. I left a note on the tree telling him we were checking up on a possible poaching operation, but I didn't leave any explicit details. Besides, he won't have any idea where to look for us. There are rockfalls along

these cliffs all the time, so he won't see anything amiss just because there's a new pile of rubble. There's nothing that would make him decide to move tons of rock to look for us. He might figure we'd been kidnapped, but he wouldn't know to look in a caved-in mine for us."

Andy gazed longingly at the fire, then back toward Nate. She looked exhausted, her energy spent. It had been a long day.

"Can we rest first?"

Her question sounded so pathetically un-Andy like, Nate wanted to gather her up in his arms, hold her and make everything better. He already knew where that would lead. Instead, he grinned ruefully in her direction, a lopsided smile that Andy slowly returned.

"We're quite a pair, aren't we." He reached out and grabbed her hand, walking her closer to the fire. The cave had grown cooler since the rock slide and Nathan deftly untied the sleeves of Andy's flannel shirt from around her waist and helped her slip it over her bruised and bloodied arms.

She smiled her thanks, then snuggled into the warm shirt while Nate emptied out the larger of the two packs of climbing gear. He spread the nylon bag flat on the ground, making a clean spot for Andy to lay her head.

"You're right. We're both tired. We'll get some sleep, then when we've rested we'll do a little exploring." He watched her settle herself in the dust next to the fire, her head and shoulders resting on the bag.

A small frown creased her brow. She looked up at him. "Nate, I wonder if that road on the far side of the plateau leads to another entrance to the cave. What do you think?"

"You could be right." He shook his head slowly. "This whole mountain could be full of tunnels. It's a strange combination of rock, everything from granite to limestone. There was even some volcanic activity at one time."

He smiled at her. "It makes perfectly good sense. There was no sign the backside of the mountain had been logged and I don't think it's a fire road." He stretched out next to Andy, his head next to hers on the makeshift pillow.

"We'll rest for a couple of hours, then look around a little." He rolled his head to one side, to see if she agreed, but Andy had already fallen asleep.

He wrapped an arm around her and tried to get comfortable, but the lump on the back of his head and the bruises from Ed's kick weren't the only things keeping him awake.

He'd never been so aware of a woman before, of each breath she took, each movement she made. Andy rolled over on her side, her face to Nate, her head snuggled firmly against

his shoulder, one arm thrown across his chest.

Nate stroked her back lightly, his eyes wide open in the gloom of the dying fire. He knew he should get up and add more wood but she slept so peacefully he didn't want to disturb her.

Sleep eluded him. Every time he touched her, his body felt charged, alive with sensations he shouldn't feel for a woman he barely knew.

He'd only known her two days. Already he felt closer to Andy than he had to Linda during their marriage. The chemistry was definitely right with Andy. It hadn't been there with Linda. He hadn't missed it...he'd never felt it before now.

His marriage had lacked more than chemistry. Not once had Linda looked to him for comfort or solace, or even, to be honest, for love. But then, he hadn't expected it from her, either.

Work had always come first. When he found time for her, it was given begrudgingly. She must have sensed that once he left college their relationship would change.

She'd married the college football hero and had no interest in life with a professor of ornithology. She couldn't forgive him for refusing the offers to turn pro. Nate hadn't even considered them. He never wanted any life other than the life he had now.

At least their divorce had come without recrimination. There had to be passion for anger, and the passion had long since died. In fact, the marriage had been over long before it ended and the final dissolution merely a vast relief to both of them.

He wondered about Andy, about her quirky ways. She could be acerbic and insulting one minute, warm and compassionate the next. First she seemed attracted to him, then she pushed him away. If she had him this confused in only two days, he mused, what would happen over the course of six weeks?

Or the course of a lifetime?

Would they ever have a chance to find out?

Damn. Trapped, their lives in the balance, the eyrie plundered of an entire season's worth of young...the frustration was eating him alive.

Andy turned in his embrace and threw one leg across his thighs. Contemplating the various levels and types of frustration, Nate stared into the glowing embers of the fire.

ANDY AWOKE to almost total darkness, the fire no more than coals. But she didn't need to see to know that somehow, as they slept, she and Nate had become as intertwined as lovers.

Her face was pressed into the hollow of his throat, one leg thrown carelessly across his thighs. His arms loosely held her, one hand along her back, the other cupping her breast.

Completely awake now, Andy relaxed into the sensations of his embrace. His arms were strong, smoothly muscled and warm where they touched her. She felt steel beneath the skin where her leg rested across his solid thighs, the strength of him evident even in sleep. His hair, loosened from its leather thong, fell against her cheek and a single strand tickled her nose.

His hand encircled her breast as naturally as a lover's. She imagined how they would look together, his fair skin against her duskiness. Without warning, she responded, a tightening in her belly, the sweet pain as her nipples contracted, a heaviness in her breasts.

She fought the reaction, denying the attraction she felt for him, the ease with which her body acquiesced to his. She didn't want to love him...loving meant giving up control, depending on someone else. Her independence had been a long time coming.

Men were all the same. Her father ignoring her, then stealing her work, her only lover jealous of her skill. Jake's defection had hurt the most, because she'd learned early on never to count on her father. She'd relied on Jake, though. She'd wanted his approval, and without even realizing it, when he took the lead, Andy had blindly followed.

In time she'd learned Jake's love had been premeditated. He cultivated their relationship, using Andy's contacts and skills to improve his own chances in the competitive field of freelance photography.

Andy had swallowed his story, hook, line and sinker. So in love with the idea of love itself, she'd been oblivious to Jake's selfish goals until she could no longer ignore the comments and the subtle derision that masked his professional jealousy. She'd been so thrilled with each small success Jake had — why couldn't he be as happy for her?

And the answer, she figured, was obvious. Because he was a man. Men had to be the best, always in charge, always in control. And if that was the case, then she'd learn to live without a man.

She would control her own life.

At least it sounded good in theory. But, the reality was Nate's hand encircling her breast, the steady thud of his heartbeat against her ear, and the warm strength of his embrace. It was the gentleness, the courage and the laughter, as much a part of him as his thick auburn hair and strong, callused hands.

Why did it all have to be so confusing? He wasn't like Jake. Nathan respected her skills. He was impressed with her abilities, he listened to her suggestions and was generous with

his praise.

He wasn't like her father either. Nate was kind and compassionate, quick to hug and offer sympathy and words of encouragement. He wasn't like any man she'd ever known and that in itself frightened Andy. She didn't understand him, she didn't know what to expect from him. But most frightening of all, she didn't know what he expected from her.

There was definitely something between them. She'd never known this kind of awareness, never responded to a man's kisses the way she did to his. He made her forget everything but the present. When he touched her, she burned at the contact. When he pulled away, she felt bereft and chilled.

Andy snuggled closer to Nathan. Time had stopped here in the darkness. She wondered how long it would take them to find their way out. She refused to admit they might never be free.

She opened her eyes as wide as she could in the dim glow from the campfire, trying to let in as much light as she could. In a very short time she and Nate would have to leave here and explore the mountain. The gloom deepened. Andy shut her eyes, trying to control the darkness.

But with her eyes closed, her other senses came alive, and all she sensed was

Nathan...his scratchy beard, the heady scent of sweat and dust and man. She felt the steady beat of his heart, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, the soft whisper of his breath against her hair.

And the touch of his fingers on her breast. When she let her thoughts drift slowly to her own body, she was suddenly aware that all her sensations, all her feelings, had coalesced into a deep yearning to have Nate caress more of her. She felt the imprint of his hand against her breast like a current that fed a steady heat throughout her body, a line of contact from breast to womb and back again. The power of her response was frightening.

Sex with Jake had been nothing more than a physical act...something Andy's body did with Jake's body whenever Jake was interested. She'd always figured sex was grossly overrated.

Nate's kisses generated more passion than she'd imagined possible. Making love with him, if it ever happened, would be mind boggling.

His fingers clenched in his sleep, tightening their grip on her breast. His touch shot a brilliant coil of need through Andy. Spontaneously she pressed her leg firmly across his thighs, and rolled her hips against the taut muscles of his leg.

She gently tangled her fingers in his long hair and brushed the loose strands away from

his closed eyes. There was no *if* about it. She knew they would make love. She only wondered if it would be worth the final cost.

Chapter 7

"GOD, I FEEL like someone used my head for batting practice." Nate groaned and struggled to sit upright.

"Someone did." Andy's dry comment came from the far side of the cavern. Nate wondered vaguely what she was doing over there, so far away from him. He had very explicit memories of her body pressed against his while they slept.

Those memories were much more pleasant than the reality of aching head and bruised ribs, contusions and scrapes and pulled muscles, none of which had been helped by sleeping on the hard-packed ground.

He watched Andy a moment longer, enjoying the graceful flow of her movements, the length and stretch of her as she knelt on the cavern floor and rummaged through their packs.

Unbound, her hair draped in velvet folds across her shoulders, over her arms, even to the floor when she tilted her head. It contrasted dark as midnight against the darker walls of the cavern. Nathan clenched his fingers, imagining the soft strands against his skin, drifting along his chest and thighs. She tossed her long mane behind her back in irritation when it

fell forward into her eyes, then pulled the mass into a wild ponytail at the nape of her neck.

Raising up on her knees, Andy tilted her head to one side, catching her lower lip between her teeth in silent concentration. She reached back with a practiced, graceful motion to deftly tie the hair into a loose knot. Satisfied it was secure, she raised her head and looked fully into Nate's dark eyes, both hands still holding the heavy coil of hair at the base of her neck.

She hung there a moment, trapped in his gaze. Her mouth opened just enough for the tip of her tongue to moisten her lips.

Nathan's gaze lingered on her mouth, then moved to her faded flannel shirt when she raised her arms behind her head to check the knot in her hair. Her motion thrust her small, firm breasts against the worn fabric. He swallowed convulsively, the sound audible in the silent cave. Slowly, she lowered her arms, her gaze linked to his. The air around them sizzled with expectation.

Something had changed last night, something beyond conscious awareness, but he felt a difference this morning. It unnerved him. A shudder raced along his spine, breaking the spell.

Andy flinched with him, obviously aware of his intense perusal, just as aware when he

withdrew. Biting down on her lower lip again, she turned away from Nate, back to the pile of nylon packs and climbing equipment.

"What are you doing?" His voice cracked. Without waiting for her answer, he lurched to his feet and stood awkwardly off balance, trying to set his world straight.

When he moved too quickly, his head pounded and the horizon tilted in odd directions. For a moment he saw two Andys, wavering in the dusky half-light. He blinked her image down to one. Sid had definitely done a job on him.

Andy frowned when he stumbled, but she answered his question as if nothing were wrong. "I wanted to see what they left. We can't use much of it." She rubbed her hands along her flannel-clad arms. "It's warmer with the fire, but I'm still cold. Do you think it'll get much colder, the deeper we go into the mountain?"

"Actually," Nate said, "the temperature should remain fairly consistent until we find an opening."

"Great," Andy said. "Consistently cold." She went back through her pack of climbing gear, practically turning it inside out in her search. She held up a tiny bar of soap, still in its Best Western Motel wrapper, and laughed. She tossed the soap to Nate. He caught it easily, and she took his quick reaction as a good sign. His injuries concerned her more than she

wanted to admit.

She shook her head, still laughing. "It doesn't seem fair, does it? I'd kill for a bath. Now that I have my own bar of soap, you have no idea how tempted I am. But I will resist because there's not much water, I am woman, and I am strong. In more ways than one," she added, taking a dramatic sniff under one arm.

"Well, I'm certainly pleased to note that you have faced temptation and mastered it," Nate said, speaking in deep, professorial tones. "Because, we only have two canteens, and if we don't get out of here soon, or at least find water, we are going to be in deep doodoo."

"Yeah, and I wouldn't even be able to wash it off."

"Yuck." Nate picked up the last of their kindling and added it to the smoldering fire. He sat next to it, legs folded Indian fashion and watched the flames catch and leap and fill the cavern with light. For a brief but timeless moment, he was lost in their flickering dance, picturing Andy bathing by the creek.

Andy's disgusted snort brought him out of his reverie. She stood up and dusted off her jeans, then walked over to him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down beside him.

"Couldn't find anything else, huh?" He tucked the soap in her pocket and looped one arm casually over her shoulders. She leaned against him, snuggling comfortably up under

his arm.

"No, but I did find this." She held up a small compass. "It glows in the dark, if that's any help." She looked around the large cavern, finally turning her attention to the pile of rubble that spilled out of the narrow entrance to the cave, and sighed. "Nate, I appreciate your giving me the time to rest, but I know we can't put off leaving any longer. Energy bars and tepid water just don't make it in my book, and I'm serious about the bath."

Nate laughed and squeezed her shoulders. "Well, since we both smell pretty much alike right now, we can't let a little BO bother us, can we? You're right, though. There's no point in hanging around here." Reluctantly, he pulled his arm from Andy's shoulders, missing her touch as soon as the contact was broken. She stood first and tugged Nathan awkwardly to his feet, her concern evident in the solemn smile she gave him.

Painfully, he straightened and stretched, then limped across the uneven ground to check the pile of equipment, conscious of Andy's unwavering gaze as she watched him. Lord but she confused him! Last night she was afraid to go deeper into the cavern, this morning she seemed impatient to explore the mountain's depths.

There was something else going on as well. Something between the two of them, as well as something between Andy and herself, but he was damned if he understood exactly what.

He was trying to convince himself it didn't matter, when she shouted.

"Nate, look! My camera bag!" Andy struggled to pull a large carry-all out from under a fallen timber. By the time he reached her, she'd managed to jerk it free. She dumped the equipment out on the ground. Nate was dismayed to see most of the expensive lenses and cameras either badly dented or totally destroyed. Andy continued digging through the debris.

"I'm really sorry, Andy."

"Why would you be sorry?" She gave him a perplexed look, her heavy brows knotted into a frown. Suddenly, comprehension dawned. "Oh. You don't understand. I'm not worried about the cameras." She continued checking pockets and zippered pouches. "Here they are! Batteries!"

She waved a large package in front of Nate. "My father said I never listened to him, but I remembered this!" She grinned at Nate, her face smudged and scratched, her eyes shining. He knew he'd never seen anyone more beautiful. "I can still hear him. 'Andrea, always take extra batteries,'" she said in a gruff voice. A shadow crossed her eyes, her smile wavered and she glanced away. But only for a moment. Then her eyes twinkled and she laughed. "It's nice to think one of his lessons helped."

"ARE YOU SURE you can carry that much stuff?" Nate studied Andy without even attempting to hide his doubt.

Once she found the batteries, she'd become a woman possessed. Racing about the cavern, she gathered up items with an occasional order for Nathan.

She had looped a long section of their climbing rope over one shoulder and filled her fanny pack with the energy bars, dried fruit, and granola. Her canteen was clipped securely to a belt loop on her jeans and she paused a moment to stare indecisively at the hammer and a small pile of other items. Obviously she didn't want to leave anything behind, but there was only so much they could carry.

Sighing, she handed Nate an apple, keeping the last one for herself. She took a big bite and chewed for a moment, then swallowed before answering bluntly, "Well, you can't carry much, Nate." She picked up her small camera, as if to weigh it, not really looking at him at all. "You're so banged up, you can hardly carry yourself."

She handed him a canteen, and he took it from her, miffed at her observation even though he knew it was true. He was in more pain than he wanted to admit and the constant dizziness meant he probably had a concussion. Carrying a heavy pack was out of the

question when he was concerned with simply keeping his feet under him on the uneven ground.

"Once I've walked for awhile, loosened up, I'm sure I'll feel better." This role made him uncomfortable. He was used to taking charge and suddenly he'd been relegated to taking orders. He didn't like it, even if he couldn't see any alternative.

Thank goodness Andy was so level-headed. He certainly didn't have the energy to deal with hysterics...including his own. He stared at the shadowy walls of the cave and wondered.

Would they ever find their way out?

He glanced at Andy. She was picking up and then discarding stones. Every move she made now appeared to have a higher purpose and he had absolutely no idea what that was.

It might be easier if his mind were clearer. He watched Andy scratching at the wall with a piece of broken rock and felt more confused than ever.

"What're you doing?" He walked closer to the wall, stumbling a bit when the floor appeared to tilt. There was a wriggly arrow etched along the surface, scratched into the rock at eye level.

Andy grinned and held the fist-sized piece of stone under his nose. "If we had bread

crumbs we could leave a trail, but since we don't, I figure we can mark the wall along the route we take. At least we'll know if we're walking in circles. Otherwise we could end up right back here."

"You sure you haven't done this before?" he asked dryly. "Or maybe you're just Indiana Jones's smarter sister." At her answering snort, he bowed, almost losing his precarious balance, and swept one hand out in front of them in the general direction of the darker hole at the back side of the cavern. He glanced at Andy, saw her shudder then straighten her shoulders and plaster a smile on her face.

"Since you seem to be the expert, Ms. Indy," he said, gesturing toward the darkness, "lead on." Her smile wavered briefly. She handed him the rock, shoved the loop of rope higher on her shoulder and headed into the depths of the cavern.

THE TUNNEL they followed twisted and turned, climbing gradually upward into the mountain. It was a natural fissure that branched periodically into other tunnels, most of them barely the width of Nate's shoulders.

Carrying the flashlight, Andy led the way. She stopped periodically, ostensibly to let Nate check the compass, but also to give him an occasional break. She knew he was in pain

but if he wasn't going to mention it, neither was she.

The passageway led them primarily in a southeasterly direction, but more than once they entered branches of the tunnel that narrowed to mere inches or ended abruptly in solid rock or loose piles of stones from cave-ins. Then, following the arrows Nathan had scraped into the rock wall, they would retrace their steps, searching for tunnels leading in other directions.

At first they managed to keep up a light conversation, anything to disguise the sense of isolation, the suffocating knowledge that each step carried them deeper and deeper into the mountain. Before long, however, the sound of their voices, echoing breathless and small in the darkness, was more discomforting than the scuffling of their footsteps and the steady scrape of rock on rock as Nathan marked their trail. As if by mutual agreement, they continued their exploration in silence.

