

BEYOND THE CLOUDS

By

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Chapter 1

"Virgin Wanted

No experience necessary!"

Gillian's focus zeroed in on the phone number at the bottom of the personal ad and she gasped. Snatching up the phone, she jabbed out the sequence of numbers and drummed her fingers on the table top while listening to the electronic whir over the line. When she heard the familiar voice on the other end she cried, "Mother. How could you?"

"How could I what, dear?"

Her calm voice didn't fool Gill for a minute. "I'm referring to the ad in the Citizen." Absently, she grabbed a red pen from the collection of writing utensils in the blue plastic cup beside the phone, then outlined the ad.

"Oh, you saw that, did you?" Mom's nonchalant manner perturbed Gill. Had she hoped Gill wouldn't see it?

"Do you know how many crazy people you'll get phoning you with an ad like that?"

"Yes, dear. I know. You're the first one."

Gillian's fingers splayed flat on the table top. "Mother!"

Why me? she asked herself. Why have I been cursed with a mother who gets involved in such crazy schemes?

"So, dear, are you calling to apply?" The hopeful note in her voice put Gill on guard.

"For what exactly?" she asked, warily.

"Why, to marry Jeremy Farraday, of course."

Oh, no. Not Jeremy again. Jeremy Farraday. Mother had been after her for the past two years to meet her employer's son and Gill had successfully avoided the event so far. Now it seemed Mom's goal had evolved to marriage. Gill suppressed a groan.

"What does this ad have to do with marrying Farraday's son?"

"Mr. Farraday has decided it's long past time for Jeremy to get married, so--you know how I've told you what a take charge kind of guy Mr. Farraday is--he's decided to search for a bride for his son. He asked me to help. Everyone's always talking about the power of personal ads so I thought I'd try one."

Gill folded the open section of the newspaper in half, then in half again, leaving the red-rimmed ad centered in front of her. "Isn't this going a bit beyond the call of duty? After all, you're the personnel manager for Farraday's company, not for his family's personal life."

Gill heard her mother sigh heavily. "Gill, Mr. Farraday sees getting a wife for his son as an important aspect of continuing the business."

Gill snorted. "He wants heirs, you mean?"

"Yes. He's an old-fashioned man. He feels this is part of the business and ... well, Gill, I just couldn't say no."

Gill clenched her jaw. Mom was too willing to be pushed around. When would she ever learn to push back? "Yes, you could. If he tried to fire you, you could sue him. He'd be laughed out of court when people found out he terminated you because you refused to be a matchmaker for his son."

Mom's soft sigh whispered over the line. "Gill, you know I don't like to make trouble."

Gill knew that only too well. When her stepfather had been busy ripping Gill to shreds, making her feel like the most incompetent fool on earth, Mom had held her silence. Afterwards, she'd picked up the pieces of Gill's self-esteem and helped patch it together again, but Gill had always wished she'd stepped in and actually spoken up for her.

Did this Farraday Junior's father berate him? Gill wondered. Probably not. He was probably spoiled rotten and living grand on his daddy's cash. He probably got anything he wanted. He wanted a wife, so Daddy just ordered his minion to stick an ad in the paper and get him one.

Her gaze flicked to the first line of the ad. Virgin wanted. It sounded like an ad for a human sacrifice. Probably marrying Farraday Jr. would be about as much fun as being thrown into a volcano.

Actually, it would probably be Dullsville in the extreme. After all, what kind of personality could the guy have if he needed his father to find a wife for him? She'd have thought that even if his attractions were minimal, he'd have been able to find someone willing to marry him with all his money. Of course, that's what they'd be flaunting with this ad. And it would probably work. Most women found wealth a great attraction, even if Gill didn't.

Gill found it hard to believe the son would actually go along with something like this. Would he just calmly let his father pick out a wife for him? And how would a father come up with an idea like this? She could just imagine Farraday calling a meeting of his staff and calmly discussing the steps for a bride hunt. Probably called for a statistical analysis to determine the percentage of virgins available in the population around Ottawa and a market report to decide what would attract the appropriate age group. Gill shook her head, suppressing a giggle.

"So, how did this all start?" she asked.

"Well, Mr. Farraday has been suggesting Jeremy get married for quite a while now, but Jeremy--like all children it seems--is resisting. I think it's as much to annoy his father as anything else."

"Mom, I'm sure this guy doesn't run his life just to annoy his father."

"Sometimes I wonder. Anyway, Jeremy just got back last week--remember I told you he went off to manage a project in Japan?--and his father tried to pin him down on when he'd find a wife. Well, maybe Jeremy's been thinking about things, you know, because a close friend of his lost a brother recently and sometimes that makes you think about where your own life is going. Anyway, to make a long story short--"

"Too late, Mom." Gill smiled, as Mom carried on, totally oblivious to her teasing comment.

"Jeremy told him he hasn't married yet because he's looking for a woman who's ... shall we say ... saved herself for marriage." Mom ignored Gill's snort of disapproval. Saved herself? Good heavens. This guy must be straight out of the Dark Ages. "That explains why such an attractive catch is still unattached at thirty-one. He also wants a woman who's near his own age."

Gill traced her finger along the outline of the airplane depicted on her purple coffee mug. "I'll bet there aren't many women of that description floating around."

"Precisely my point. That's why you'd be so perfect."

Gill clamped her eyes shut. She should have seen this coming. "Why do you think I fit the bill?"

"Oh, don't be silly, dear."

Gill resented the fact Mom thought she knew her so well. But she didn't call her on it. Gill valued their closeness as much as Mom did. Mom had always believed in her, had always made her believe in herself. Unlike her stepfather.

"I think he'd be perfect for you."

"You think his bank book would be perfect for me, you mean."

"Darling, there's nothing wrong with marrying a wealthy man."

"There is if that's the only reason for marrying him." She took a sip of lukewarm coffee.

"So far, you haven't found a good reason for marrying anyone. Or even dating, for that matter," she grumbled. "But I think once you got to know Jeremy you wouldn't be marrying him for his money."

"So you've told me."

"And he's gorgeous." Mom's voice had slipped into her persuasive tone.

"Great. So I should marry him for his looks instead." She plunked her cup on the table.

"That's not what I meant."

"Mom, you know how I feel about rich men."

Her mother's voice softened. "Yes, I know, dear. But you've got to remember, your stepfather was only one man. Not all rich men are like Eric," Mother continued, "and I can personally guarantee that Jeremy isn't."

Oh, Mom. You and I just don't see the world the same way. All rich men are selfish and power-hungry. That's how they get to be rich.

"I don't want to talk about this."

Gill could hear a tapping sound from the other end of the line, probably her mother playing with a pen, as she tended to do while on the phone. "Gill, if you'd just meet Jeremy...."

"Don't start on that again! I don't want to meet him. And I definitely don't want to marry him."

Gill picked up the red pen lying in front of her and, as she reached across the table to drop it back in the cup, she accidentally knocked her mug and spilled a few drops of coffee on the newspaper. She snatched some tissues from the box on the side table and blotted up the blobs of dark liquid.

"How do you know if you don't--"

"Stop pushing. Why would you push your only daughter off on some stranger, anyway?"

"Jeremy's not a stranger."

"He is to me," Gillian shrilled.

"Okay, Gill. Calm down. Look, let's forget all this nonsense for now. We haven't seen each other for a while. Why don't you come downtown and we'll have lunch?"

"I don't have time, Mom. I have a lesson starting at one. I could come over tonight, though."

"Why don't you come for an early lunch, then?" Her voice switched back to that reasonable, persuasive tone she did so well. "If you got here around eleven thirty, we could be finished in time."

Why did Gill have the feeling Mom was up to something? "I don't know." She glanced at her watch. Ten

thirty. "It'll be pretty tight."

"Look, I have to go now. I'm due at a meeting in five minutes. Meet me at eleven-thirty. Please?"

It had been over a week since they'd gotten together. Gill had canceled their dinner last Tuesday because she'd had to work late. She sighed. "Okay, Mom."

"Thanks, honey. And, Gill ... wear something nice, will you? Not the usual leather jacket and jeans. I like you to look presentable when you come to my office."

Gill started having second thoughts.

"And not too flashy. Your black suit with a nice white blouse would be appropriate."

"Mom--"

"Good-bye, dear. Got to go."

Mom hung up before Gill could finish her protest. How could someone Gill loved so much be so annoying? She flicked the phone switch with her index finger and called work to check her afternoon schedule. After that, she went to shower and dress--in her scarlet suit--with a nice white blouse.