"Nate, do you think you can fit through here?" Andy directed the beam of light at a narrow fissure, an area partially blocked by a rockslide that could have occurred minutes or centuries before. The gap was wider at the top, but would be a tight squeeze, even for her.

"I sure don't want to go back." Nate leaned against the cavern wall for support. "We've followed this section a long ways." He slipped around Andy, checked the width of the

opening, then turned and flashed a huge grin at her.

"Well, Indy–Andy, I think I can make it, but I'll go through first. If I get stuck you can call 911."

"Great idea," she answered dryly. "But I don't have any change for the phone. So don't get stuck, okay?" She handed him the flashlight, reluctant to part with it. "By the way, you can stop calling me Indy any time you want, Professor. It's dark and scary in here. I'm feeling less adventurous all the time."

Nate grinned reassuringly, then took the light from her, aware of the brief frisson of contact when their fingers brushed. He touched her cheek, cupping the side of her face in his palm and looked into her shadowed eyes. Her face appeared ghostly in the artificial light, dirty and tear–streaked. It drew him closer until he hovered, his lips a breath away from hers.

"Don't be afraid." He spoke against her lips, so close she felt the puff of his breath before he kissed her, gently, sweetly, an affirmation of the sanctuary he offered.

She moaned softly, leaning into his kiss, raising tired arms to touch his shoulders, his hair, his throat. But for all he offered, the kiss remained chaste, his lips conveying hope and strength, his passion controlled.

He smiled against her lips, ended the kiss and leaned away from her, still locked within her light embrace. "Stay right here." He touched the end of her nose with the tip of his finger. "I'll be back in a second." He turned, slipped between the narrow cleft, into the shadows beyond.

Without the flashlight, the darkness was absolute. Andy pressed against the solid rock, splaying her fingers to either side to feel more anchored. In the total absence of light, there was no up or down, no sense of distance. Only texture and sound and scent, from the abrasive stone beneath her hands and the musty dampness of rock and dust, to her own labored breathing.

She listened for Nathan. She was fine, as long as she heard the scrape of his boots against the rough ground. Soon even that brief link was swallowed up in silence until Andy was left alone, in darkness, with only the rock as her anchor.

Hours passed, it had to be hours. She was lost in the rasp of her breath echoing loudly in the dark confines of the narrow tunnel. Then she heard it, the scrape of leather against rock, a rattle of loose stones. She bit her lips to keep from sobbing out loud with relief.

"See, Hon, I told you I'd just be a minute."

"No...you said you'd be gone a second." She shuddered, unwilling to admit how

frightened she'd been, embarrassed he would know she'd almost lost control.

He set the flashlight down and cupped her face gently in his callused hands. "Oh, Hon...I'm sorry. I know you hate the dark." He kissed her, a sweet apology she didn't want to accept.

She must hate this weakness in herself, he thought, aware of her struggle as he brushed his lips softly over hers, feeling her tremble, not from his touch but from fear. Then she was kissing him back, desperately, her arms snaking around him, holding him. He felt her scalding tears as they coursed down her cheeks, down his face and into the stubble of his beard.

"Oh, God. I was so afraid." It was almost a question, the way she said it. Nate kissed her forehead and lightly rubbed her arms, aware of her sense of vulnerability.

"Well, you did say you didn't like the dark." He held her against his chest, feeling the rhythmic thump of his own heart beating counterpoint to the erratic tempo of hers.

"I've always been afraid of the dark. It's just never been quite so dark before." She tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob. She cut the sound off as soon as she recognized it.

"Well, I'm back now." He said it so matter-of-factly. Damn him! So he was back. That meant everything was okay? Men! She pulled out of his embrace, angry and embarrassed.

He didn't seem to notice. "Andy, wait till you see what I found at the end of this passage." He was already moving away, pulling her along with him, her terror completely forgotten.

She hitched the rope back up on her shoulder. The weight was just one more ache to endure. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, as he dragged her behind him through the narrow fissure.

"Some place magical," was all he said, but she sensed his excitement. Carefully, they maneuvered the tight passageway, inching along like crabs on the shore, sideways, the rock pressing in on them from all sides.

She heard the sound, finally, a deep roar keeping pace with her pounding heart and heavy breathing. Suddenly they popped out of the narrow tunnel like corks from a bottle, onto a slippery ledge, the abyss below them invisible in the feeble beam of the flashlight's dying batteries.

Suddenly, Nate turned off the flashlight.

Andy gasped, shut her eyes and grabbed his arm. She pressed her back against the rock wall, away from the chasm below.

"What do ya think? Isn't it beautiful?"

She was too frightened to scream, too terrified to breathe.

"Andy? Ya gotta open your eyes, Hon."

Damn him for laughing. "Quit calling me Hon," she retorted, but she opened her eyes. "What is it?" she whispered, when her sight adjusted to a darkness that was no longer as dark.

They stood on a narrow ledge high above a huge cavern. The walls were far enough away that the beam of the flashlight, if it had been on, would not have reached the opposite side.

But there was no need for artificial light. The ceiling and walls of the huge amphitheater above and below were draped with glistening strands of fire, thousands upon thousands of webs of light that glowed in unearthly hues of silver and blue.

And to their right, the source of the roar that had become a part of the rock, a part of the fabric of the world around them, a massive torrent of water shimmered like cascading diamonds in the ethereal light of the cavern.

"My God, Nate," she breathed, awed by the beauty, the magnificence of the spectacle before her. "What is it?" She turned to him and saw he was as awestruck as she, his lips parted, his eyes wide to the astonishing view spread out below.

"I don't know." His words came out in a whisper, as if to speak aloud would somehow desecrate the sanctity of such an unearthly place. His arm tightened around her waist. "The only thing I can think of is glow worms."

"Glow worms?" she asked. "As in, glow little glow worm, glimmer, glimmer, etcetera, etcetera?"

"Kind of like that." He chuckled, and the sound warmed her. "Actually, I remember reading about glow worms that live in caves. In Australia, I think. They make long webs that glow in the dark for catching insects."

"Where would the insects come from?" She leaned away from him, expectantly, waiting for his answer.

"From somewhere outside, of course." He grinned at her as the importance of the statement struck home.

"Then I suggest we look for the outside. What do you think, Professor?"

"I think the rope you've hauled all this way may finally come in handy." He lifted the heavy loops off her shoulder.

"We need to find someplace secure to tie it," he said, using the flashlight to search the ledge. The light glistened off a large stalagmite, growing up from the floor of the tunnel

behind them. Nate put his full weight against the formation. When it didn't budge, he looped a circle of rope over the top and pulled it tight.

"You go first," he said handing the rope to Andy. "That way I can help you down."

"You're hurt," she answered, miffed he would condescend to help her. Hadn't she proved she was every bit as capable as he? "You go first, then I'll follow. You don't have to help me."

He shook his head, laughing at her. Whenever she asserted herself, he made her feel foolish. Why was it okay for Nate to help her, but not for her to return the same courtesy? *Men!*

Finally, he seemed to come to some silent conclusion, and without further comment, wrapped the rope around his waist and dropped carefully over the lip of the rock ledge.

Andy grabbed the length of rope and held it near the base of the stalagmite, knowing that if it slipped over the top of the rounded formation she would never be able to hold his weight.

Before she had time to panic, though, Nate had reached the bottom. She quickly stuck new batteries in the flashlight, half expecting the natural glow in the cavern to simply shut off, then tied everything to the rope, sending down her fanny pack, canteen and the

flashlight. While Nate untied the bundle, she waited on the ledge, delighting in the silvery half-light from the webs. Then Nate pointed the flashlight in her direction, momentarily blinding her. She gave him a thumbs-up sign and wrapped the rope around her waist.

Suddenly she realized that once she was down, they would have to leave the rope here. If they came to another precipice like this one, they would be trapped.

Frowning a moment, she called down to Nate. "Just a minute. I need to do something up here."

Before he could respond, she had hauled the rope back up to the ledge, then proceeded to untie the end that was wrapped around the stalagmite. Carefully, she tied one end around her waist, then looped the rope loosely around the large rock formation, preparing to lower herself to the ground.

"Andy, what are you doing up there?" He sounded worried, but she decided she liked that a little. It was nice to know someone cared whether or not you made it down a cliff in one piece.

"I'm fine," she called back to him, giving a silent prayer to the cave gods that she make it down without falling. *One step at a time*, she thought, as she started to back over the ledge. *But the first one's a doozy.*

She couldn't do it. What if she wasn't strong enough to slow her own drop to the ground? She hovered there, at the edge of the precipice, caught between panic and pride. Finally, common sense convinced her, now was not the time to prove a point.

"Nate?" Her voice sounded small, even to Andy. "Nate, I have a little favor to ask."

"Yes, Andy?" He was trying to tease her, but she sensed his unease. "What do you want?"

"Out of here," she joked, but the humor fell flat. "Actually, I want to throw you one end of the rope and have you lower me to the ground. Or at least as close to the ground as it'll reach."

"That's stupid!" he exploded

"No it's not. Be reasonable. We might need the rope again."

He was silent so long, Andy wondered what he was up to. "You're right. I didn't think of that."

"What did you say?" She couldn't believe it...he actually admitted he'd neglected to think of something?

"Toss me one end of the rope, but wrap it at least twice around the stalagmite. I don't want it to slip over the top."

Quickly, she looped the rope an extra time, then tossed Nate the other end. She checked the knot around her waist. This time, when she reached the edge of the precipice, she flopped down on her belly and eased herself over the brittle edge.

Suddenly, without warning, the ledge crumbled. She dropped off the edge, her hands gripping the abrasive rope in a vain attempt to stop her descent. It happened so fast she didn't have time to scream. She fell a dozen feet before the rope caught her, long enough to wonder if Nate was strong enough, with all his injuries, to save her. But then the rope jerked hard under her ribs, tore the skin on her hands and stopped her fall.

She swung a moment against the face of the cliff, then, swaying gently back and forth like a huge pendulum, was lowered steadily to the ground.

Nate halted her descent, holding her just inches above him. His muscles bulged with the strain of her weight, the cords in his neck stood out like bands of steel. She let go of the rope and grabbed his shoulders.

He grunted with the unexpected weight of her, but his arms snaked around her waist and held her against him. She wrapped her legs carefully across his back, avoiding his bruises as much as she could. Then she pulled his face against her breasts, laughing with the sheer joy of having made it safely to the ground.

He growled into her belly. "Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again, or I swear to all that's holy I will leave you where you fall!"

"But I made it!" She unwrapped her legs from his waist and slid to the ground, her arms still holding tightly to his shoulders. "I made it, and we've still got the rope!" She was invincible, untouchable. She had dared and won.

Shaking his head, Nate slowly coiled the rope, pulling it loose from the stalagmite at the top of the ledge.

"This time. You made it this time." He looked at her, at her sparkling eyes and the smile that filled her face with joy. He couldn't help but grin back at her. "You're making an old man out of me. You know that?" He took a deep breath, still not believing she'd made it down the vertical face of rock in one piece, remembering his terror when she fell.

She'd trusted him with her life. Thank God he hadn't failed her. Nate suddenly realized he was trembling all over.

"We made it, Nathan." She smiled at him, a smile that warmed him and sent an arrow of longing ranging through his gut. "We made it together. Thank you."

Chapter 8

NATE'S HANDS tightened on Andy's shoulders. She was warm beneath his grasp, the bone and muscle and flesh that, moments before, had dropped and slipped along the face of the vertical wall until his grip on the rope had stopped her.

The image of her falling, the thought of her lying broken and bloodied at the base of the cliff, flashed through his mind. He gathered her into his arms and stifled a sob that escaped as a rough sigh against her hair.

I love her, he thought, wondering when the attraction had become so much more than an ache in his loins. Had become, instead, a pain in his heart that threatened to tear him apart.

Biting his lips, Nate rested his chin on top of her head. His heart pounded as if it might burst beyond his ribs. He sensed Andy's confusion and he took a long breath in a vain attempt to control his emotions. He hadn't cried when Linda left, had barely wept at his mother's death so many years ago. But now, so close to losing a woman he hardly knew, he couldn't stop the tears that quietly fell along his jaw and into her sable hair.

The intensity of his embrace was frightening, the energy racing between their bodies exhilarating. Andy felt him tremble, and it worried her. The long walk with his injuries

must have been too much. She'd seen fresh blood on the back of his head this morning, evidence the laceration had broken open again. She knew he hadn't wanted her to worry about him, so she'd honored his unspoken request. She hadn't mentioned what she'd seen.

Now, though, she felt the moisture against her scalp, and heard his ragged breath. Nate crying? But why?

"Nate?" She pulled away and cupped his ravaged face in her hands, forcing him to look at her when he would have turned away in embarrassment. "What's wrong?"

His battle for control was obvious. With a self-conscious, lop-sided smile he turned his lips against the palm of her right hand, kissing her with velvet softness along the ridges and abrasions where the rope had burned into her flesh.

"I thought I was going to lose you. God," he sighed, a deep shudder that racked his body. Then he pulled out of her arms and roughly wiped his sleeve across his tear-dampened face. "Sorry," he said gruffly. "Must be the bonk on the head. I'm shakier than I thought." He held his forearm against his eyes a moment, then more composed, dropped both hands to her hips.

"I'm okay." She whispered the words, then reached out to him, carefully brushing the thick hair out of his eyes with one hand, tucking it behind his ear with the other, much as

she would have done for a child.

"I'm okay," she repeated, her eyes filling with unshed tears, stunned by his emotional response. No one, not her father, not Jake, not any man had cried for her. The implications overwhelmed her.

She could stand this way forever, she thought, her hands on his broad shoulders, his large hands resting lightly on her hips, their eyes bridging the space between them with a current almost visible in the half light. Then her stomach growled.

"Dinnertime?" Nate lifted one eyebrow, a relieved grin splitting his face. He obviously welcomed the distraction.

"Don't I wish," she answered, moving away, effectively ending the moment. She grabbed her fanny pack off the floor. "I can offer you a choice from our wide selection of granola or energy bars," she said, pulling out a half dozen wrapped packages. Mimicking a waiter in an elegant restaurant, she pretended to read from a list.

"Your choices include apple-raisin, raisin-apple, or apple with raisins." She held out the selection of bars.

"I hate raisins," he deadpanned. He took one anyway and led Andy to a nearby rock where they could sit. "Make it last. We still don't have any idea how we're gonna get out of

here."

"Yeah, but at least we've got the rope," she said.

"But we almost lost you," he responded softly. "No rope is worth that."

"Well, nothing happened." The solemn look in his dark eyes confused her. She wished she understood men better and Nathan in particular. Maybe then she'd have some idea what he was thinking.

His reactions were rarely what she expected. She was beginning to realize he was nothing like her father or Jake. On assignments with her father, if things went wrong he usually blamed Andy or at the very least let her know he could have handled the situation much better without her.

Jake, on the other hand, hadn't wanted Andy along at all. By the time she figured out he was jealous of her work, she'd spent too much time trying to save a dying relationship. The struggle had taken its toll on her and her faith in men in general.

Could men be trusted? Specifically, could Nathan be trusted? Andy had never met anyone as straightforward before. He was strong and tender, brave and gentle, he laughed with her, not at her. Except when she got a little testy, she admitted to herself, embarrassed to recall a few unfair assumptions she'd made.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Nathan's voice was a caress against her ear, followed by the soft touch of his fingers as he pushed the wild strands of hair back from her face.

"Only a penny?" She turned to him and reached up to pluck a tiny crumb of granola from the corner of his mouth. "I'd like to think they're worth more than a penny." She grinned, her thumb and forefinger still pressed to the soft crease between his lips.

So intimate, she thought, to touch a man's mouth with your fingers. More intimate than a kiss and every bit as erotic. Did she really have to understand Nathan to feel this way about him?

"Oh," he agreed, his lips moving against her fingers, "a whole lot more. Have you still got that bar of soap?"

"Excuse me?" What did soap have to do with pennies and thoughts? "Yeah, I think so." She patted her pants pockets, then finally found the tiny bar in the front pocket of her flannel shirt. "It's right here."

"Well," he stood and grabbed her hand, pulling Andy to her feet. "I think our long awaited bath beckons." He led her toward the shimmering pool, near the base of the waterfall.

He looked so relaxed, as if inviting Andy to bathe with him were a common occurrence,

but when she looked at Nate she read impatience in his dark eyes, and the question that waited there.

"I don't think so, Nate." She laughed nervously. "The water's so dark, and it looks cold." She hung back a bit, still holding his hand. It would feel wonderful to be clean again. But was she ready for the intimacy? This wasn't just a bath they were discussing!

He tugged on her hand again. She pulled her fingers loose, refusing to meet his eyes. He stepped away. She knew he watched her. She glanced at him, studying him out of the corner of her eye. He had to know it wasn't the temperature or the darkness that held her back.

Nate stepped closer to the waterfall, then stretched his hand out and parted the silvery stream of water with his fingers. "It's not that bad!" he said, sounding surprised.

Andy bent down, testing the water at the shallow edge of the pool, then turned to see what Nate was going to do. She felt like an untrained actress, waiting on stage for her lines. Nate was the director, supervising her every word and move.

His boots and socks were already off and he was quickly unbuttoning his shirt. That question was answered. Their eyes met, briefly. He grinned at her before she looked away as he peeled the shirt off his broad shoulders.

She glanced back again, quickly, to watch the flex and stretch of his muscles, eerily defined in the silvery light of the cavern. "Are you coming in, or do you just plan to watch?" he asked playfully. She blushed, praying he couldn't see her color deepen in the faint light.

"When the creature from the deep comes out to bite your toes, I'll be safe on shore," she joked, covering her reaction.

"There's no creature, Andy. Only me." He carefully folded his shirt and set it next to his boots.

Andy looked away, but she could hear the sound of his zipper and the rustle of his jeans when he tugged his pants down his legs. She didn't need to see him to recall his broad chest, flat stomach and heavily muscled thighs. Amazing, that after such a quick glance that first morning, she could still see the details of his body, the thick mat of hair that trailed from navel to groin, a tiny scar across his left collarbone, the flat nipples, dark against his smooth chest.

Blushing in spite of herself, Andy began to slowly unbutton her shirt. Odd, that it had been so much easier to disrobe in anger that first morning, when Nate was still a stranger.

"This is heaven, Andy, pure heaven." It was difficult to hear him over the roar of the

waterfall. When she looked for him in the half-light he was barely visible, bobbing shoulder deep in the pool a dozen feet away.

The cavern formed a natural grotto, with smooth walls on two sides, and the waterfall on the third. The polished expanse of rock on the fourth side of the enclosure, where Andy knelt to undress, stretched seamlessly for at least thirty feet, then disappeared in the darkness.

She wondered how long the cool torrent had cascaded through the caverns to wear the rocks as smooth as glass. There was no moss growing this far underground and in the eerie light of the glow worms' webs, the grotto and waterfall looked surreal, like the background in a Dali painting.

Andy pulled her boots off, then her socks, and dabbled her feet in the cool water, periodically glancing across the surface at Nate. He was treading water now, arms moving in lazy circles, barely visible beneath the rippling water.

The air was damp, almost muggy after the dry chill of the upper cavern, but Andy still shivered as she stripped the sweaty flannel shirt from her body and peeled the denim jeans down her legs. She looked out across the water again. Nate had turned his back, giving her a sense of privacy. Taking advantage of the moment, she quickly pulled her tee shirt and

cotton panties off, folded everything in a neat pile and waded into the water.

The bottom was sandy, slightly abrasive against her bare feet as she moved toward Nathan. As soon as the cool water was deep enough to reach her hips, Andy dipped forward, taking a few light strokes to move out across the pond. Nate was right, she realized. The water was cool but not uncomfortably cold.

He'd pulled himself partially out of the water and sat, legs submerged, on an outcrop of rock where he could scrub his chest and underarms with the tiny bar of soap. Andy drifted into the bubbles that sparkled across the surface of the water.

As if sensing her presence, he raised his eyes to meet Andy's. She floated toward him, drawn by his gaze until she drifted in the tumbling pool at his feet.

Nate reached out to her, his arm glistening in the silver light, and pulled Andy up on the ledge beside him. Her nipples puckered in the chill air. She crossed her arms over her chest, but Nathan gently pried them away, running his hands along her sides, pausing at the indentation of each rib before grasping her firmly at the waist and turning her away from him.

She felt the slick caress of the soap as he ran it along her spine, then up across her shoulders. She leaned into his touch, knowing exactly where this would lead. She'd made

her decision, certain when the time was right they would come together.

Still, the feeling persisted, that she was merely an actress on stage waiting for her cue. Nathan's subtle caresses dictated each response, the tempo of her breathing, the beat of her heart.

He bathed her carefully, washing each arm as if she were a child. He turned her again so that her back rested against the side of the pool. He bathed each leg, each foot, even between her toes. He ran his soapy hands along her calves and grinned mischievously at her when he brushed the tiny bristles of her unshaved legs. Embarrassed, she turned her head, her hands still gripping the rock ledge, but he leaned down and kissed her kneecap, rubbing his bristly cheek against her calf.

His hands slid along the tops of both thighs, leaving soapy trails that met in the dark thatch of hair at their apex. She gasped, her chest rising and falling in anticipation as his fingers, slick and soapy, slid easily between her legs.

He stroked her gently with the small bar of soap, his attention not on her face, but on his own movements. She waited, anticipating the moment when his fingers would breach the opening, would touch her even more intimately, but instead his hand moved on, soaping the sensitive skin of her inner thighs before he withdrew, leaving her breathless and

unfulfilled.

She exhaled, frustrated by his teasing, wondering what he was trying to do to her. Then she felt him slide off the narrow ledge. His movements were precise, controlled, as he carefully pulled her into the deeper water alongside him. She followed him across the narrow expanse to the tumble of bubbles beneath the waterfall, soaking her hair and rinsing her body as they entered the rush of falling water.

She vibrated with unspent passion, her nerve endings tingled in the roiling water. She followed his direction, not certain of his motives, merely waiting for her next cue.

Curiosity as much as desire made her follow.

She thought the force of the cascade would drive her under, but at the base of the falls she realized it was an illusion of power. The water fell in a broad but shallow stream, its noisy roar more echo than force within the confined space of the grotto.

Nathan pulled her beneath the water and the two of them emerged, laughing, behind the shimmering curtain. It was darker here, so dark Andy could hardly see him. Only his eyes sparkled in the muted reflection glistening through the water.

It was shallower beneath the ledge that formed the upper edge of the waterfall. Both of them could stand upright. Andy smiled, realizing Nathan probably saw merely the shimmer

of her white teeth and the glint of her eyes in the darkness.

He rubbed the small bar of soap between his hands, then worked the suds into her streaming hair. "I've wanted to do this since the first day," he said, his voice husky. "I thought of you, down at the creek bathing, and I imagined your hair flowing with the current. I wanted to be there with you, washing it for you, tangling my fingers in all that glorious hair."

She didn't know what to say, couldn't say anything, could only lean into the strength of his fingers as they massaged her scalp, lifted the heavy weight of her hair and scrubbed along the base of her neck.

"I wanted you then, Andy." He whispered close to her ear, his voice barely audible above the rush of falling water. His hands continued to work their magic along her scalp. "I thought you were beautiful and I convinced myself it was just chemistry, that all I wanted was your body. You were a wonderful fantasy."

She tried to summon anger at his admission, but all that came out was a low moan, a sound so foreign to her she wondered at first where it came from.

"But it's more than chemistry, isn't it?" His voice, hypnotic, moved in rhythm with his massaging fingers, fingers that, without moving from her neck and scalp had managed to

inflare her entire body with their heat.

She was liquid, a part of the water around her, flowing with the gentle current, floating free from the sandy bottom of the pool, held in place by the firm but gentle touch of Nathan's fingers. She tried to keep her feet in place, to hold that subtle contact with the reality of rough sand and solid rock, but her muscles were fluid, without form or substance.

"I feel you fighting it, Andy," he whispered in that same low voice. "You're always trying to hang on to control, just like me. Don't worry. I'll never hurt you. Please trust me."

How could he know her so completely? She shivered under his passionate touch. "I trust you, Nathan," she said, hesitating only a moment. Slowly, letting the current dictate her position, Andy turned into his arms, feeling the heat of his body and the strength of his arousal.

Like a carefully choreographed water ballet, they moved together, wrapping their arms tightly around each other, their lips a breath apart, foreheads touching. Andy let her body float against his. Her legs joined behind his back, locking her firmly against the flat surface of his belly.

She rested there, feeling him swell beneath her. The trembling in his arms and the tautness of his body were evidence of the control he forced himself to maintain.

She wanted to kiss him, to lose herself in his embrace, but he carried her into deeper water. The tiny ripples lapped along her collarbone and covered the smooth swell of her breasts. Her nipples were tight beads, the darker areola swollen with desire.

His hands caressed her back, the rounded curve of her buttocks, along her hips and thighs. And still, he controlled the fever she felt, the fever she knew must burn in him as well.

So carefully he stroked, and stoked her inner fires with caresses that touched only arms and legs, back and sides. As if he saved the very best for last, she thought, smiling against his lips, wondering if maybe it wasn't time for her to exert some of her own control.

She bridged the infinitesimal gap between their mouths and found his ready. At the moment of contact, his lips parted and their tongues met in a tender joust of heated flesh. Tip to tip, then more, an exploration of the senses that centered all her being at the point where two mouths met in the darkness.

His slow caresses built to a feverish pitch, but still his hands touched only her back and sides. Her breasts ached for attention.

She loosened one arm from around his neck and trapped his roaming fingers, grabbed him and placed his hand upon the curve of her breast. She felt his smile against her mouth,

recognized his ploy for what it was, and couldn't help but love him for offering her control.

She wondered if she should feel the fool, for letting him play her like this, but the pressure of his large hand encompassing her breast drove any questions from her mind.

Locked against his belly, her tongue still intertwined with his, Andy felt Nathan push off from the ground, swimming with her under the streaming water to the shallower pool beyond.

Nathan lifted Andy, carried her out of the pool to the polished slab of granite where their clothing lay in neatly folded piles. When he stepped from the water, she loosened her legs from around his waist and slipped to the ground.

Standing there, wrapped tightly in each other's arms, their lips met again in a long and heated kiss. Andy felt him, hot and heavy against her belly. His arousal inflamed her.

She pressed against him, trapping his tumescence in the cradle of her hips, feeling his weight and heat close against her. She spread her fingers wide, running her hands along his chest and ribs, lightly rubbing his beaded nipples and trailing along the tight muscles of his stomach to rest lightly, tentatively on the solid bones at his hips.

He drew a shuddering breath, then suddenly his movements stopped and he pulled away. His arms still encircled her body, but lightly now, the passion under control. Once again he

took a deep breath, exhaling raggedly, the air rasping in his throat. Confused, she looked at him. A gentle smile curved his lips.

He cupped her face in his hands, forced her eyes to meet his. He studied her face while they struggled to control their heated breathing and the erratic pounding of their hearts. Finally, he kissed her, a feathery caress on sensitive lips.

"I love you, Andy. You have to know that this is much more to me than just wanting, or needing. I think I've loved you from the beginning, even when you've made me crazy."

"And that's most of the time, isn't it?" she answered quietly, shocked by his declaration of love. Her mind was spinning, she struggled to keep her expression composed, all the while wondering how she really felt about this man.

Her body thrummed with desire, her heart raced and her skin was on fire, but did she love Nathan? She had already decided that she wanted to make love to him, but was she in love? She had no doubt he desired her. His body trembled with his fight for control, but he was telling her something so important she needed to step away, if she would answer him honestly.

She pulled back from him, just far enough to break the contact from breast to thigh, and shivered at the sense of loss. His erection still hovered hot against her flesh, his arms

embraced her, but she fought to control her raging desire and look at him, as a woman looked at her lover, for the first time.

Ruggedly handsome in spite of his bruises, his features weathered and strong, his thick auburn hair falling in damp waves, long enough to touch his broad shoulders. He was tall and lean, the muscles of his chest and arms smoothly defined. The dark sprinkling of hair covering his lower belly and blending into the heavy muscles of his thighs drew her gaze to the evidence of his masculinity, the burgeoning arousal that fired her racing heart and made her mouth go dry.

But it wasn't the way he looked that drew Andy. It was the way he looked at her, the way he treated her. Tenderly, respectfully. He didn't try to change her, didn't lie to her.

Even now, when another man might have taken what she so obviously offered, he held back. She knew his words of love were spoken honestly, spoken to show her the depth of his commitment. The final decision to make love was hers. She realized it wasn't a choice to make lightly.

Nathan watched the play of emotions cross Andy's expressive face. He wanted to pull her into his arms, to love her and make her love him. He knew she wanted the physical act, felt the sensual hum of her body and heard the ragged breathing that signaled her arousal.

But he needed her on an emotional level. He wanted to raise this act of love beyond the purely physical, to give it the meaning it deserved. Over the past hours he'd tried to read Andy. From the few admissions she'd made, he thought he had a grasp of what made her the woman she was.

If he took her now, made love to her without expressing his true feelings, he would be lying to her. He wanted her so desperately the ache in his body wouldn't be eased without her, but he needed that same response from Andy.

He wondered briefly why it was so important. They might never escape the caves. Odds were against them, but he loved her. Even if their time together might only be measured in hours, Nathan wanted those hours to count.

He wondered what she was thinking, and wondering that, he felt his heart constrict. What if she looked to him for a physical release, not an emotional anchor? What if she was like Linda, concerned only with her own pleasure, uninterested in what he offered?

Nate struggled to hold his hands immobile against her shoulders, struggled to control his breathing during the brief moments she considered his words.

Then she looked at him, really looked. He felt her gaze searing his face, linking with his...and he wondered if she found him wanting.

But she raised her hand to caress the side of his cheek. Her palm was a feather's touch against the roughness of his beard. She smiled at him, a smile that belied the tears sparkling in her brilliant blue eyes. He read passion in her look, and tenderness, and what he hoped was love.

She reached up to him, sliding her arms along his shoulders and encircling his neck, pressing her hips against his, trapping his heat against her belly as she kissed him. Her breasts flattened against his chest, and he felt her heart pounding an errant rhythm, a dancing counterpoint to his own unsteady beat. Her lips brushed his, gently at first, then with growing passion before her tongue slipped into his mouth, wetting his lips and trailing along the sharp edges of his teeth.

Then suddenly, as quickly as she had embraced him, she pulled away and laughed. The sound was free, full-throated and echoing in the natural amphitheater.

"Oh God, Nathan," she said, the sound of laughter still rich within her voice, "I do love you. I think I've loved you forever. I know I must have looked for you all my life."

"You don't have to look anymore," he whispered against her damp hair, inhaling the scent of cheap motel soap and clear water. He shuddered as he drew her body close to his, comforted by her answer, admitting finally how frightened he had been, that she might

have turned away.

Chapter 9

THERE WAS indeed a difference, Andy thought, making love with a man who wanted your heart. A small corner of her mind had become the observer, noting the primal undercurrents in the cavern's twilight, the age-old vision of man and woman, naked and unadorned, embracing in this timeless place.

All the passions of the past few days, the fear and excitement, the desperation and anger and love were joined. She felt the blood course through her veins, the tension in Nathan's muscles as he lowered her gently to the ground. Then the cold shock of damp granite against her legs and buttocks sent the observer in Andy's mind scurrying for safety.

Laughing, she arched away from the chill stone, catching Nathan off-balance and rolling him to his back. She straddled him, locking his hips between her knees, holding his shoulders and back against the icy rock, dragging her damp hair across his chest.

"Aaaaaaargh!" he bellowed, pretending to shove her away, but in reality, grabbing her closer. They struggled in mock battle, laughing and touching, inflaming and provoking, tormenting and inspiring.

At some point, the laughter turned to sighs, the giggles to moans, and the touches altered

from tickle to caress. The cold granite, heated now with the friction of their bodies, might have been a featherbed for all the notice they took of anything beyond the sensations of touch and taste and smell.

Nathan's hands were the center of Andy's existence. Rough and callused, they covered her with feather touches as he played her body like a tightly strung harp. Long, mobile fingers molded her breasts, raised the flesh across her belly, then trailed along her inner thigh. She felt the vibrations of his touch, pulling her not so gently into the very center of her own being.

Her hands played a feverish tune of their own, tracing the line of his collarbone from shoulder to throat, then following the muscled ridge across his chest to lightly encircle the flat, male nipple and stroke it into a tight, solid bead.

Her touch drew his hands away from the soft flesh at the apex of her thighs. As he reached to cup her breasts she sighed against his lips at the abandonment that was merely a change in sensation.

As if in answer to Andy's silent request, he kissed her throat, then encircled the nipple of one breast with his tongue and lips, trailing his fingers back along her belly and below, to touch her intimately. Stroking, gently exploring the soft folds and tissues that had swollen

in expectation, he played her once again as she arched into his hand, desperate for the final crescendo and release.

She hovered there, awash in sensation, her entire existence controlled by his touch, wanting more, needing him inside her. Her hands moved independently of thought, stroking his sides, feathering along his ribs, then reaching for him, begging him with her touch to take her over the edge.

He kissed her as he entered her, not gently as he might have done, but hard and fast with all the pent up passion and intensity that had brought them together.

Their bodies melded and became one fiery monument to ecstasy, a brief rapture before completion left them panting and sweat-soaked on the cold, hard stone of the cavern floor.

HOURS. DAYS. Minutes later. Andy lay wrapped in Nate's arms, their heads cradled together on the wadded shirts and jeans they'd once folded so carefully.

She stared, mesmerized, at the faintly glowing ceiling, imagining stars and open sky instead of thick rock walls. She felt replete, totally satiated for the first time in her life.

Her body still vibrated with the fervor of their lovemaking and the power of her release. *Cataclysmic* came to mind, the only word she knew to adequately describe her body's

uninhibited response to Nate's. Their loving had surpassed anything Andy could imagine. The reality of it overwhelmed her.

She pressed closer to Nate, feeling a bittersweet sadness. Why now? To finally discover someone, something, so monumentally perfect at a time when her life could be ending.

Reality check. She had to banish the fear from her mind, but the walls of the cavern closed in about her. For the first time since the cave-in, Andy wondered what it would feel like to die.

Desolate, she turned in Nathan's arms and kissed him lightly on the temple. His skin was cool and moist against her lips, his thick hair fell in damp waves away from his face. He smiled at her and the tenderness in his eyes made her heart break.

"It isn't real, is it, Nate?" She felt tears welling up in her eyes. "None of this matters, because we're not going to get out of here, are we?" Her throat tightened. She knew her control was slipping...but she'd never had so much to lose before!

"Oh, it's real, all right." His arms tightened around her. "It's real, and it's important, and I've got one helluva reason not to give up now." He sat up, pulling Andy with him. She snuggled into the protective warmth of his arms.

"We're both exhausted and hungry," he said. He smoothed her tangled hair back from

her brow. Pressing her face against the solid wall of his chest, Andy felt the steady beat of his heart, and, oddly, the first rumblings of laughter as he added, "and I don't know about you, but my butt's gettin' cold!" He kissed her forehead, then stood up and hauled her to her feet.

But, instead of reaching for their clothing as Andy expected him to, Nathan drew her into his arms. She went willingly, meeting his body at breast and hip and thigh, feeling him hot and heavy against her once again.

"This isn't going to get us out of here, Nathan." She giggled, wondering where her fear had gone. "Don't you think we should get dressed?"

"I'm thinking about it," he answered, nuzzling her neck. He wrapped her long hair around his wrist, tilting her head back, giving the tip of his tongue access to the satiny skin behind her ear.

"Yeah," she answered dryly, her voice husky with renewed passion, "but what are ya gonna do about it?"

"This," he whispered following the line of her jaw with his mouth. "And this," he growled, against her lips. "And maybe a little of this." He trailed featherlight kisses across her breasts and down her belly, nipping the soft flesh below her navel between lips and

teeth.