* * * *

Gill arrived at her mother's office building at quarter after eleven, checked in at reception in the lobby, and grabbed the first free elevator up. She patted her hair--coiled at the back of her head and held by a gold barrette--checking for loose tendrils. This hairdo, her only other concession to her mother's request to dress conservatively, caused a tugging weight at the back of her head, giving her a headache. Maybe she ought to take it down, she thought, just as the elevator doors swished open. Too late.

"Gillian. There you are." Gillian's mother stood waiting on the eighth floor and climbed aboard. "I've got to drop off some papers in the executive office before we go." She pushed the button for the twenty-second floor.

"Can't you do that when we get back?" Gill didn't want to be late. The doors closed and the elevator proceeded upwards.

"It'll only take a minute, honey."

She eyed Gill's outfit critically, but said nothing. They rode in silence all the way to the top. Gill tugged at the hem of her blazer. She tried to push aside the feelings of inadequacy that accompanied the thought of visiting the office of a rich man like Farraday. She would not be intimidated.

When they stepped off the elevator, Gill glanced around, feeling a little overwhelmed despite her resolve. Large potted palms stood between each elevator column and a plush sage green carpet covered the floor. A svelte blonde woman sat behind a cream colored desk with the slightest tinting of rose in the wood grain. She glanced up at their arrival and smiled.

"Hi, Claire. How are you?"

"Fine, Rita. I've got something for Jeremy." She waved the manila folder in her hand. "Is he here?" She glanced around expectantly.

"No, he's moving into his apartment today. You know him. He won't leave it to movers. He has to have a hand in it himself."

He doesn't trust them, you mean, Gill thought. Typical rich-man attitude.

"It's too bad you hadn't stopped by ten minutes earlier," the woman went on. "He was here to pick up some papers he wants to review over the weekend." She took the envelope from Mom and glanced at the label. "Does he need this in a rush? I could courier it to him."

While Mom and Farraday's secretary discussed the details of shipping documents, Gill wandered to the sitting area just past the reception desk. Floor to ceiling windows spanned one side of the area and two inviting off-white leather couches sat in a cozy arrangement around a square glass coffee table, set to take advantage of the view. Gill stared at the city laid out below them, Dow's Lake glittering in the afternoon sunlight. The white glint of an aircraft in the clear depths of the sky caught her attention.

Oh, drat! She hadn't verified that Puff, her favorite aircraft, would be ready for her one o'clock lesson. She'd booked Puff last week, but the plane had gone in for regular maintenance yesterday and they'd hit a few snags.

Gill glanced around for a phone and, when she didn't see one, strode back to the secretary's desk. "I need to make a quick call."

The woman waved at the phone on her desk. "Go ahead." She clicked the button beside the label 'Line 2' and pushed the phone toward the edge of the desk, holding out the receiver. Gill stepped closer and took it, then dialed the number for the airport.

"Hi, Suzie? It's Gill." She turned away from Mom and the secretary so her voice wouldn't interfere with their conversation, then leaned back against the edge of the desk.

"Hi, Gill. What's up?"

"I'm not sure if I have an aircraft for my one o'clock lesson."

"You're booked with George, right?" Suzie asked and Gill murmured an affirmative response. "Let me check."

Gill heard the ruffling pages and knew Suzie was flipping through the appointment book. "Puff is penciled in here."

"I know, but she was still being serviced last I heard."

"Oh, right, that leaky oil thing. Hang on."

Gill heard Suzie shout to someone in the background and a moment later she came back on the line. "No problem. She's all set."

"Thanks, Suzie. See you at one."

Gill hung up the phone, and turned to see a gray-haired man in a navy suit get off the elevator. She stood up and tugged the hem of her blazer to straighten any wrinkles that had formed, then brushed down the sides. His keen blue eyes skimmed her suit from collar to hem and his mouth puckered into a frown.

"Mr. Farraday." The secretary stood up with Mother's envelope and a couple of file folders in her hand. "I have a few errands to run before this afternoon's meeting."

The man nodded and the woman hurried away. His gaze settled on Mother.

"Claire," he said. "Is this a new employee for me to meet?"

"No, Mr. Farraday. This is my daughter, Gillian."

His gaze intensified as it shifted back to Gill and she quelled an overwhelming urge to fold her hands in front of her and drop her gaze to the ground. Instead, she hiked up her shoulders and met his frank scrutiny head on.