She burned along the fiery path his lips caressed, gasping at the intimacy of his kiss. Her breath escaped as a tortured moan when he knelt before her, his strong hands along her flanks pulling her intimately against his mouth. She twisted her hands in the thick hair at the back of his head, afraid her knees would collapse beneath the sensual onslaught of his lips and tongue.

"Nathan, please," she pleaded. She grabbed his shoulders, pulled him to his feet, held him against her...needed him inside her. He lifted her in his arms and covered her face and throat and breasts with kisses as he carried her into the shimmering pool, close to the churning depths beneath the waterfall.

The cool water did nothing to diminish Andy's need for him. She clung to his shoulders and buried her face against his throat.

They floated beneath the glowing ceiling of the cavern, enclosed in the silvery mist from the waterfall. Nate turned her, positioned her against him, and she felt the silk and steel of his erection hard against her belly as she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist.

He filled her, finding his place deep within her core. She arched against him, her body moving of its own accord in rhythms older than time, more ancient than this enchanted

place. But even as she gasped his name, as her hands tightened in his hair and her body writhed against his in ecstasy, even then she doubted this fantasy could last.

ONLY THE WATER'S buoyancy kept Nathan from collapsing. He let his trembling legs float free of the gravelly bottom. Andy shuddered in his arms, their climax etched in the flush of her dark cheeks and the glazed expression in her eyes.

He hadn't meant to love her again, had really not expected his body would be ready, but the passion she inspired in him was too strong to deny.

Her long legs, still locked tightly behind his back, kept them locked together intimately as well. Carefully Nathan floated with the light current of the water, pulling the two of them easily to the side of the pool where they could catch their breath in the shallow depths.

Andy's legs tightened around his waist even more. Surprised, he felt once again a stirring of passion. Chuckling to himself, he tipped her chin back. Expecting joy to match his own, he saw the faint tracks of tears covering her cheeks.

She smiled, but he saw only sadness. When she let her legs float free of his body, the separation he felt was more emotional than physical. His chest constricted and his heart felt

as if the space had grown too small for it to beat.

"What's wrong, Hon?" He made himself smile, confused by her reaction. He loved her. She said she loved him. He had no doubt they would find their way out of here. There was absolutely no reason why they couldn't be together. It was perfectly logical.

"Don't call me Hon," she said, evading his question with a bittersweet smile.

"Andy?" Nate repeated, waiting for her answer.

"Whatever happens, I want you to know I love you." She sounded wistful, her voice ragged. Nate hugged her, held her tightly against his chest.

"Whatever happens, we'll be together," he said. "C'mon." He stood up in the shallow water and tugged Andy to her feet. "Let's grab another energy bar and some dried fruit, fill our canteens at the waterfall, and get out of here."

"Don't you think we ought to put our clothes on first?" she asked. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

"I was getting to that," he said, lifting one eyebrow. "Eventually. I didn't want to rush anything."

Nathan noticed the twinkle was back in her eyes as he watched her dress. It was almost as intoxicating to watch her put her clothes on as it had been to see her take them off.

"If you keep that up, we'll never get out of here," she said. He liked the fact she'd been watching him watch her.

"We'll get out of here." He picked his pants and shirt up off the ground. "But there's no reason not to enjoy the trip."

Andy snorted at his quip, then poured some granola into her hand and gave the rest of the bag to Nate. "Be sure and remind me once in awhile how much fun we're having," she said, taking a bite of cereal. "Don't forget the gourmet meals, either."

THE CANTEEN sat comfortably heavy against Andy's hip, and the flashlight cast a brilliant beam across the amphitheater. The granola rested as an unsatisfactory lump in her stomach, but she still felt refreshed and in a much better frame of mind than she'd been only minutes before.

She liked that about Nathan. Whatever happened, no matter how desperate the situation, he had the ability to find hope. His optimism brought Andy out of her own despair.

He was definitely stronger. She knew his bruises and bumps still hurt, but Andy was certain the time spent in the grotto had helped to heal him. She wondered if their lovemaking had helped as well. A smile crossed her face as the image of an old-time

medicine show wagon, emblazoned with *Doctor Petersen's Elixir of Love, Cures All, Heals All* floated through her mind.

She held the flashlight steady, aiming the beam at the wall next to the waterfall. It would be great if they could just climb into Dr. Petersen's wagon and get the hell out of here, she thought, shifting her mind out of the silly fantasy. Reality was never that uncomplicated.

Instead, Nathan was slowly and carefully inching his way up the slick rock, dragging one end of the rope tied to his waist as he worked his way up to the ledge above the waterfall.

While Andy watched, he carefully grabbed the lip of rock at the top, then pulled himself over and out of her sight. A moment later she saw his face and shoulders, spotlighted at the top of the wall in the narrow beam from her light.

"C'mon up," he yelled. "I think we're getting close. There's a good sized tunnel up here, and the air smells fresher. I can't see a thing, though. No glow worms!"

Within minutes, Andy had reached the same level as Nathan, and immediately noticed the difference in the air.

"It feels drier, too," she said, shining the flashlight across the narrow stream that fell into the grotto below. "Not as cold, either." A warm draft of air smelling faintly of pine,

ruffled her hair.

Nathan wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held Andy close to his chest. "I told you we'd make it." He whispered, but even his lowered voice couldn't hide his jubilation.

They stood on a level bank of glistening stone, a slender pathway running along the edge of the tunnel. It was partially submerged in places where the shallow water spread across the entire floor. Andy cautiously led the way, her flashlight illuminating a slippery path.

"Do you want me to go first?" Nathan asked a while later. His voice echoed in the dark. They'd lost the scent of pine.

The water was deeper now. The current tugged at their legs, reaching just below Andy's knees. The dry ledge had completely disappeared. The tunnel narrowed until Andy touched both walls for balance as she walked.

"No, I'm fine." She tried to hide the edge of panic she felt in the enclosed space. Nathan carried the rope now but Andy still gripped the flashlight, unwilling to part with the small bit of comfort it gave her, clinging to her role of leadership for the sake of the light alone.

She heard Nathan's footsteps splashing close behind her. As the water deepened in the narrow tunnel, the sound changed to a rhythmic swish of bodies moving through the current.

The ceiling gradually dropped as the channel deepened. Andy touched rock now on all sides. She looked back at Nathan, walking stooped over to fit within the enclosed space. When the beam of light from her flashlight caught his expression, she saw worry and exhaustion in his eyes.

He grinned at her, though. She met his smile. "This is a fine mess you've gotten us into, Ollie," he said.

"Sick, Nathan, that's really sick." She flashed the light along the narrow passageway, then looked back at him. "Got any great ideas?" she asked, hoping for a miracle.

"Yeah. Let's eat the rest of the energy bars," he said. They're gonna get wet anyway and I'm starved."

Andy handed Nathan the flashlight, then carefully unzipped the pouch on her fanny pack and handed him two of the four remaining bars. The pack was already wet, but the bars were only a little soggy within their plastic wrappers.

Water swirled around her thighs, plastering her jeans to her legs, tugging steadily in the direction from which they'd come. It was cold here. She wondered about the danger of stopping, of hypothermia, but they'd gone so long without food that she appreciated Nate's suggestion.

She knew he'd weakened over the past few hours. She wondered how serious his head injury was and remembered the brutal kick Ed had given him. He could have cracked ribs, or internal injuries for all she knew.

Andy decided she couldn't think about those things. She needed to concentrate on getting the two of them out.

She braced herself against the wall and munched the energy bar, fighting the exhaustion that made her legs tremble and her reactions slow. They should have rested at the grotto, she thought, instead of making love. But, if they hadn't made love she might have never known how great it could be.

She turned her head to watch Nathan, his shoulders slumped with exhaustion, quietly eating the last bar. He leaned against the stone wall, his body slightly stooped to fit beneath the low ceiling. The flashlight dangled loosely from a clip on his belt and the indirect light cast grotesque shadows across his face, emphasizing the bruises and cuts from his beating.

Andy's chest constricted. At that moment she knew she could never love anyone more than she did this unlikely looking hero, would never want another man the way she wanted Nathan.

As much as his bravery, she loved his vulnerability. As much as she admired his

strength, she admired his willingness to admit to weakness. And, she had never, not in her wildest fantasies, come close to imagining the heights he'd taken her to when they made love. She suppressed a quiet chuckle, wondering how she could possibly think of sex when they were still trapped in this damned cave!

"You finished?" Exhaustion roughened his voice. Andy wondered at the note of despair she detected. He couldn't give up now!

"Yeah." She paused, then reached for his hand. "Are you okay?" she asked him, concerned.

"Just tired of having fun, I guess." He flashed her a brief smile and handed her the flashlight. "I'm about ready for some daylight. How about you?"

"Let's go." She tried to sound jaunty, but his sudden shift in attitude frightened her, almost as much as the change in the tunnel as they continued moving steadily upward.

The passage had narrowed to a fissure barely eighteen inches wide. Water flowed through the gap in a steady torrent that reached almost to Andy's waist. The footing was slick. She searched for fissures, any handholds, to pull herself forward. The beam from her flashlight showed nothing beyond more rock, more water, more darkness.

"What do ya think?" she yelled over the roar of the water. "Should we try to go on or go

back and look for another tunnel?"

Bracing his arms against the walls, Nathan shouted, "We're not goin' back. This water's coming from the surface or it would be a whole lot colder. Let's keep going."

"It's cold enough for me!" she yelled, when suddenly the rushing stream drove Andy away from the opening, up against Nathan's solid form. He caught her around the waist, so quickly she didn't have time to be frightened. She held the flashlight high above her head, out of the roiling current.

"Good reflexes," she laughed, feeling the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She leaned into him for a split second, enjoying the feel of him, the knowledge that he was there to catch her, literally, should she fall.

"Not so bad yourself," he said, grabbing her by the derriere and half lifting her into the cleft between the rocks.

She grabbed for a handhold with her left hand, holding the flashlight out of the water with her right. The stream rushed over her shoulders and split into an arc behind her body, soaking Nathan. She scrambled up and through the rugged fissure, well aware of Nathan right behind her, his hands pushing steadily against her hips.

Suddenly, Andy was through, stepping out into a large cavern partially filled with a

narrow pool. She swung the flashlight in a wide arc. There was a dry ledge to one side, an area about eight feet wide that appeared to lead into a broader tunnel off to the right.

"Look, Nate," she called out as she quickly turned to help him through the narrow cleft. "It gets wider. Looks like a piece of cake from here!"

"Andy!" His harsh cry cut the darkness. She watched in horror as he lost his footing, grappling for a nonexistent handhold on the polished stone.

He struggled against the rushing current, only to fall to his knees in the narrow opening, his broad shoulders tightly wedged between the slippery rocks. He carried the heavy length of climbing rope looped over his left shoulder and across his chest, and the bulk of it held him there, jammed securely in position, his face only inches above the roaring water.

"Nathan!" Andy screamed. Immediately she saw the danger. The water was already rising against him, stopped by the unnatural dam his body created. He grabbed at the slick rock, trying to pull himself up and out of the water, but she could see his strength ebb as the torrent beat against him.

She linked her fingers in the coil of rope at his shoulder. Her feet slipped on the slick bottom of the creek, more a narrow chute than stream bed at this point along the passageway.

The water boiled up around his chin and threatened to drown him. Frantic, Andy clipped the flashlight to her fanny pack with one hand, then with both hands free, dragged with all her might as she tried to pull Nate into the upper cavern.

She felt his weight slipping, felt him falling back into the narrow passage below as the force of the water built up against his solid body. Still she pulled until she thought her arms would wrench from their sockets.

Finally, in the erratic light of the flashlight swinging at her hip, she saw Nathan grab a tiny cleft in the rock, grab it and pull himself a few inches out of the water. With his body partially free of the flow, the level quickly dropped around him. She saw the terrible effort in his face, the cords standing out on his neck as he forced his exhausted muscles to obey him one more time. His strong features twisted in a painful grimace and suddenly, with a fierce yell, he hurled himself forward and free of the breach, knocking Andy to her back in the rushing stream.

Completely submerged in the flowing current, Andy panicked, pushing Nathan away from her body, fighting his hands as he grabbed for her then pulled her to the surface.

The cavern was completely dark, the flashlight shattered and broken in the churning water, but Andy sobbed tears of relief when she realized Nathan's arms were around her,

his lips pressed hard against her hair.

"I thought you were going to drown," she cried, unable to fight the tears any longer. Her body trembled from cold and fear. She clutched her linked fingers behind his back, holding their bodies close together.

"I'm okay," he said, his lips pressed to her temple. He hugged her in a soggy embrace, but she felt only the warmth and comfort of his enfolding arms.

"We do have a little problem, though."

"I know," she answered, realizing he didn't want to frighten her any further. "The flashlight went down for the count."

Nathan pulled out of her embrace, and she realized he was checking his pockets. The penlight! She had given him the tiny flashlight she found after the cave-in.

"Do you have it?"

"Naw," he said, obviously disappointed. "It was in my shirt pocket. It must have washed out." He grabbed her hand, offering solemn comfort in the darkness. "Did you get a chance to look around up here before I fell?" he asked. "Is there any place dry where we can rest a bit and try and figure out what we're going to do next?"

"Yeah. There was a raised shelf of rock to the right of the gap. A pretty good sized area,"

she added hopefully, turning into the current to get her bearings.

Holding his hand, she led him carefully across the shallow pool. She stumbled where the slippery stream bed gradually tilted upward, but finally scuffed her boots across dry land. Blindly, she walked through the darkness with one hand waving out in front of her. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until, after a few faltering steps, her knuckles rapped against the rough surface of the cave. She breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Totally spent, Andy dropped to her knees. Thank God she felt dry sand instead of rock. Nathan collapsed beside her. For a moment neither of them spoke. The only sounds were the rush of water and a faint drip, drip, drip echoing in the darkness.

"What now?" Andy asked, shivering against him. The air in this section of the cavern felt unnaturally warm. Once again she thought she detected the faint scent of pine, but her wet clothing and the aftermath of fear had left her chilled and exhausted, her thoughts scattered and confused.

"We rest, I think." Nathan answered, his voice a quiet rumble against her ear. "I'm so tired I can't think straight." He shifted away from the wall to stretch out in the sand.

Andy curled up next to him, ignoring the terror that pressed at her from all sides. At least with the flashlight they'd had a chance. She thought again about dying, but when Nathan

wrapped his strong arms around her and pulled her into the curve of his body, the thought fled. It was impossible to be afraid, she realized, when she was enclosed in Nathan's arms. Giving in to exhaustion, she shut her eyes against the darkness, and with Nathan filling her senses, she promptly fell asleep.

HE KEPT waiting for her to break down, to admit the terror and despair she must be feeling. Instead, she snuggled against him, curled into a tight little ball beneath his chin, and wrapped her arms around him as if the two of them were sleeping comfortably in bed.

He wondered where she found her strength, both physical and emotional. At some point during the last hours, he knew she had come to trust him and the depth of that trust frightened him as much as their desperate situation. He didn't know how to save her. All the optimism in the world wouldn't get them out of here. He knew he'd rather die than fail her.

Her shivering subsided as her body settled close to his, falling quickly into the rhythms of sleep. Exhaustion wrapped itself around him. He wondered if there was any place on his body that didn't hurt.

They'd reached their limits...at least he had. Andy amazed him. The thought of what a

durable little thing she was made him smile. Even that was almost comical, the way he thought of her as little when she was taller than average and stronger than any woman he knew. He loved the way she tried to be so tough, but he'd seen her vulnerability and he'd watched her deal with her fear. Childlike in some ways, but one tough lady when it counted.

He wanted to believe they would escape the caverns, but it was hard to feel optimistic lying here in the darkness. He let his mind wander a little. For the first time since the cave—in, he wondered about the peregrines, about the poachers and whether or not anyone had come to look for Andy and him yet.

Without a watch, he had absolutely no idea how long they'd been in the cave. At least a couple of days, but he couldn't be certain. In many ways it had been a lifetime, so much had changed. He kissed Andy lightly on the temple and felt the sting of tears in his eyes.

Dying wasn't something he'd ever really thought of before, but suddenly it scared him. He didn't want to think of losing her, of losing his life now that there was someone like Andy in it. She was courageous and funny, and tender and tough and so sexy she made his teeth itch. Their lovemaking still left him feeling stunned.

He thought of her, faintly illuminated in the shallow waters of the grotto, dark hair

flowing over her slender frame, and the exquisite image caused an immediate and very masculine reaction in him. He clenched his jaw painfully as the familiar ache in his loins reminded him again how very much he had to lose.

Andy mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep. Nate placed his palm against her cheek to calm her dreams and kissed her lightly on the temple. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding the tears inside. It was so frustrating! He loved her and he didn't know what to do. There was no light in this place and it hurt to think he might die without ever seeing her face again.

Chapter 10

ANDY STIRRED restlessly, pressing her hips into the hollow of Nate's belly and snuggling her face against his forearm. Her unconscious motions brought Nathan fully awake.

He'd been dreaming of death.

The darkness in the cavern was absolute, the only sound the ceaseless murmur of the stream flowing over polished stone and an echoing *plink* as water dripped from ceiling to floor.

A sense of despair wound tightly through his gut, a dull ache that even Andy's touch couldn't cure. He'd never once thought it would come to this, that he and Andy might die, but without a flashlight the odds of survival were against them. It had been dangerous enough with light; he hated to think of wandering through these caves in total darkness.

Poor Andy, he thought, smiling grimly to himself. She had such a phobia about the dark. Only Andy would think to keep her eyes shut after the flashlight broke, explaining to Nathan, "I know it's dark, but if my eyes are shut, it's my dark." It made him realize how fragile she was at this point and how afraid she must be of losing what little control she had

left.

He wished he'd realized earlier how much she needed her sense of power. He didn't understand why it was so important to her, but he saw now that many of their disagreements had come from his habit of automatically taking charge and assuming she would follow.