"So, you finally got her in here, did you? Well, come on, young lady. Let's have a little chat."

Her back stiffened. Mom may have to answer to this man, but Gill didn't. "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Farraday," Gill responded. "Mom and I were just off to lunch and I really don't have time--"

"Nonsense." He grasped Gill's elbow and led her toward his office door.

Gill narrowed her eyes as she glanced back at Mom, silently demanding she get her out of this situation. Mom sent back a pleading look. That look that begged her not to make trouble. That look Gill knew she could not ignore. After all, Mom had trained her over twenty-eight years. Gill sighed, knowing she'd been bamboozled. Had Mom planned this all along? Or was she just taking advantage of opportune timing?

Gill tugged her arm free and followed Farraday through the office door hating the position Mother had forced on her. The inside of the executive office, even more plush than the reception area, was as intimidating as it was impressive. Gillian hated blatant displays of wealth and, even knowing that a company must have an office that reflects a positive financial position, the luxurious trappings made her uncomfortable. More floor to ceiling windows made up one wall of Mr. Farraday's office, sending dazzling sunlight into the room, bouncing off the highly polished surface of his glossy mahogany desk. Mom walked past the dark green leather chairs surrounding a square cherry wood coffee table towards the desk where Farraday sat watching them with sharp blue eyes.

"Sit down," Mr. Farraday said, indicating the chairs opposite him. Mom sat down, tugging Gill into the seat beside her. "So, Claire, this is the daughter you've told me so much about." Farraday circled around her, inspecting every detail of her appearance, from the upswept coil of her dark, chestnut hair, down the trim lines of her fitted, red linen suit, to the tips of her matching red pumps. "She certainly is as pretty as you claimed. I wondered, knowing that through a mother's eye...."

Gill felt her cheeks flame. The off-hand compliment, meant more as an appraisal of an asset, set her teeth grating. She kept her mouth clamped shut, reminding herself this was her mother's employer and that she didn't want to get her mother in trouble. It took a great deal of convincing.

"I know what you mean, Mr. Farraday." Mom beamed, as though the compliment had been directed at herself. "And she's very clever, too. She has a university degree."

His eyebrows arched. "In what? Home Economics?"

Gill seethed even more.

"Now, really, Mr. Farraday," Mom countered. "You know women do more than stay at home and take care of the house nowadays. Look at me."

Gill groaned inwardly. Her mother worked in personnel, which was an area still pretty much dominated by women. Gill would bet there weren't any women on the technical side of Mr. Farraday's business.

"Let the girl talk for herself, Claire. Well, Gillian?"

"I have a degree in Mathematics with an Engineering option."

"Eh?" His keen gray eyes narrowed, skepticism oozing from him.

"Mechanical Engineering," Gill clarified.

This man reminded her of her stepfather. Eric had ridiculed her efforts in school. To the point of making her believe she'd never amount to anything. He'd always made her feel like an incompetent fool. But despite that, she'd made it through university--in a man's field no less--and her dream career was within grasp.

"So, you're an engineer?"

"No. Not exactly...."

"You earned a degree and then didn't use it?" He narrowed his eyes. "I've heard of women who go to university to earn their MRS."

In other words, to find a husband. Gill stood up and sucked in a large gulp of air, ready to spill a torrent of angry words in response, but her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her back into her chair.

"Gill's not like that. She's the type of person who likes to be well prepared for anything she undertakes. She wants to be a commercial pilot. And if that doesn't work out, her qualifications will help her pursue other things."

Farraday shook his head. "None of that really matters. She won't need a career if she marries my son. Being smart is good, though. Jeremy doesn't like the dumb blond type."

Her stomach clenched in a tight, hard knot. If I marry his son? Does he think I'm here because of that stupid ad? This time when Gill shot to her feet, she stepped out of Mom's reach. "What do you mean if I--?"

Farraday fixed her with a sharp stare. "Well, you don't automatically get the position, you know. I want to make sure you're appropriate before presenting you to him."

Presenting me to him? Good heavens. It sounded like she was to be some kind of gift. "Well, you can just--"

"Gillian, please." Her mother's words cut across what would have been a very rude retort. Mom might be soft spoken, but she could find volume when the situation demanded it. At her do-as-I-say-or-I'll-strangle-

you look, Gillian glared at her.