He was trying to understand her, but short of dragging her after him into the darkness, how was he going to convince her they had to keep going? He sighed against her hair. There were no simple answers and his thoughts seemed to travel in circles as convoluted as the twisted passageways that trapped them.

Wandering blindly through unmapped caverns and tunnels was probably not the smartest thing to do, but anything was better than waiting here for a slow death.

Miracles happen. Yeah, but they happened best when he helped them along. The air definitely smelled fresher here, the familiar scent of pine periodically teased his nostrils. It would be such a horrible irony, he thought, to starve to death near an exit because they were too afraid to take a chance.

He'd certainly had his share of miracles lately. Finding Andy, loving her, knowing she loved him in return; that qualified, didn't it? He hoped he hadn't used up his allotment...did

he have the right to wish for just one more?

He couldn't let Andy know the direction his thoughts were taking. The one thing he could offer her was strength and hope. Now, if he could only figure out how to keep himself from panic.

"Are you awake, Nathan?" Andy's whisper drew him away from his grim thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm awake. Are you feeling any better?"

"Yeah." Her lifeless voice transmitted despair. Nate hugged her, needing to ease her fears, knowing the task might be impossible. "I wonder how long we slept?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "It could be hours or even a few minutes. It's hard to tell. I know we've been in the caves for at least a couple of days, just from my beard."

"That's not a very accurate timepiece, Nathan," she murmured into his ear.

"It's the best I can do, considering the circumstances. When we get out of here, I promise to buy a watch."

"Nathan."

"Hmmm?"

"Do you have any regrets?"

"We'll get out of here, Hon. You don't need to worry about regrets," he answered,

discovering his need for denial was stronger than his desire for honesty. But it wasn't a fair answer. He realized that immediately.

"Actually," he added, his lips moving gently against her hair, "I guess my biggest regret is that I didn't meet you sooner. I'm sorry I wasted all that time."

She leaned over and kissed him gently on the corner of his mouth. He tasted her tears.

"I feel the same way. Like my life is just starting...now I won't get to finish anything." She snuggled against his chest.

"I guess I'm sorry the poachers are getting away with their crime, too," Nathan added, feeling the anger and frustration well up in him. Three men had done this terrible thing, not just to the peregrines, but to Andy, and to him as well. He wanted them to pay for their crime, not profit by it.

The silence stretched between them for a few moments before Andy spoke, her voice small and trembling. "I'm sorry my father didn't love me."

"Oh, Hon, how can you say that? Fathers always love their daughters. It's in the rules ...they sign a contract or something." He kept his voice light and playful, but his anger grew. Andrew Petersen didn't deserve this woman as his child. It was beyond Nate's comprehension he hadn't loved her.

"He never said ..." Her voice quavered, and Nathan's heart ached with her grief. "There's so much I'll never know." She paused. Nathan heard the catch in her breathing, the quiet sniff that told him she was trying to control her emotions and failing miserably.

The silence stretched into long minutes, broken only by their breathing and the cave—sounds of water swirling and dripping in the darkness.

"How long will it take?"

He didn't need to ask what she meant. The same question was soundly lodged in his own mind.

"God, I don't know, Andy," he whispered, awash in helplessness and guilt, overcome by despair. *Dear God*, he prayed silently. It isn't fair, not to her. She wasn't even supposed to be on this project!

He pulled her close, offering what comfort he could with his embrace, wanting to absorb her fear and take her out of the darkness. And as their bodies met, he was aware of another response as well, a need for Andy that burned as intensely as his desire to save her. A need to affirm life?

"I love you," he groaned, turning to her, covering her body with his. "I love you, and God willing, we will get out of here."

"I believe you."

He tasted her words, felt them against his mouth as he probed her softness with his tongue.

Her body was warm, alive! Nate's hands found the buttons at the top of her flannel shirt. He trembled with his need for her. Her hands covered his, helping him with each button, then reaching for his shirt.

He pushed the damp flannel away from her shoulders and slipped his hands beneath her tee shirt. The fabric was soft, warm from her body heat. It slid up along her smooth torso like finest silk.

She touched him beneath his shirt, her fingers fluttering along his ribs, bunching the wet fabric up under his arms. He pulled away, just long enough to strip the clothing from his chest, to help Andy as she struggled out of hers.

Before, when they made love in the grotto, there had been an enchanted light bathing the lines and angles of her body. Here, the darkness was complete. Like a blind man, Nathan learned her shape by touch. The soft curve of her breast, then the line of her ribs leading his fingers to the deep concave of her belly.

Their searching progress was halted for a moment by the rough edge of her denim jeans.

Nathan sat up and pulled Andy's wet boots off her feet, then peeled her damp jeans along her legs. He felt her shiver when the chill air touched her skin. He bent over to trail hot kisses along her flank.

She reached for him when he pulled away to remove his own clothing, her fingertips fluttering against his chest, searching for him in the darkness. He wondered briefly why the sparks he felt from her featherlight touch weren't visible, so powerful was the sensation of electric shock at each fleeting contact.

Struggling quickly out of his wet jeans and boots, Nathan drew Andy into his arms, then stretched out beside her in the sand. He trapped both her hands in one of his, holding them over her head to still their frantic motion, then slowly bent to kiss her temple, the bridge of her nose, her eyes. He smiled against her eyelids when he realized they were tightly closed.

Andy still controlled the darkness.

Their movements had scooped out a sandy nest. Nate brushed the grains from her breasts, then pulled one beaded nipple into his mouth. She moaned as he suckled. Her hands pulled free of his light entrapment and grabbed his shoulders, holding him closer.

He wanted her now, so desperately he thought his control might snap, but with studied patience he touched her, stroked her hips and breasts and belly, affirming his love, his

belief they would survive.

His fingers found the tight downy curls between her thighs, then dipped into her center. He reacted with a throbbing pain in his groin when her body quivered at his gentle assault, his passions aroused by her trembling flesh and incoherent moans.

She clutched at his shoulders until Nathan felt the sharp bite of her nails against his back, the press of her lips in the hollow of his throat. The stinging pain and the gentle caress coalesced into an overwhelming need for completion, a need he could no longer fight.

He entered her with slow and gentle strokes, his muscles quivering from careful restraint. "I love you," he gasped, knowing his control was wavering, feeling himself spiral down into a maelstrom of desire so compelling it threatened to overwhelm him.

And at that moment, that incomparable point in time often called "the little death", Nathan realized he had never been so intensely alive.

SHE LOVED his hair, Andy decided, running her fingers through the long, thick waves. It reminded her of the deep reddish brown of the huge redwood trees, but when the sunlight touched him, she thought of polished copper.

Would sunlight ever touch them again?

She pushed the thought aside and stroked the thick strands away from his face. She'd never been with a man who had long hair before, had never imagined how erotic it would feel, the sweep of it across her bare breasts.

"I love your hair," he said, brushing the long strands back from her face. She giggled in the aftermath of their lovemaking, to know his thoughts so perfectly mirrored her own.

"What's so funny?" he asked, kissing along the line of her jaw and ending up at her lips.

"I was just thinking the same thing," she said. "About you. I love your hair, the way it feels, the length of it." She draped one long strand across her mouth, then lightly blew it away.

He rubbed his cheek against the palm of her hand.

She kissed him lightly on the corner of his mouth.

He sighed, feeling every bruise and bump he'd gotten in the past few days, "I'm only thirty-three, but right now I feel as old as the hills."

"I love you, Nathan Murdock," she whispered softly against his lips. "Even if you do feel old."

"And I love you, Andrea Petersen. I'll love you for as long as we both shall live."

"That wasn't funny, Nate."

"It wasn't meant to be. I intend to make it out of here."

"Are you taking me with you?" she teased, but the sudden tightening in her gut dragged her back to reality. It was so easy to forget, when they made love.

Suddenly, his body stilled. "Andy? Are your eyes open?"

"Of course not, silly," she said. "It's dark out there."

"Well, I think you can open them, because it's not nearly as dark as it was." Suddenly he was laughing, sitting up, and dragging Andy with him.

"What?" She looked wildly about, then suddenly stopped, caught by a pale glimmer of light, one tiny edge of granite, glowing faintly in reflected sunlight. Somewhere nearby, sunshine beckoned. Laughing and sobbing her relief, Andy fell joyfully into Nathan's warm embrace.

The light was merely a pale glimmer against the polished stone surface of the tunnel wall. No illumination extended into their part of the cavern. While Nathan searched for their scattered clothing, Andy brushed the sand off her body, at the same time trying to keep her eyes on the faint shaft of sunlight.

They dressed in a flurry of activity, dumping sand out of boots, struggling with belts and buttons and shoelaces and clothing still damp from their soaking in the underground

stream. Andy tied her snarled hair into a loose knot at the nape of her neck and Nathan quickly wound the climbing rope into a coil and strung it over his shoulder.

Unwilling to leave anything behind, Andy grabbed the fanny pack and canteens, then, hands linked, the two of them rushed in the direction of the light, scrambling across the sandy floor and splashing through the shallow stream.

Around one corner, then another, until the reflection became a steady glow and they could see each other, see the walls and floor of the tunnel that gradually grew wider and brighter as they climbed upward out of the mountain.

The early morning sunlight was painful against eyes long accustomed to darkness. It took a moment to get their bearings.

"We're on the back side of the plateau," Nathan said between gasps for breath. He shaded his eyes and looked north along the heavily timbered ridge.

"I don't think we're far from the woods where we hid from the poachers," Andy replied, holding her sides to control her labored breathing. She looked to the south where a tall grove of redwood trees hid the rest of the plateau from their view.

"You're right." Nate tugged her hand to pull her toward the plateau. "We should be able to find the road back to camp if we cut through the trees. Let's go."

"Then what?" she asked, falling in step beside him. "Shouldn't we head back to the ranger's station? Tell them what's happened?"

"Not until we have the film," Nathan said between clenched teeth. "I'm not going anywhere without enough evidence to nail those bastards. Your pictures are the proof that'll do it. C'mon."

Struggling to keep pace, Andy followed a few steps behind Nathan as he jogged through the thick grove of trees. He shoved branches and foliage out of his way, jumping over logs and small shrubs in his path. She heard his muffled curse when he accidentally snagged the heavy coil of climbing rope on a broken branch. Uncharacteristically, he tossed the rope angrily to one side rather than take the time to untangle it.

She managed to keep up with his headlong passage, but one thought was uppermost in her mind, that he had assumed control again and she was blindly following his orders.

It didn't matter that she agreed with him. What mattered, thought Andy, was that he did what he wanted without asking her opinion, assuming she would obey. He barged ahead of her like a freight train. She heard him mumbling under his breath and she had the distinct feeling that, if it were at all physically possible, steam would billow from his ears.

FINALLY, NATHAN thought. A chance to act, to actually do something that didn't leave him feeling helpless and weak and impotent. Well, not necessarily impotent, he reflected, thinking of the passion he and Andy had shared. Not impotent at all.

He pushed the hair out of his eyes, aware of Andy following silently behind him. She was his and he was out for vengeance. It felt good, to be this angry, to push things aside that got in his way, to move in the light like a man, not crawl fearfully in the dark.

They had made it, even though he'd practically given up hope. He'd protected her after all, in spite of Mark and Ed and Sid. It was a good feeling, this sense of achievement, of purpose.

This anger.

It felt wonderful, cathartic even, to force his way through the heavy underbrush, to vent his emotions on the offending branches that blocked his path. Now, finally, he could act.

He burst out of the woods at the edge of the road and the peacefulness of the scene stopped Nate in his tracks. The morning mist was already burning off. While he waited for Andy to catch up he took a moment to appreciate the sounds of daybreak.

Jays squawked nearby. He heard the musical twitter of warblers in the heavy undergrowth and smelled the scent of damp earth and grass and pungent pine and redwood

-- the wild perfumes he'd thought he would never smell again.

The poachers had almost taken this away from him forever. Had almost taken Andy away. He clenched his fists, controlling the fury that rolled over him in violent waves.

Then he realized Andy was beside him, her breath rasping in her chest, her dark face flushed and angry. He was glad she felt the same as he. Together they could take on the world. He grabbed her in an exultant hug and planted a big kiss on her mouth.

"We made it sweetheart! Doesn't it feel great? You feel great! God, how I love you!" He held her, laughing, then kissed her again and grabbed her shoulders. "We'll get 'em," he vowed. "Those bastards'll regret messing with us." He grinned at Andy's wide-eyed stare then grabbed her hand and started down the road, pulling her behind him.

He'd turned into a certifiable maniac, Andy decided, struggling to keep up with Nate as he jogged down the dirt road to their camp. She didn't understand the change in his personality, nor did she like it. Where was the tender, compassionate man she'd fallen in love with? This guy was nuts!

From the minute he'd stepped out of the cave, he'd been a man possessed. She could understand his excitement over escaping the caverns. For crying out loud, she was excited, too. What she didn't understand was his anger, this sudden drive for vengeance.

The poachers were long gone...so were the eggs. The photos might eventually bring the crooks to justice, but this season's crop of young falcons was lost. So what was the rush? She was tired and sore and hungry. She needed time to sort through the confusing layers of emotions that threatened to bury her.

Running behind him, her breath tearing at her lungs, Andy wondered if she really knew anything about Nathan Murdock at all.

WAS THAT A helicopter? Nate grabbed Andy and shoved her behind a huge redwood. He flattened his body close beside hers and the two of them sagged against the rugged trunk, panting in loud, irregular gasps.

The roar of the chopper grew closer. Dust swirled about them as it hovered nearby. After a moment, the steady beat of the blades slowed and idled, then stopped completely.

"They're not back, are they?" Andy's wide blue eyes transmitted anger and fear in equal proportions.

"No. Listen." Nate carefully inched around the shaggy side of the redwood tree. "It doesn't sound like them. Their helicopter's a lot quieter, smaller, I think. This sounds like," he paused, listening a moment longer, then turned back to Andy, laughing. "This sounds

like Roger Dalton and the US Forest Service!" He grabbed Andy and raced out into the clearing.

The small meadow was filled with people. They reminded Nate of a herd of deer, the way they simultaneously raised their heads in the same direction, looking at Andy and him running hand in hand through the tall grass.

When a spontaneous cheer went up from the group, Nathan realized it had to be their rescue party. The next thing he knew, Roger had him in a bear hug, crushing ribs still badly bruised.

"Put me down, you idiot," he laughed, grimacing at the pain, and holding his hand to his injured side.

"Where the hell have you been, Doc?" Roger asked, a wide grin splitting his face. "We've been worried sick ever since we found your camp. What happened? You look like hell!"

"It's a long story, Roger," Nate answered, looking for Andy. She had disappeared in the arms of an older, white-haired man and a young blond woman. Nate watched them for a brief moment and experienced an odd sense of alienation.

Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to Roger and two other rangers who stood by

the pilot's side. He noticed members of the local rescue group and a number of armed men as well, dressed in Trinity County Sheriffs Department uniforms.

"We got messed up with poachers, Rog," Nate said, realizing that was probably the understatement of the year. "They got the whole season's clutch. We didn't save an egg."

"Oh yes you did." Roger grinned even wider than before. "We got 'em all and your three friends as well."

"But how?" Confused, Nathan looked from one smiling face to another.

"Their chopper had a mechanical problem...got 'em just as far as the Weaverville Airport and down they went. Hit hard enough to knock 'em all a little dingy, but didn't break an egg. As soon as we realized it wasn't your standard group of hunters, we hauled 'em in." He gestured to a group of four young men partially, suited up in climbing gear.

"These fellas are just getting ready to go into the eyrie and check on the imitation eggs they placed in the nests Thursday morning. We'll hatch the chicks back at the center ..."

"And exchange them with the fake eggs in the nests later on, and their mammas will never know the difference!" Exultantly, Nate finished the statement, experiencing an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. The project hadn't failed. He shook Dalton's hand gratefully. "That's great, Rog, really great," he said sincerely. "It makes the whole mess

worthwhile, ya know?"

He turned to Andy. She was wrapped in the stranger's arms, sobbing. "Andy. Andy, did you hear what Rog said?" he asked quietly, realizing she was unaware of anyone other than the man who held her. The man who had to be her father, Andrew Petersen.

Loath to intrude, Nate turned back to Roger. He'd have plenty of time with Andy later. Right now, there were things that needed to be done. "We've got film, Rog. C'mon. I'll show you where we hid it. We're gonna nail those crooks."

ON ONE LEVEL, Andy felt like a child, except she couldn't recall a single time as a youngster that her father had actually hugged her.

But her father's arms were around her now and from the broken sound of his breathing she knew he battled the tears she allowed to fall. Not in her wildest fantasies had she ever imagined her father would be concerned about her. So concerned, that when Donna called to inform him Andy was missing, he would actually travel hundreds of miles to help find her.

"Andrea, we've been so worried." His low voice was a soothing rumble in her ear. Andy took a deep breath and tried to control her runaway emotions.

"What happened, Andy?" Donna's familiar voice grounded Andy as no other could. "The ranger called and said you and Dr. Murdock were missing, but no one had any idea what happened."

"They caught the poachers. Ranger Dalton suspected they had something to do with your disappearance," Andrew Petersen said, holding Andy by the arms, "but the men refuse to talk."

"Dalton said they claimed diplomatic immunity," added Donna. "Supposedly, one of them works at a foreign embassy."

"What about the eggs?" Andy asked, suddenly realizing she couldn't see Nate anywhere. "Did they save the peregrine eggs?"

"I don't know," Donna answered in a soothing voice. "That's not important now, Andy. We need to get you home. You're a mess. Are you hurt?" She grabbed Andy's arm and turned her around.

"No, I'm fine." Andy frantically searched for Nathan. "Where's Nate?" she asked, stepping out of her father's grasp, away from Donna's searching eyes.

One of the rangers heard her question and pointed in the direction of the campsite. "I saw him head over there with Dalton," he said. "He was talking about some film he had."

"*He* had?" Andy replied angrily, keying on the last two words of the man's comment, searching for a focus for her scattered emotions. "That's my film." She stalked across the small meadow, followed by her father and her friend. Andy noticed when Andrew and Donna exchanged questioning looks, but she didn't have time to explain right now, in fact, probably couldn't explain her sudden outrage.

"Nathan," she called, an angry edge to her voice. "Nathan, where are you?"

"I'm over here," he yelled back. "I've got the film."

Andy pushed the heavy shrubbery aside just as Nathan handed the canisters of film to Roger Dalton. She watched as Roger shook Nathan's hand, then stuck the film in an official looking pouch.

"What are you doing with that?" she asked indignantly. "That's my film!"

"I know that," Nathan said, confusion shadowing his face. "So what's the problem? It's evidence. Dalton needs to get it to Fish and Game."

It all came down to this, Andy realized. His decision, his choice, him. "I took those pictures, Nathan," she said, her voice shaking with barely controlled rage. "Don't you think it should be my call to turn them over to the authorities?"

"I don't get it." He shoved his tangled hair out of his eyes with a frustrated motion,

looked to Donna and Andrew as if asking for an explanation, then back at Andy.

"Do you want me to get it back from Roger, so you can hand it to him?" he asked in a condescending tone.

"No, dammit!" she shouted. "That's not the point." She looked around at the small crowd that was gathering, drawn by Andy's raised voice. "You really don't get it, do you?" she said, beaten by the exhaustion of the past few days, the pain of the past few minutes.

Straightening her spine, Andy looked directly at Nathan, regarding him silently for a long, contemplative moment. Then she turned her attention to the pilot. "Do you need me for anything else, Mr. Dalton?" she asked formally.

"Not right away, Ms. Petersen," he answered, glancing briefly at Nate, then back at Andy. "Make sure we have an address so the authorities can get hold of you for questioning. I think it's okay for you to leave."

He turned to Nate. "You can give us most of what we need to know for now, can't ya, Doc?"

"Yeah...yeah, I guess so," Nate answered softly. Andy refused to meet his eyes when he slowly added, "I guess Ms. Petersen can leave anytime she wants."

Chapter 11

ANDY WALKED stiffly across the meadow, flanked on either side by her father and her friend. Speechless, Nate could only stare. After what they'd shared...how could she walk away?

He wouldn't let her go. Desperate, he jogged after her. "Andy! Andy, wait." She paused, but didn't turn around. "Andy, what about your contract?" He grabbed her shoulder, instantly aware of the tension vibrating through her body.

"You have a six week contract," he repeated.

She turned on him, eyes blazing, her face a welter of conflicting emotions. "The contract was for a study of the peregrines' breeding this season," she said. "In light of what's happened, I imagine the study's been discontinued."

"What do you mean, 'in light of what's happened?'" Nate asked, incredulously. She couldn't back out now. He wouldn't let her! Suddenly he realized...she didn't know. "Andy, they recovered the eggs. They're okay. Fish and Game's going to hatch the chicks at the center, then we'll put 'em back in the nests in a few days. Climbers substituted imitation eggs in the nests so the parents'll accept their chicks when we make the switch. Don't you

want to be in on that?"

The shock on her face said it all—she didn't know they'd saved the eggs. Nate shook his head sadly, immediately regretting his autocratic method for getting her attention.

Andy's father and her friend stared suspiciously at him, hovering over Andy like a pair of mother hens. Nate held out his right hand to Andrew Petersen and waited a brief moment for the older man to grasp it.

"I'm Nathan Murdock, Mr. Petersen," he said, forcing Andy's father to make eye contact. It was disconcerting, Nate mused, to look into this man's face and see Andy's brilliant blue eyes assessing him.

"I'm sorry Andy got involved in this mess." His gaze settled a moment on Andy. "Your daughter is a very brave and resourceful woman."

"What happened?" Petersen asked. "We have no idea where you've been for the past four days."

"Four days!" Both Andy and Nate spoke at once. "I can't believe it's been four days!" Andy repeated. "No wonder I'm so hungry."

"It's what, Saturday?" Nate asked of no one in particular. When Andrew nodded, he turned to Andy. "Go home, or back to Weaverville, whatever. Get checked out at the

hospital, make sure none of those cuts and scratches got infected or anything. Get some food and some rest...I'll expect you back on site by Tuesday morning. Can you manage that?"

Andy nodded silently, a bemused expression on her face. Nate realized he was pushing her, but once they were working again, together, there'd be time to figure things out.

"You'll have to replace your equipment," he said. "Can you get what you need here? You'll be reimbursed for any expenses."

"I'll take care of that," her father interjected, speaking to Nathan but looking directly at his daughter. "I'll make sure Andrea is ready by Tuesday."

"C'mon, Andy." Donna grabbed her arm. "You need a good hot meal and a bath." She glanced at Andy's tangled hair and filthy clothes. "Boy, do you need a bath! Mr. Dalton, can you fly us back to Weaverville? We're staying there. Andy looks like she's ready to fold."

"No problem, ma'am." Roger turned to Nate. "You comin', Doc? They'll probably want you for a statement back at the office."

Nathan studied Andy's face a moment. She hadn't spoken at all in the past few minutes. In fact, she looked shell shocked. "No," he said to Roger. "I need to check on stuff here. I'll

make the next trip."

"Give me an hour." Roger tipped his hat in Nate's direction, then turned to help Andy board the big chopper. The rescue team and sheriff's deputies climbed in with them. Within minutes the craft was airborne, disappearing over the towering trees.

Nate watched them leave and wondered if he'd made a grave error letting Andy out of his sight. He loved her. He didn't doubt she loved him, but they were both tired, easily confused.

At least they'd saved the eggs. He was thankful for that good news. Now, how was he going to save his relationship with Andy?

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you spent four days wandering through a cave!" Donna's voice barely penetrated the haze of exhaustion that enveloped Andy. She'd felt disoriented from the moment she ran into the meadow and into her father's unexpected embrace.

"I've drawn a bath for you, Andrea." Her father's voice again. Why was he here? She set the half-eaten hamburger down, amazed food could taste like cardboard after so many days without a real meal.

Donna's room was actually a tiny cabin nestled beneath a towering stand of Douglas fir

and redwood trees. Andy's father had the adjoining cabin, but he'd remained with the two women while Andy briefly told them what had happened.

It was definitely the censored version, she thought, realizing she'd kept Nathan's role limited to that of employer. She couldn't think about him now, not when the mere thought of the man made her eyes sting and her heart pound faster.

"A bath sounds wonderful." She smiled gratefully at her father, unsure of him in this new role, but willing to play along. A long, hot bath would give her the opportunity to think about Andrew Petersen and Nathan, and the fact she was committed to spending at least five more weeks working with a man she loved, but wasn't sure she liked.

The tub was an old fashioned, claw-footed monstrosity, the porcelain chipped and scarred along the edges and the metal soap dish bent and discolored. But the water was hot and it covered Andy to her chin.

Until she climbed into the water, she'd been unaware of the vast number of cuts and scratches marring her skin, but the sting from the soap had an oddly soothing effect as it pin-pointed blisters and scrapes Andy hadn't noticed. Maybe the pain would take her mind off of Nate.

Except the myriad little wounds were an effective reminder of what had happened over

the past four days and every memory was filled with Nathan Murdock.

She held her hands up out of the steaming water. Blisters swelled out of old calluses and rope burns had torn the blisters. The newest injuries must have occurred in the final cavern, when Nate slipped and was trapped in the rising current.

She shuddered to think how close he had come to drowning, how hard she'd pulled on the rope looped over his shoulder. Her arms still ached from the exertion, but she had saved him. Even losing the flashlight hadn't mattered, as long as Nate was okay.

No matter what she thought of, Andy realized, her mind returned to Nathan. Thoughts of his hands on her breasts, his lips touching her intimately, bringing her to unimaginable heights of passion, soothing her fears in the dark cave.

The images were dreamlike when she tried to recall the little details of his touch, but the tranquilizing bath and her tired body worked against her. She was mad at Nathan, wasn't she? If she could only remember why. The details hovered at the edge of her memory, until a quiet tapping on the door brought her out of her reverie.

"Andy? Are you okay?" Donna stuck her head around the bathroom door. "You've been in here a long time."

"Yeah, I'm fine. C'mon in." Andy gestured toward the toilet. She chuckled as Donna

perched on the edge of the scarred wooden seat. "How long have we been having our conversations like this?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Ever since we quit taking our baths together, I guess," Donna replied, smiling. "I remember when you were about three you begged Mom to let you bathe alone. When she finally gave in, you insisted I stay in the room to keep you company."

"Yeah," Andy said. "But you always hogged the toys. At least when you were exiled to the pot, I got to play with everything."

"Do you remember taking control of the entire rubber ducky squadron?"

"You know me," Andy said quietly, "always in control."

"You've got that right." Donna smiled. She seemed oblivious to the emotional undercurrents behind Andy's comment. "Okay," she said in a conspiratorial tone of voice, "tell me about Professor Murdock. You don't spend four days in a cavern with a hunk like that and just walk away!" She glanced toward the half-open door. "It's all right. Your dad went to the airport to check on a flight back to Big Sur. He said he'd fly down to pick up extra camera equipment for you. We'll get the rest of the stuff you need up here."

"I don't get it, Donn. Why's Dad here?" Andy asked, effectively changing the subject. "He's actually acting like a father. In fact, he's acting like everything's fine between us, but

we've hardly spoken in years."

"I know. But when the sheriff's department notified me you were missing, I figured he should be told. When I called, he insisted on coming up with me. Go figure."

Andy slid under the water to rinse her hair, then stood up and grabbed the heavy towel Donna automatically handed to her. When she was dry, she slipped into a terry cloth bathrobe of Donna's. Suddenly she remembered—all her clothes had been destroyed.

"I don't have anything to put on!" She laughed, looking down at her long legs extending below the short hem of the faded green robe. "The poachers trashed my clothes and I refuse to put those stinky things I was wearing back on."

"I've got some running shorts and a tee top that should fit you," Donna said, "but you still haven't answered my question about you and the good professor. What gives?"

"I don't know, Donn," Andy replied wistfully. "I really don't." She stared thoughtfully at her reflection in the steamy mirror. "But it looks like I've got five more weeks to find out."

THE AFTERNOON was unusually warm. Donna was napping on one of the narrow beds in the cabin. Andy sat on the shaded deck, idly playing with the melting ice cubes in her glass of tea.

She had half expected Nathan to come by, at least to check on her. She knew he must be busy, and probably still angry, but she waited anyway, hoping to see him.

Her father was in his cabin, packing his bags for the flight to Big Sur. He'd chartered a private plane, but money had never been a problem for Andrew Petersen. Not for the man who'd won the Pulitzer Prize. Andy swallowed the bitterness the memory evoked. She would never forgive him.

He'd stolen more than pictures. He had stolen her trust, as well.

"Andrea?" He called to her from the open window at the front of his cabin. "I'll be leaving soon. Anything else you want me to bring back for you?"

"You've got the list," she answered, not really wanting to talk with him right now. "Just bring what you can. If you don't have all of it, I'll make do."

Andrew stepped quietly out to the shady deck, his leather carry-all hanging over his shoulder. Andy glanced up at him, impressed as usual with his striking appearance. Her father was taller than average, the blond hair of his youth now turned to an all-over silver. He was a handsome man, she thought, but he wore his intractability like a cloak of armor.

She had always thought of him as cold and unforgiving, but this morning's embrace had chipped away at that image. For some reason, she was uncomfortable thinking of him

kindly. She remembered telling Nathan she wanted her father to love her, but in all honesty, she wasn't certain she wanted that at all. This morning had confused her, had shaken the foundations of her own reality.

She'd felt him trembling, heard the roughness of his voice. Obviously, he was deeply affected by her disappearance, but his emotional reaction came as a complete surprise to Andy. He would always be a puzzle to her, she decided, but she didn't know if she really wanted to solve it. So much of her identity was tied up in her feelings toward him.

"I'm pleased you've decided to fulfill the terms of your contract," he said, looking away from Andy, staring in the direction of the rugged peaks of the Trinity Alps. "I would have been disappointed if you had pulled out of the job, even though I know the past few days have been difficult."

"I think difficult's an understatement, don't you, Dad," she answered dryly. "Shot at, threatened, then trapped in a cave for four days should probably warrant a little hazardous duty pay, don't you agree?" She watched him, waiting for his reaction.

"You signed a contract," he said, his eyes still on the distant peaks. She wondered what he really thought. "It's the honorable thing to do," he added, finally turning his brilliant blue eyes on Andy, eyes that had been his legacy to her.

"You're right Dad." Andy stood up and faced him. "And we all know just how honorable you are, don't we?"

She slipped quietly into the cabin, careful not to wake Donna, and closed the door behind her. Leaning weakly against the rough-hewn boards, Andy cried silent tears that continued to fall long after she heard her father leave.

NATHAN DRAGGED himself out of the shower only when he figured his legs wouldn't hold him upright any longer. He checked his reflection in the steamy mirror and decided the beard could stay another day. So what if it was getting gray? Who did he have to impress.

He checked his watch, a ten dollar special he'd picked up this afternoon at a local discount store. He'd never really worried about time all that much. There was always a clock somewhere on campus, but the lack of a timepiece while he and Andy were in the cave had been terribly disorienting.

It was almost nine o'clock. One helluva long day, between his statement for the sheriff's deputy and identifying the three poachers over at the jail.

God, he was tired. At least the doctor at the clinic had given him an almost clean bill of

health. Bruised ribs and a minor concussion might hurt like hell, but he was going to live.

Nate stretched out on top of the bedspread and sprawled diagonally across the queen sized mattress. He thought about Andy, about their argument this morning. It had taken him a while, but he'd finally figured out what upset her. He recalled her telling him about the time her father took credit for some of her photos, and ended up winning a Pulitzer with them. Nate guessed she had a good reason to be touchy about who handled her film. Still, it hurt deeply that she didn't trust him.

He'd thought about going by the cabin to check on her, but he didn't think he could handle her rejection. He wished she were here beside him, nestled against his chest. "We'll work it out," he sighed, feeling himself drift into sleep. He had the contract. Before the next five weeks ended, he'd have Andy as well.

ANDY WAVED good-bye to Donna with mixed emotions. She was sorry to see her friend go, but relieved at the same time. It had been a difficult three days, avoiding Donna's questions about Nate, but Andy couldn't talk about him yet. She wasn't certain herself how she felt.

The camera equipment arrived late Monday afternoon, shipped air express from her

father. She was almost sorry he had chosen that impersonal method of delivery, since she had practically convinced herself there was a chance for the two of them to work out their differences. But the heavily insured package, no note enclosed, reminded her that reconciliations were never easy and this particular one might never happen at all.

Nate called once, a very businesslike contact Monday evening, right after Donna left. He asked about her physical condition and confirmed her willingness to finish out her contract.

She wanted to respond that her physical condition was fine, that her period had started that morning and he was off the hook. But she felt so weepy when she heard his voice she cut the call short, filled the bathtub full of hot water and scented bath beads, and spent the rest of the evening soaking in the tub with a glass of wine, a sad romantic novel, and a box of tissues.

By the time Tuesday morning arrived, Andy wondered if she'd be able to drag herself out of bed, much less climb a cliff with a sack full of camera equipment. But she had her gear packed and neatly piled on the front porch when Roger Dalton stopped by to pick her up.

"Mornin' Roger," she said, flashing him a warm smile. "I expected Dr. Murdock. Is he already at the site?"

"He's hardly left it." Dalton grabbed her bags and loaded them into the back of his pick-up. "He spent Saturday in town getting his equipment together, making a statement down at the sheriff's office and checking out the eggs, then I flew him back in to set up a new camp early Sunday morning."

He helped Andy into the truck, then climbed in and headed slowly toward the airport. "Doc came back in for a couple of hours on Monday then went right back out again." Dalton turned to look at Andy, and she noticed a definite twinkle in his eyes. "Hell, I've flown back and forth so many times, I feel like a gosh darned boomerang!" He laughed at his own joke, then turned his attention back to the road.

"He'll be real glad to see you, you can bet on that," Dalton added, still chuckling. "He's been trying to do his own photos while you've been gone, and photography's not one of Doc's natural talents."

"I'm anxious to get back to work," Andy said, her mind drifting ahead to the job, and to Nathan. But when her thoughts wanted to settle on what she knew to be Nathan's natural talents, she forced herself to concentrate on the ride instead.

They reached the airport and Andy helped Roger load her equipment into the small helicopter. The larger chopper they'd flown in on Saturday was parked near the hanger.

Beyond it, past the main runway, she saw a crumpled pile of machinery lying in the field

Roger pointed the wreck out to her as they flew over. "Doc told me that's your doin'." He shouted over the roar of the engine. "Remind me not to have you do any repairs for me!"

"That's the poachers' helicopter?" she called back, amazed anyone could have survived in that twisted heap of metal. A large black scar ran up the hill on one side where a grass fire from the crash had started, but the helicopter itself had not burned.

Andy was relieved to see that. She'd never really considered the implications of her vandalism when she pulled the cables loose. What if she had actually been responsible for their deaths? She shuddered, imagining what might have happened.

The flight seemed shorter this time but Andy still experienced a strange sense of déjà vu when Roger carefully landed the helicopter in the meadow down the hill from the campsite and helped her carry her bags along the trail.

Two new tents were set up, side by side near the carefully reconstructed firepit. Nathan had said he'd take care of everything. Obviously, he'd followed through.

Roger helped Andy store her things in her tent, then sauntered down the trail with a jaunty wave and a tip of his hat.

She organized her camera equipment, choosing the lenses she thought she might need,

then sat on the scarred log by the firepit to wait for Nathan.

He had told her to be here early Tuesday morning. By the hands on her brand new ten dollar watch she knew it was just a little past eight o'clock. Andy still couldn't believe Donna had bought her this dumb watch. Would the time have passed differently if she and Nate had been aware of the exact minutes and hours? She doubted it.

The morning was still cool. Andy shivered slightly in the light nylon jacket she wore. She missed her comfortable old sweatshirt—all her new clothes felt stiff and unfamiliar.