If this man says one more offensive thing--

"Speaking of appropriateness," Farraday started, now seated at his desk. "My son is looking for a woman who can, shall we say, wear white to the wedding. I was very pleased to hear that my son holds such virtue in high esteem."

Yeah, right. As if he's followed those axioms himself. The words scuttled through Gill's mind but she successfully kept them to herself. Barely.

Mr. Farraday folded his hands on his desk and stared straight into Gill's eyes, assessing. "I assume you meet the requirements?"

Gill stiffened her spine and drew in a deep breath ready to sputter out some cutting remark.

"Yes, she does," Mom interjected.

"And why is that?"

Gill blinked, thrown off by his audacity. "I beg your pardon?"

"It seems very odd to me that such an attractive girl hasn't hopped into the sack with someone, given the morals of today's young people. Is there something wrong with you?"

Wrong with me? WRONG WITH ME? This man who was looking for a virgin wife for his son by interviewing women in his business office was asking if there was anything wrong with her?

"That does it!" Gill retorted. "I don't have to put up with this." She turned on her heel and stomped toward the door.

"Gill, wait!" Her mother's words chased after her as she stormed past the secretary in the outer office and on past the elevators to the stairs. She shoved the door open and raced down the steps, not giving her mother time to catch up with her--and make her feel guilty.

She tugged the clip off the back of her head and stuffed it in her jacket pocket, letting her shoulder-length hair tumble free, hoping this would help diminish her headache. The sound of her mother calling her name down the stairwell, and the answering echoes, only made her descend faster. Mother wouldn't follow her down the stairs and the elevators in this building always took forever to arrive, especially over lunch hour. If all went well, Gill would be able to escape the building without having to face Mother.

* * * *

She wasn't gorgeous, but she was dependable. Cade sighed as he unlocked the door of the beat-up old pickup truck his friend, Luke, referred to as Old Blue and tossed the documents he'd been carrying onto the passenger seat. Thank heavens Luke had handed over the keys, albeit reluctantly, when Cade found his car blocked into the driveway by the moving truck.

The door creaked on rusty hinges. Cade climbed inside and slammed the door shut behind him. The clomping sound echoed through the underground garage of the large office building. Shoving the keys into the ignition, he glanced out the windshield in time to see a flurry of red fabric and long black hair swirl by. The woman's spike heels hit the ground with a force that could split concrete. Her eyes blazed with unsupervised anger and her cheeks matched the color of her suit. If she'd been a cartoon character, the artist would have shown steam blowing out her ears and drawn her with the body of Jessica from Roger Rabbit--long legs, a trim waist, and ample curves in all the right places.

"Incredible," he murmured to himself. His mouth stretched into a smile as he watched her stomp across the parking lot to a luminescent yellow Neon. "Lord, I wouldn't want to get in her way."

He turned the key in the ignition and the truck roared to life. Or more precisely, sputtered. Shoving the gear stick into first, Cade coordinated the gas and clutch pedals to negotiate the vehicle into a smooth acceleration. All went well as he shifted to second, but as he entered the ramp to the next level, the engine faltered--and died.

Cade turned off the ignition and tried starting the truck again. Nothing happened. Not even an encouraging chug.

"Great." Cade shifted to neutral and tugged on the hand brake then climbed out. He stood staring at the vehicle for a few moments, thinking, then kicked the tire. It didn't do much good, but it made Cade feel better. If only he knew something about engines. But Luke had always been the one to get his hands dirty. Cade had pursued more intellectual endeavors.

He scratched his head. Maybe if he opened the hood....

A sharp peeping sound snatched his attention to the car that had pulled up behind him. When he saw the yellow Neon with the lady-in-red glaring at him from inside, a grin tugged at his lips.

This could get interesting.

Chapter 2

Her palms slammed against the horn again and Cade shrugged expansively. She flung open her door and stormed toward him with menace raging in her blue eyes. He marveled at the way her angelic features contrasted with the devilishly sexy aura pulsing from her. Man, she was gorgeous.

She stopped two feet from him and planted her hands on her hips. "What do you think you're doing?" She swung one arm toward Old Blue. "You're blocking the way out."

He crossed his arms and leaned back against the door of the truck, still smiling, intent on enjoying this encounter. "Do you always answer your own questions?" he drawled lazily.

"What?" Confusion furrowed her brow.

He shrugged. "You're right, I'm blocking the way out."

Her arms flung out to her sides. "Why?" she screeched.

His grin broadened. "I'm stuck."

"Stuck?" Her hands balled into fists. "What do you mean stuck?"

"You know. The truck stopped working. I can't get it to move." He patted the vehicle affectionately. "It's stuck."

She shot Old Blue a narrow-eyed glare. "What's wrong with it?"

"Lady, if I knew that, I wouldn't be stuck, now would I?"

She sucked in a deep breath, her chest expanding in an enticing manner, then let the air out in a sharp hiss. "Oh, for heavens sake. If it won't start, why don't you take a look at the engine rather than standing around?"

"I doubt it would do much good. I don't know anything about engines." Cade had no interest in anything

mechanical. Never had.

"Great! Just what I need. A useless jock." She glanced toward the elevator, then back at the truck. Pushing up the sleeves of her immaculate, tailored jacket, she marched toward the front of the truck. "Release the hood, would you?"

His eyebrows swept up in surprise. "What?" Surely, she couldn't mean to--?

She growled something incomprehensible as she shoved him aside to open the driver's door. She fiddled under the dash, slammed the truck door, and stomped around to the hood. Cade watched in fascination as the hood lifted like a giant mouth ready to swallow her. Moving forward to watch her lean over the tangle of pipes and wires connecting various hunks of mechanical bits, he marveled at the difference between this woman and the ones he dated. Those females wouldn't even ride in this vehicle let alone peer under the hood.

The lady-in-red stood up, glaring at the machinery inside the truck's mouth as though it had offended her. She slammed the hood closed with a thump.

"We'll have to push it out of the way." She glanced around and gestured toward an empty parking space at the bottom of the ramp. "If we move it in there I should have enough light to see what's up."

"Push?" he asked incredulously. "You mean, you and me?"

She clamped her hands onto her hips. "Well, I'm not going to push it on my own." She pointed at the driver's door. "You steer while I push from here."

"But--" He started to protest that she'd be taking the bulk of the weight, but she didn't let him finish.

"Don't worry," she answered, as though able to read his mind. "With the slope of the ramp, gravity will do most of the work, then momentum will do the rest. Pull the door open so that once it's gone far enough, you can jump in and work the brake."

He shook his head as he complied. This woman was full of surprises. Smart, beautiful, and not afraid to get her hands dirty. An exceptional combination. He'd love to get to know her better.

She hopped into her own car and pulled it out of the way, then together they pushed the truck into the spot she'd suggested. He half expected her to jump into her car and take off, leaving him stranded. But she didn't. She tramped back to the hood and hauled it open again. Muttering to herself, she fiddled with the engine. Cade propped his foot on a cement ledge about two feet high and leaned his elbow on his knee. None of what she did meant anything to him so he enjoyed watching the delicious curve of her backside and the exciting little shifts it made as she tugged on various bits of machinery. She let out an exasperated sigh as she straightened and turned to face him, slapping her hands back and forth against each other.

"I can't fix it. You'll have to call a garage."

His eyebrows quirked up. Was she all promise and no delivery? "Why did you think you could?"

Her hands stilled and a fierce expression tightened her features. "If I had a fan belt you'd be on your way in ten minutes, but I have better things to do than go shopping for spare parts for a stranger." She stared at her hands. Black grease stained her creamy skin. She stepped toward him, palms upright, staring expectantly. "Do you have a rag?"

He couldn't remember seeing one in the truck. He shrugged. "'Fraid not."

She expelled a sharp breath and advanced on him like a caged lioness. She narrowed her eyes and her gaze fell to his raised knee. Calmly, and seemingly without remorse, she dragged her hands across his denim-clad thigh, leaving behind dark grubby streaks. He would have laughed out loud if she hadn't looked so fierce--then the feel of her hands stroking his thigh registered and his body reacted in the most natural way possible. His jeans became uncomfortably tight. He stopped admiring her passionate anger and started imagining her passionate response to him under the sheets.

The curiosity shifted to a pulsing need. This had to stop--now--or he'd do something about satisfying that driving curiosity. He grabbed her wrists and held her hands palm up.

She pressed her lips together tightly--luscious, rosy, very kissable-looking lips--as she glared at him, as though challenging him to retaliate. Despite the steel in her sparkly blue eyes, something told him her unwavering control was more bravado than anything else. He sensed a tiny quiver of uncertainty beneath her self-assured expression.