It had been a unique experience to hit the stores on an expense account, but Andy had kept her purchases practical and to a minimum. She had to think about Nathan as her employer, not her lover, if she was ever going to get through the next five weeks. Dressing to provoke Nathan's interest certainly wasn't going to keep things platonic.

She wasn't certain when she'd actually made the decision to try and ignore what had happened between them, but it was a decision she firmly believed would have to be followed.

She'd had all weekend to think about it. Their entire relationship had happened by accident. She knew danger could be a powerful aphrodisiac. Neither she nor Nathan had been immune.

Even now, knowing what Nathan was really like, how autocratic he could be, she couldn't help but think of that other side of him as well. The gentle, tender, loving side that made her heart race and her body come to life.

But Andy had seen the real Nathan Murdock after they left the cave and he wasn't a man she liked very much. Her eyes burned with the sting of unshed tears. What a disappointment! In the caverns he'd been the perfect lover, the ideal companion, her partner in every way.

They had shared something very special in the darkness. Andy would never forget the way he had made her feel. Once they got out, though, it was a different matter altogether. She should have expected it. That's when the typical, testosterone-ridden male had taken over. She thought about their headlong rush back to camp, the anger radiating from Nate and the uncontrollable need for action that had turned him into a stranger.

And then, when he decided to turn her film over to the authorities without any discussion at all, he had gone too far.

She'd been willing to forgive his anger, had even accepted his leadership when she didn't always agree with him. But no man, not even Nathan, took her film without her permission. He had no right to make that judgment without talking it over.

No one made her decisions for her. That was one lesson it had taken Andy a long time to learn. Her father was a great teacher, she decided, but Jake got his share of the credit as well. What one taught, the other reinforced. Let a man take control, and your independence was gone—*kaput*.

Andy took a deep, calming breath. She couldn't dwell on this if she was going to make it through the next five weeks.

And she would make it, Andy decided. She'd show Nathan Murdock a thing or two. He was one chauvinist who definitely had a lesson to learn.

Chapter 12

NATHAN PAUSED in the midst of a downward stroke with his razor and stared at his trembling hand. He was lucky the small nick on his chin was his only injury.

He'd been fine until he heard the helicopter fly over the ridge half an hour earlier. Now he heard the familiar throbbing beat again as the craft hovered above the meadow then disappeared over the ridge south of camp. The sound of Dalton heading back to the airport.

Which meant Andy was waiting for him, probably sitting on the big log by the fire, her long hair tied back in a dark braid.

He took a deep breath, then applied the razor to his chin one more time. His hands were steady now. Andy was back.

ANDY CHECKED her watch, then stared at the trail that led to the stream. It was early. Nathan was probably bathing. She flushed, thinking of their first meeting by the creek.

She wished she could just sort of wander on down and offer him a cup of coffee, but that could lead to all sorts of complications. Complications she couldn't possibly deal with.

How was she going to spend the next five weeks working with the man without cracking up? *Just do it, get the job done, and go home.* That was the only way she'd survive.

She heard him coming up the trail and took a deep breath to compose herself. But the minute he stepped out of the woods and into the clearing, she knew her mental preparation was wasted.

Sunlight gilded his auburn hair and burnished the strands to a deep copper. His face was tan, the bruises faded around his jaw and eye to a sickly yellow. Andy didn't think they detracted at all from his rugged good looks. He waved, but she noticed, with a sinking heart, he didn't smile.

"Mornin' Andy," he said, his expression unreadable. "Got your gear ready? How're you feeling?"

"Fine...yeah, everything's ready." She could do this, she thought. It wouldn't be easy, but she could handle it. "Are we climbing this morning?"

"No, I don't think so. The birds have been disturbed so much lately...they need to settle down. The artificial eggs are all in place...everyone's back where they should be. The mamas are setting and the papas are flying around acting important."

"Typical," Andy replied dryly, unaccountably relieved when Nate flashed her a quick

grin.

"Did you have to give a statement?" he asked. He stopped by his tent and draped his damp towel over the top.

"Not yet," she answered. "The sheriff's department contacted me and said as long as they could find me, your statement would suffice for now. What did you have to do when you went down?"

"I identified the three of them and told the investigator exactly what happened."

Right, Andy thought, wondering how much detail had been left out of his statement. She hoped he hadn't mentioned the magic they'd found between them...a magic she couldn't allow herself to recall. Not if she planned to walk away with her soul intact.

It was too late for her heart.

"He said there's a good case against them," Nate continued. "Air tight, in fact, with the shots you took. By the way," he added, almost as an afterthought, "I've got your film. The department made prints and gave the negatives back to me."

The film, she thought angrily, ignoring the little voice in the back of her mind that reminded her how much easier it was to walk away angry, than to walk away heartsick. "How come they didn't turn them over to me?" she asked, feeling the slow anger again.

"They're my pictures, aren't they?"

Nate walked around beside her, hesitated, then moved across the area to sit on the log facing her instead. He sighed deeply and she wondered if he was mad at her for reopening the issue.

"Actually, Andy, it's my film, or IFF's if you want to get technical. According to your contract, all photos you take on this project belong to the International Falcondai Foundation. They bought the film. We hired your talent and your equipment."

She hadn't thought of that! He had every right to dispose of the film in any way he wanted. She'd been wrong, not Nathan. "I, I'm sorry." *Such a fool!* she berated herself, unable to face him. "I guess I didn't think ..." It was hard to apologize, even more difficult to raise her eyes to his, expecting his gloating smile.

His solemn expression confused her.

"Andy, I don't know what happened Saturday, but whatever it was, it doesn't alter the way I feel about you. I told you in the cavern I loved you, and I do. That's not going to change, but something about you is sure different." He propped his elbows on his knees, rested his chin in the palms of his hands, and waited.

"I haven't changed a bit," she said defiantly. "You changed, not me. From the minute we

climbed out of that cavern, you were a different person. You went from being the nicest, most decent man I've ever met, to an autocratic tyrant. I don't think I should have to take that from anybody."

"I don't get it," he answered, a confused frown marring his brow. "All I did was head for camp to get the film. What's so tyrannical about that?"

"You just took over." She bit her lips. "You assumed that whatever you did, whatever action you took, I would blindly follow, waiting for your command. Well, Nathan," she stood up. "I dislike being bossed around like I haven't got a brain or a will of my own. And if I'm going to stay and work, I think we need to set some rules so we can get along, okay?"

"Fine." He jumped to his feet and started pacing around the small campsite. "I'll give you some rules. You can start by remembering who's in charge here. This is my project, Ms. Petersen. You work for me. You agreed to finish out the five weeks of your contract and I'm going to hold you to every last minute of it. And if you don't like that," he continued, his face livid with rage, "then that's too bad."

"Then maybe we ought to call the whole thing off," she sputtered, turning to face him as he stalked past the campfire.

"Okay. Fine. Quit. It's your call. But remember this ..." He stopped directly in front of

her, dark eyes flashing, "you'll be walking off a job you contracted to do. If you leave, I'll make certain your reputation with the university and every research group I've ever worked with is shot. Do you understand the ramifications of that, Ms. Petersen? You will be taking pictures of babies and weddings 'till the cows come home, because no one else will hire you. Think about that before you quit."

Trembling with rage, Andy knew defeat. Tears of anger welled up in her eyes. She dashed them away with an irritated swipe of her hand. He could ruin her. What he promised didn't sound like an idle threat. She couldn't risk the damage to her reputation. Especially now, when she was just getting started.

She'd had a taste of wildlife photography again and she knew this was all that would ever satisfy her. This work and Nathan, she realized, drawing a ragged breath. How could she hate a man and love him at the same time?

"All right, Dr. Murdock," she answered, emphasizing his title. "You do your job and I'll do mine. When my contract's up, I'm outta here." Deliberately she turned her back on him and began to gather her equipment. "Now, if you'll please let me know where I'll be working, I'll get my things ready."

"You'll need your telephoto lens," he said flatly, the anger gone from his voice. "You'll

be shooting from a rise directly across from the eyrie. I think you can get some good shots of the falcons on their nests from that angle." He glanced at his watch, then back at Andy. "I'd like to leave in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be ready," she said, feeling as if her heart would break. She'd been right. That terrific man in the cavern had merely been an illusion.

HE'D BLOWN it big this time, Nathan thought as he led the way up the narrow trail. He felt her walking behind him, so aware of her he could accurately describe her movements without ever turning to look.

He'd planned on apologizing and returning her film. Instead he'd ended up yelling like the autocrat she accused him of being. What was it about this woman that turned him into such a jerk?

The anger radiating from her could scorch leaves. She stomped along behind him, her shoulders bowed with the weight of her equipment. He felt like a damned fool, strolling along with just his canteen and fanny pack while she labored under at least forty pounds of gear. He shook his head, wondering how to straighten out the mess he kept making worse.

"How much farther?" she gasped, obviously struggling.

"Maybe a quarter of a mile." He halted for a moment to give her a breather. "Do you want me to carry anything for you? The trail gets pretty steep from here."

"No. I'm fine. Thank you."

Her polite answer startled him. He'd expected something sarcastic, at the very least. Would he ever figure her out?

SHE DEFINITELY knew her work. Nate watched Andy set up her tripod and attach a huge telephoto lens to her camera. Her slender hands were strong and quick. His memories of those hands touching him brought a flush to his face, a familiar ache to his loins.

He missed her touch almost as much as he missed her companionship. She was so distant and professional now, following his orders without comment or spirit. He wanted her back but he didn't have the slightest idea how to accomplish such a thing.

He found a comfortable spot where he could observe the falcons and Andy at the same time. He could watch her forever, the way she moved, the serious approach she took to her work.

Once the camera was in her hands all the anger disappeared. She focused entirely on her work while Nate focused on her.

How, he wondered, would he ever convince her they belonged together?

ANDY HAD to force her hands not to tremble. Working with Nate on the face of the cliff had been a piece of cake compared to the strain of working on this shady hilltop, under his constant observation.

As far as she could tell, he hadn't looked at the birds at all, and they were putting on a marvelous show. The males, or tiercels, were diving and soaring across the face of the cliff, almost as if they wanted to entertain their mates sitting dutifully on the eggs.

Typical males, Andy decided, watching the aerial display. All fluff and no substance. She set up her camera, and aimed it carefully at a ledge where she knew one of the pairs nested.

She watched a moment, trying to figure out what the tiercel was doing. He hovered only a few yards out from the nest. Suddenly, he dropped out of the range of her lens, and Andy grabbed her binoculars to follow his dizzying swoop to earth.

The dive took only a few brief seconds, then the tiercel was rising, a struggling songbird trapped in its razor-sharp talons. With a victorious scream, the peregrine carried his prey high into the air, then circled once, passing in front of its mate where she waited patiently

on the nest.

Andy grabbed her camera. She focused on the nesting female as she stretched her graceful neck out to the tiercel, then snapped the photo as the male, still airborne, transferred his tattered prize to his hungry mate.

It wasn't *fluff*, Andy realized, stunned by the aerial display she had recorded. The male was hunting to feed his family, bringing food so the female could incubate the eggs.

Andy took more photos. One of the female eating and others as she carefully turned the eggs in their rocky nest. While Andy watched, another tiercel delivered a torn and bedraggled meal to his mate. Andy realized the beautifully synchronized flight she and Nathan witnessed was a fierce battle of life and death.

Many would die so that others would live. The aerial acrobatics she filmed were an intricate dance that insured the birds' survival.

Things were not always as they seemed.

She wondered how often she had misinterpreted actions.

"Pretty impressive, hmm?" Nathan's low voice jarred her out of her thoughts. "I never tire of watching them. Look," he pointed at one tiercel, flying straight up over the top of the tallest pinnacle. "I think he's doing a victory dance!"

Andy followed the soaring peregrine with her camera as he caught a thermal current and lifted higher and higher into the pale blue sky. Finally, when he was no more than a speck against the heavens he rolled over and fell like a thunderbolt. Wings half closed, he sped, faster and faster, heading to earth. Suddenly, directly across the canyon from Andy and Nathan, the peregrine tilted his sleek body and swept over their heads, his wings tearing the air with the sound of ripping fabric.

His powerful wings beat, lifting him back into the sky in a heart stopping vertical loop. Once, twice, then three times he repeated the marvelous display, his shrill screams sounding like laughter as he soared over the heads of the earthbound.

As quickly as the display had begun, it ended. The tiercel flew off in search of more game. Andy looked at her hands, still clutching her camera. She'd run out of film long ago.

She turned to Nathan, surprised to see tears shining damp and silvery across his cheeks. He grinned at her, the familiar lop-sided smile that warmed her heart, then brushed the moisture away with his sleeve.

"They really get to me," he said, sheepishly. He sniffed out loud then he laughed. "They're just so damned beautiful." He set his notebook down, stood up, then walked across the short space between them. Andy froze as Nate reached out and gently grabbed

her chin, turning her face to his. "They're beautiful," he repeated. "Just like you Andy. Beautiful and free spirited."

"Nathan, please ..." she begged, unable to look away.

"I love you, Andy," he whispered, his lips a feather touch against her mouth. "I want you so badly I ache."

She was drowning in his words. She clenched her camera tightly, forcing her fingers against the solid metal and glass to keep them from twining themselves in his hair. His words caressed her, his clean male scent enveloped her and she fought to control her body's traitorous reaction to his touch.

A peregrine screamed, a harsh cry scant yards away, and Andy suddenly returned to her senses. "No," she rasped, her throat dry, "no, Nathan. We can't, we ..."

"Why not? Andy, for God's sake, I love you. I thought you loved me. What's wrong?" He grabbed her shoulders. Her muscles tensed. *Control*. He always had to control her, with his words, his lips, his hands.

Whenever he touched her, she responded, whatever he wanted, she gave. She couldn't let this happen, she wouldn't! "I'm going back to camp," she said tightly. She pulled out of Nathan's grasp and grabbed her tripod. Her hands shook as she carelessly threw her

cameras and lenses into the heavy nylon pack. She felt Nathan watching, standing silently beside her.

"I still have work to do," he said.

Relieved to make the trip alone, Andy threw the bulky pack over her shoulder and practically ran down the mountain.

HE HADN'T planned to stay so long on the hilltop, but Nathan figured the more time he gave Andy to cool down, the better his chances of finding out exactly what her problem was.

The peregrines continued their aerial displays. Watching them took Nate's mind off his troubles. Maybe five weeks would be enough time to figure her out. She was one confusing woman.

The sound of a helicopter grew steadily louder but Nate didn't pay it any attention until he realized the craft was hovering over the landing area below their camp. He grabbed his canteen and fanny pack and trotted down the hill to see what Roger wanted. He hoped there wasn't a problem with the smugglers.

He was still about a quarter mile from camp when he heard the chopper's engines

revving up again. Suddenly the significance of its arrival made sense. Andy was leaving!

He hadn't even considered that. Breaking from a jog into a hard run, Nate rounded the trail and burst into the small campsite. The tent he had brought for Andy was still in place, but all her personal gear was gone.

Frantic, Nate ran into his tent and grabbed the radio. It took him just a few seconds to raise Dalton.

"Roger, where are you taking Andy?" he asked as soon as his friend picked up the radio.

"Ms. Petersen radioed in and said she had an emergency, Doc. I'm flying her to the airport. Over."

"Well, you can fly her back here, Dalton," Nate roared. "Ms. Petersen has a job to finish. Over."

"No can do, Doc," Dalton said. Nate was certain he heard censure in the other man's words. "Lady wants to leave, the lady leaves. Sorry. Dalton out."

"Out." Nathan responded automatically, stunned. She was gone. No reason, no explanation. Just gone. He wanted to go after her but he had a job to finish.

In fact, the next few weeks might even convince him he didn't want to bring her back at all.

Loving Andy had brought him nothing but grief. Along with something else so special and unique he couldn't describe it.

Wearily he sat down on the log by the firepit and put in a call to Forest Service headquarters. Maybe they had a photographer who could fill in for the next five weeks.

"ANDY, WHAT are you doing here?" Donna looked up from her painting in surprise. "You aren't due home until next month!"

"It's a long story, Donn." Andy cautiously evaded the penetrating look in Donna's brown eyes. "I couldn't stay."

"It's Dr. Murdock, isn't it?" Donna stuck her paint brush in the can and stood up, wiping her hands on a soiled rag. "What happened?"

"I blew it, Donn," Andy admitted, her eyes filling with tears. "I love him. I love him a lot, but since we got out of the cavern, every time he tries to hold me, I freak out." She leaned against the counter, fighting tears that threatened to spill.

"Andy, I know Jake hurt you, but you can't let him ruin every other relationship." Donna looped an arm over Andy's shoulder. "Ya know, between your father and your ex-lover, you sure managed to let two men screw up your life."

"That's the problem, Donn. They didn't just do it to me, I let them. I practically invited them to make my life miserable." Andy pushed away from the counter and stared blindly out the front window. "Why can't a man love a woman without taking control of her life?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

"Andy, loving someone doesn't mean giving up control of anything. Real love means having the freedom to make your own decisions. If you love someone, you make those decisions with them in mind. It works both ways." Donna walked over to the window and stood next to Andy. "Maybe what you see as a power play is just someone else showing you how much they care."

"Yeah, like my father showed my mother," Andy responded bitterly.

"Yeah Andy. Just like that." Donna grabbed Andy's shoulder and spun her gently around. "Look at me, kiddo. I did some heavy talking with your father when you were missing. I think we've misjudged him in a big way over the years. Why don't you take a few days off, head down to Big Sur and spend some time with him?"

"I don't care if I never see him ..."

"Don't say that Andy, 'cus you don't really mean it," Donna admonished her. "Please. Go talk to your dad. Give him a chance to tell you what really happened when you were

born. He's not perfect, but he's not the ogre we've made him out to be over the years, either. Please," she repeated, her brown eyes pleading.

"I never could win with you!" Andy said after a brief hesitation. She punched Donna lightly on the shoulder.

"Big sisters always win arguments," Donna laughed. "It's in the contract."

ANDY PARKED her car in the small level spot just below her father's beach house. Gulls wheeled and spun in the evening sky and she thought of the peregrines, soaring and plunging over the granite cliffs. The air here was fresh with the salt tang and drying kelp smells of the Pacific Ocean. Andy felt a moment's trepidation at having come here unannounced.

The tiny home, not much more than a cabin, sat on a lonely promontory high above the waves. Her father had moved here permanently when he retired six years earlier, but he had owned the house for as long as Andy could remember.

She wondered how he was going to react when she knocked on the door. She hadn't been here in ten years, not since he'd won his Pulitzer Prize on the strength of her photographs.

She fought a strong compulsion to climb back in her little car and head north, back to

Oakland and Donna and the safety of her studio, but suddenly the door on the back of the house swung open and her father was beckoning her inside.

"Donna called," he said without preamble. "She wanted me to know you were coming, so I would be sure and be home. C'mon in."

"I'm surprised you didn't leave anyway," Andy muttered under her breath, wondering for the hundredth time why she was here.

"I'm sorry you left the project," Andrew said as he grabbed her one bag of luggage and guided her through the door. "But Donna said you were having problems with your employer."

"Leave it to Donna to sum it up in a nutshell," Andy commented, walking into the great room. She had always loved this room, paneled in whitewashed pine on two walls but framed in floor to ceiling glass on the two walls facing the ocean.

Generally, her gaze was drawn to the massive waves crashing on the rugged coastline below, but as she entered the room this time, she looked at the pine walls and stopped. The last time she had been here, her father's photographs and a few of his paintings had been spaced across the expansive wall. It was different now. Andy stepped closer, realizing immediately that every photograph on the entire expanse was one of hers.

All of them were framed and professionally mounted, in order by date and place. Photos she had taken as a young girl on one end, photos she had done within the past few months at the other. She turned to face Andrew and caught a look of immense pride and love on his face before he quickly shuttered his expression.

"I don't understand," was all she could think to say. "How did you get these?" she asked, pointing to her recent photos.

"Donna sent me copies of your work," he answered, walking across the room to a small wet bar. "Would you like a drink?" he asked, pouring himself a brandy.

"Yes, please," she answered, not really caring what he gave her. When he handed her a glass of her favorite wine she was surprised he knew what she preferred.

"Thank you." She took a sip. "How did you know?" She held up her glass.

"I know more about you than you realize, Andrea." He sighed. "We haven't talked in a long time. I'm glad you've come."

"I wouldn't have," she admitted honestly, "but Donna asked me to. She said I've misjudged you. If I have, I'm sorry, but you haven't given me much to go on."

"No, I haven't," he said, his voice practically a whisper. "I guess it's time we talk." He guided Andy to a simple but elegant white leather sofa.

He sat across from her, his long legs crossed at the ankle, the brandy snifter balanced at the tips of his fingers. "I can be extremely obtuse," he said after a moment's hesitation. "At least that's what Donna told me. You're very lucky to have someone as loyal as she is, you know. At least when I found a family for you, I found you a good one." He smiled, but his eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

"You're very like your mother, you know. She was headstrong and beautiful, the original untamed spirit. Except for your blue eyes and your height, you look very much like her."

"I wouldn't know," Andy said bitterly, taking a swallow of her wine. "You've never let me see a picture of her."

"I destroyed them all when she died. I hated her for dying. I guess, in some ways, I hated you for living," he said, without apology.

"Tell me about her," Andy begged, hoping to finally learn about the woman who had given her life almost thirty years ago.

"I met Pilar on a job in the Yucatan Peninsula," he said after a long silence, a faraway expression on his face. "I was down there to photograph some newly discovered Mayan ruins near Chichen Itza. The village where I stayed was very remote.

"She was barely sixteen. She came to my hut every day to prepare meals and do

laundry. She had no family. I think she had a lot of Mayan blood in her, she was of mixed heritage. Her face fascinated me. I wanted to photograph her and I finally convinced her to model for me. She was lovely." He sighed, then took a long swallow of his brandy.

"But then, the unspeakable happened. We fell in love." His eyes, when he looked at Andy, were filled with anguish, his voice trembled. "I was thirty years old, almost twice her age, but I wanted to marry her. She refused me because there was no priest in the village to perform the ceremony. When she told me she was pregnant, I was ecstatic. When her time came, I wanted to take her to Merida where there was a doctor. She refused to go. Maybe the shame that we weren't married? I'll never know.

"It didn't matter what I wanted, anyway, because Pilar always got her way. She was very stubborn, your mother," he said, smiling gently at Andy. "She couldn't distinguish between people who acted out of love for her and those who tried to run her life." He looked pointedly at Andy. She lowered her eyes.

"You have to believe me when I say how much we wanted you. Pilar's labor was fairly easy, you were a beautiful baby. She was so proud! I remember when she held you. Your eyes were already as blue as the sea." His voice cracked, harsh with emotion.

"She died two days later. There was no doctor. I never knew what killed her. Pilar

nursed you, the midwife wrapped you in blankets and put you in bed with your mother. She fell asleep with her arms wrapped around you, but she never woke up." He gazed out the expanse of glass, toward the deep blue Pacific. Andy wondered what memories played through his mind as she waited for him to continue.

Finally, he turned back to Andy, but his thoughts seemed to be miles away and years past when he spoke. "She was just a child, Andrea. Only seventeen. I loved her more than life itself. I think I went a little crazy when she died. The village was very poor. There wasn't anyone there to take care of you. We were never married, so there was no way to prove you were my daughter. I smuggled you across the border. The birth certificate I eventually obtained for you is merely an excellent forgery.

"Ben and Patricia were my closest friends, the only friends I stayed in touch with through all my years of travel, and Donna was their only child. Patricia couldn't have any more children. When they offered to take you, well ..." he paused, and Andy could tell his memories were painful. "You have to realize, I had never held a baby, much less cared for one. I'm surprised you even survived the first few weeks of your life.

"It took me many, many years to get over the guilt I felt for Pilar's death. Ben finally made me realize she made her own choices. If she had let me take her to a doctor when her

time came, she probably would have survived, but she always had to be in control of every situation. It was her choice to stay, no matter how I argued...and loving her as I did, I gave in.

"I have never been a good father, Andrea. I didn't want to interfere with your relationship with Ben and Patricia, but I used that as an excuse, too. After your mother died, I didn't care about anyone or anything. I took you with me on some of my trips because Ben insisted I should know my daughter, but it was always painful to look at you and see Pilar.

"The only thing that mattered was my work, but as the years went by, I let bitterness rule my life. I could never look at all the good I had without seeing everything I had lost. That bitterness cost me you, as well. Instead of taking pride in your wonderful, creative spirit, I was jealous of your talent. Your work is so fresh, Andrea! You capture life with your photographs, the way I did so many years ago. And I stole that from you."

He rose stiffly from the chair, like an old man. Andy was struck suddenly with a sense of time passing, of time wasted.

He walked heavily across the room, to a large oak desk, and took an envelope out of one of the compartments. "The low point in my life was the day I was awarded the Pulitzer for your photos. I will never forgive myself for my duplicity." He held the envelope in both

hands.

"This letter is addressed to the journalism advisory board at Columbia University. It is a notarized admission of my fraudulent award and contains a check in the full amount of the prize I received.

"I am sorry for so many things, Andrea, and I make no excuses. I have always loved you, but I've failed you in every possible way. I didn't realize, until Donna called and told me you were missing, how very much you mean to me and how much I could have lost. I hope that, some day, you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

He handed the envelope to Andy and slowly left the room. Watching him walk away, his shoulders slumped in defeat, Andy wondered how she could have possibly been so wrong about so much.

Chapter 13

THE SUN HAD set over an hour ago. The sea churned with a natural phosphorescence that reminded Andy of the grotto.

The night sounds at the beach were all rush and thunder, none of the restful silence of the forest after dark. Andy leaned back in her deck chair and let her father's words fill her mind.

The unopened envelope dangled between her fingers.

When she thought of all he had told her, she finally understood this was the least important of all. His apology was sincere. Andy realized that was all she had really wanted.

"You didn't have to do this Dad, but thanks," she whispered. Then she carefully tore the letter into dozens of tiny pieces. Walking to the edge of the deck she leaned out over the railing and tossed the scraps into the air, then watched them flutter on the sea breeze until they disappeared into the darkness.

She leaned her elbows on the wind-scarred railing, breathing deeply of the tangy air. She missed the mountain smells, the clean earthy scents of the damp woods.

Most of all, she missed Nathan.

She wondered if her father realized how much he had told her today, especially his description of her mother as hard-headed and stubborn. At least she came by it honestly!

But her mother's stubbornness ultimately had killed her. Stubborn pride destroyed, and the shattered relationship Andy had with Nathan was proof. Her chance of happiness was lost and she had no one to blame but herself.

When she accused him of being autocratic and chauvinistic, she was wrong, but she hadn't wanted to admit it. He had only been worried and every bit as frightened as she was.

Andy tried to put herself in Nathan's place as lover and employer, with the added ingredient of a lifetime of male conditioning that made him feel responsible for her safety. It wasn't control at all that made him act the way he did. It was love. She'd just been too damned stupid and bull-headed to realize it.

Donna was right—she was a control freak, but the only one she had truly lost control of was herself. What a fool she'd been, to walk away from a man like Nate Murdock!

Donna was right again when she said control worked both ways if you loved someone. When it came right down to it, Andy admitted she was guiltier than Nathan of being autocratic and just plain bossy.

A quiet step on the wooden deck startled her.

"Andrea, it's getting cold out. Why don't you come in and have a bite to eat."

"I'm not really hungry, Dad, but thanks." She turned around to thank him and realized his step was lighter, his shoulders more erect than when he'd left the room earlier in the day.

"I didn't see the letter on my desk, Andrea. I want to get it in tomorrow's mail. Do you still have it?"

"It's gone, Dad. I tore it up."

"But why? You deserved that award, not me. Andrea, I've carried that load of guilt all these years. It's time I quit living a lie." He stepped across the short distance and leaned against the railing next to Andy. "I don't blame you for hating me," he sighed. "I am so sorry for all the pain I've caused."

She turned to look at him, astonished by his words. "I don't hate you! Please, don't think that. The award meant nothing compared to what I didn't know about my mother. You wouldn't talk about her. I think if I had known how you felt, what happened, things between us could have been so much better." Her throat tightened. She felt the hot sting of tears. So much time wasted.

She grabbed his hands, felt the bumpy joints and calluses. "Dad, I've never hated you. I

love you. I wasn't sure how you felt about me. I understand now. I only wish I'd known earlier."

He let go of her hands to envelop her in a hard embrace. When he released her, his eyes sparkling in the pale light filtering across the deck from the house, his smile was bittersweet. "I've got something to show you, Andrea. Come with me, please?"

THE FAMILIAR scents and shapes in the darkroom reminded Andy of her childhood. Andrew flipped on the light and Andy saw a row of damp prints hanging to dry. The photos were black and white, the subject was a beautiful young woman. Her hair was long and dark, her cheekbones, like Andy's, wide and pronounced.

Andy walked across the small space and lifted the corner of one photo then turned to look at her father. The tears that glistened in his eyes must mirror her own, she thought, as she gazed at her mother's face for the first time.

"I thought you destroyed them," she said, accusing and thanking him at the same time. "How?"

"I saved the negatives. I could never destroy them, but I couldn't bring myself to print them, either. She was beautiful, wasn't she?" He took a photo of Pilar off the line that

showed the young woman in native dress, a basket artfully balanced on one shoulder.

"She was pregnant when I took this, but she hadn't told me yet. Andrea," he looked directly at her, his eyes piercing in their intensity, "I lost your mother because we were both too damned hard-headed to really listen to each other. Don't make the same mistakes we did. If you love Nathan, give the man a chance."

Surprised, she raised her eyes and stared at her father. How did he guess what this was all about? "It might be too late, Dad," she finally said, her voice breaking. "I left him when he needed me."

"If he loves you, it's not too late. Get a good night's sleep then go to him. C'mon," he said, putting an arm around her. "Let's have some dinner. You can leave in the morning."

"I don't know, Dad." She felt as if her heart would break. "I think I really blew it."

NATHAN PACKED the rest of his climbing gear and brushed the sand off his faded jeans. He was hot and tired and sweaty, but he felt great. It looked like all the falcons would accept their chicks. He only wished Andy had been here to see.

He wondered how she was. She'd been gone for three days but it felt like three years.

The roar of the helicopter climbing over the ridge brought him to attention. He silently

cursed Roger Dalton for the disruptive noise even though he knew that wasn't the real problem. He hadn't forgiven his friend for taking Andy away.

By the time Dalton sauntered into camp, Nate was bathed and shaved and dressed in clean clothes. He offered the pilot a cup of coffee, and realized he'd never been able to stay mad at the big guy. Besides, the camp seemed terribly lonely without Andy. It was nice to have some company.

"So how's it goin'?" Dalton asked. He took the coffee and sat on the log opposite Nate.

"Okay, I guess." He wondered why Roger was here.

"I'm sorry I cut you off the other day," Dalton finally said, taking a sip of coffee and looking toward the cliffs.

"That's okay. I deserved it. I was pretty rough on her."

"I thought something had happened." Dalton looked embarrassed, as if he wasn't sure what to say. "She cried all the way back to the airport. She never said what happened but she was really upset."

"Basically, she'd just told me to take a flying leap, and at that point, I probably deserved it," Nate answered, remembering the tactics he'd used to get Andy to fulfill her final five weeks of the contract. He would never forgive himself for pulling rank on her like that. The

worst part of it was, he didn't think she'd forgive him either.

"I've got a meeting down near Carmel," Dalton said as he refilled his cup. "I thought you might like to come along for the ride."

"Why would I want to go there?" Nate asked, perplexed. He was still on the project and he had a lot more on his mind than a weekend at Carmel.

"Just a suggestion. By the way," Dalton added, grinning, "Donna Burrows called. She said Andy had gone over to Big Sur to spend a day or two with her father. It's only a few minutes flying time from where I'll be. In case you're interested," he said, laughing.

Nate paused briefly, then set his coffee mug on the log next to him. "Tell me something, Dalton," he asked, trying not to grin and failing miserably. "Would you go after a woman who equates love with a power play?"

"I would if it was Andy Petersen," he answered, slapping his knee and laughing. "That woman could boss me around anytime."

"THANKS, DAD." Andy closed the suitcase and set the bag on the floor. Her father handed her a heavy manila folder, the photo prints of Pilar Corzo Petersen. Andy felt tears well in her eyes when she grasped the folder in her hand. There were no words for this gift,

she realized, throwing her arms around her father.

"I just ask that you do what's right for you, Andrea," he said roughly, his voice cracking with emotion. "And I hope that includes inviting me to the wedding," he added, holding Andy away from him with an encouraging smile.

"I think it's too late for that, Dad." She walked out of the room and left her suitcase by the front door. "But if Nathan hasn't decided to terminate the contract, I'll fulfill my obligation. If I'm lucky, we'll at least be able to part friends."

She turned to give her father one last hug, enjoying the unique sense of family he had given her. A loud knock startled both of them. Andy pulled away so Andrew could open the door.

"Nathan!" Andy stepped back, shocked by his subtly altered appearance, the windblown hair, the tired and defeated look on his rugged face.

"Running away again, Andy?" he asked softly as he glanced at the suitcase by the door. His dark eyes were a commanding force holding her in place, compelling her to answer, loving her.

"Running to," she answered breathlessly, feeling the love for him sweep over her, a wave of need and desire that took her breath away. "I'm so sorry, Nathan." She took a step

toward him.

"No," he said, stepping closer to Andy, "don't apologize. I was wrong. I never should have pushed you like I did. I shouldn't have tried to make your decisions for you, I ..."

Andy closed the last few inches, and then she was in his arms, holding him, feeling the need pulsing through his body in the strength of his arms, the warmth of his embrace.

She lifted her face to his, offering her lips, her soul, her very life to him. The featherlight touch of his mouth on hers sealed their love and the hot tears they both shed washed away pain and fueled desire.

Finally Nathan broke the contact, gently, regretfully, and smiled at Andy before speaking directly to her father.

"Andrew, I would like to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage, but knowing Andy, I think I'd better discuss it with her, first. Will you excuse us a moment?"

"Of course, son. You're a wise man to let her think she has a say in the matter," Andrew teased, smiling fondly at his daughter's suddenly rebellious expression.

"We'll talk about bride price and dowry later," Nathan added, dodging a quick jab Andy poked in the direction of his bruised ribs.

"A couple cows should suffice," Andrew said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe a

pig as well."

"Look, you two macho ..." Andy sputtered, laughing at her father and her future husband, feeling the love that surrounded her coming from both men.

"I don't know, Andrew," Nathan continued, as if Andy hadn't spoken, "she's pretty bossy. I think you're pushin' it with the pig."

"Men!" Andy howled, laughing as she pulled out of Nathan's arms and turned to face both of them. "Yes, Nathan, I'll marry you, and no, Dad, no cows and no pig!" She reached out to grab both their hands, feeling the link complete with her touch.

"I'll settle for a grandchild," Andrew said finally, a sheen of tears in his eyes.

"We'll work on it," Nate answered as he pulled Andy back into his arms. "I think that's something we can agree on, don't you, Hon?"

"Don't call me Hon," she whispered against his lips. "My name's Andy. And yes, I think we can agree on that."

Kate Douglas

Kate Douglas is a sucker for happy endings, but this romance author never makes it easy for her characters to find their own personal paradise. Kate's found hers in the wine country of northern California where she and her husband of almost thirty years live in an old farmhouse in the midst of a hillside vineyard.

When she's not writing, Kate does sports photography for many northern California cycling teams.

Visit Kate's Web site at: <http://www.katedouglas.com>

Don't miss these Hard Shell titles by Kate Douglas!

Honeysuckle Rose
Cowboy in my Pocket

Available from your favorite bookseller or directly from:

Hard Shell Word Factory
PO Box 161
Amherst Jct. WI 54407

Fax: 715-824-3875
Email: books@hardshell.com
<http://www.hardshell.com>