Was the lioness really a kitten in disguise? He would surely love to make her purr.

But for now, he'd settle for teasing her--after all, what did a kitten love more?--and watch those tiny claws unsheathe.

Glancing back at her paws--or rather, palms--he noticed that black smudges still stained her white skin. "If you'd like to finish cleaning these off..." He paused, grinning wickedly. "I could suggest other, more interesting--"

"Never mind!" She snatched her hands out of his grasp and twirled away. Then gasped and spun back. Grabbing his arms, she jerked both their bodies around ninety degrees.

"What the heck--?" he sputtered, barely catching his balance. "What are you doing?"

She bobbed her head down, ducking in front of him, as though ... the thought bolted through his brain--as

though hiding from someone. He glanced around, catching a glimpse of a silver-haired woman exiting the door from the elevator before the lady-in-red spun him back to face her.

"Stop it!" she hissed in a fierce whisper. "She'll see me." She shifted her hands to his shoulders and aligned him as a shield.

"Is this woman chasing you?" Concern twitched through him. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, nothing like that. I--" Her gaze shifted past him. "Oh, rats, she's looking this way."

The panic in her voice as she ducked again drew a surge of protectiveness from deep inside. The feel of her fingertips grazing his chest as she lowered her hands drew out the animal in him. The two feelings collided into one compelling urge. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her toward him. His mouth clamped over hers as he shifted to keep her hidden from the intruder.

She muttered and frantically tried to pull away, until he murmured against her mouth, "She wouldn't think you'd be down here kissing a strange man, would she?" Then he fixed his lips firmly on hers again and soared toward heaven.

Gill stopped fighting as the truth of his words struck home. She felt his hands glide over her arms in a slow caress. His hands slid to her face, fingers tangling in her hair, cradling her gently. The hard-muscled warmth of his body against hers disturbed her on some deep level. His rib cage expanded against her chest with each breath he drew in, and the rhythm of push and pull increased steadily, as did the firm pounding of his heart.

Damnable man. He was doing her a favor, but did he have to enjoy it so much? She strove to stay immune. Tall, dark, and handsome was not her style--but something about this guy threatened to bypass her well-constructed barriers. His mouth moved persuasively on hers and she felt the rigid walls crumbling. As his tongue cajoled her lips apart, she held firm--for about a second, then parted her lips.

He tasted minty--male. She wanted to nestle into the warmth of his body and inhale his woodsy scent more deeply. Well, if he could enjoy it, why couldn't she? After all, they both knew this was an act. As long as they remembered that, everything would be fine.

The tip of his tongue teased hers and she stroked the length of his. A slight moan escaped his mouth into hers and he swept his arms around her, dragging her against him.

There was a reason she was doing this--she just couldn't remember what it was. Images--of her mother, an old truck, a gorgeous stranger--fluttered through her mind like a film stuttering through an old movie projector, hazy and erratic. Her heart, confined in too small a space, pounded against the walls of her chest. Her lungs, incapable of drawing enough air, refused to supply her brain with oxygen. She felt light-headed. She had to hang onto something or she'd fall--long and hard--so she hung onto the only thing

handy. The hunk's broad shoulders.

His arms tightened around her and she pressed herself firmly against him, feeling her breasts crush against his chest. His hands slid down her back to the swell of her buttocks. She felt a hardness against her stomach, informing her he was very aroused.

Sexually aroused.

She gasped and stepped back. How had she let things go so far?

He grinned sheepishly and she felt her swelling anger dissipate.

"She's gone." The handsome stranger jerked his head toward the door and Gill glanced around, noticing that her mother had indeed disappeared. Gill had totally forgotten about her.

"Oh ... well ... thank you." She smoothed down the sides of her blazer, straightening out the wrinkles. "I ... guess I'd better be going now." What must he think of her?

"What? And leave me stranded?" The half-grin he beamed at her sent her heart throbbing.

"I told you. I can't fix the truck. You'll have to call a garage."

"Then I'll be stuck waiting here for an hour or so until they show up."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you suggesting I wait with you?"

"Well, you owe me that much, don't you?"

She owed him? She opened her mouth to sputter a rejoinder, but he continued.

"After all, I did save you from your pursuer."

She snapped her mouth shut. He was right. He'd saved her from having to face Mom and that deserved at least lunch. In addition, he'd given her the most devastating kiss she'd ever experienced. She didn't even want to think about how she should repay that.

The stranger who'd just kissed her so thoroughly turned around to fetch something from his truck and Gill saw two dark gray hand prints on the back of his white, rough-cotton shirt.

Her hand prints.

"Oh, no, I...." Guilt wriggled through her.

He glanced at her and his golden-brown eyes sent her insides churning with remembered passion.

Golden. Despite his dark hair, that was the only way to describe him. Golden eyes. Golden tan. Golden touch.

He dragged a dark canvas backpack out of the truck and turned to face her. "What is it?"

"I seem to have stained your shirt. You must let me pay for it."

She glanced down at her hands and he followed her change in focus, then chuckled. "What about my jeans? You didn't seem too worried about those."

The guilt burrowed deeper. Judging by his well-worn clothes and beat-up old truck, she realized he probably couldn't afford the expense of buying new clothes.

"I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have done that. I'll pay for those, too."

His eyes twinkled. "Believe me, I really didn't mind."

She remembered the look of burning interest in his eyes as she'd wiped her hands on his denim-clad thigh. She also remembered the feel of his long, firm muscles and her raging desire to keep right on stroking.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked and she shook her head. "Look, if you'll join me for lunch, we'll call it even. Okay?"

His crooked smile and the crinkles around his eyes as he waited for her response sent her heart into a nervous flutter. She remembered his arms around her and the warmth of those curling lips on hers.

Maybe tall, dark and handsome could be her style. At least this one wasn't rich. And, judging by his Sir Galahad act in hiding her from her mother, probably honest to a fault. Definitely golden. She nodded and smiled at him. "Okay. As long as you let me pay."

She didn't usually accept invitations from a stranger, but after that kiss, and her uncharacteristic response, she didn't think of him as a stranger. Besides, she didn't like being indebted to anyone. She'd buy him lunch to thank him for being her human shield and find a way to pay for his ruined clothes. Then they'd be even. Then she would forget about him. Forget about his broad shoulders, his crooked smile, the feel of his arms around her crushing her against his firm chest, the quivering ripple of desire that made her blood feel like jet fuel about to ignite.

She drew in a shaky breath as she realized her hands had started to tremble. Forget him? She must be nuts. She'd never forget that golden moment she'd spent in his arms. Okay, so she'd tuck this afternoon away in her imaginary memory box to be retrieved in the slumberous time before sleep--to be carried into her dreams. But she would not see him again. No matter how golden the man, or his touch, he'd already shown himself to be like all the others. He'd watched in total disbelief as she'd worked on his truck, clearly surprised a woman could know anything about mechanics. It rankled even more since he himself had been so inept. No, she didn't need the hassle.

Gill trotted to her car and snatched her purse from the passenger seat, then walked with him to the exit.

"Let's take the stairs up," she challenged. "I like to get exercise whenever I can to stay in shape."

His gaze slid the length of her body, from shoulder to hip, slowly caressing the length of her legs. She felt as though the sun blazed across her skin, in line with the focus of his eyes.

"You must find a lot of opportunities."

Anxious to escape his frank male scrutiny, she pulled open the door and tossed over her shoulder, "Judge that when we get to the top."

A large, red 'P5,' written on the wall, greeted them inside the door and Gill could see by the look on his face he hadn't anticipated ascending five flights.

"You can go ahead and take the elevator if you like." She smiled sweetly. "I'll wait for you at the top."

"I don't think so. How about a race? Then we'll see how smug you are."

With that he dashed by her and got several steps above before she got her feet moving. The clack of her high heels echoed through the stairwell and she knew she'd barely make it up the stairs at a walk in these shoes let alone beat this crazy, gorgeous man. Suddenly, her toe caught on a step and she lurched forward. She cried out in dismay. Her hand shot out in front of her in time to stop her face from connecting with a stair. Her knee wasn't so lucky.

Gill felt strong arms pull her to her feet and her companion's warm, brown eyes gazed down at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern lacing his words.

"Yes, I...."

He stared at her intently and for some reason she couldn't finish her sentence. Or catch her breath. The words--any words--eluded her. She couldn't remember how to speak. All she could think about was the way his lips had felt on hers, the hard wall of his chest pressed against hers. She nipped her lower lip,

knowing she should move. Dipping the tip of her tongue out to wet her lips, she noticed that his concerned expression had evolved into something else, something more potent. His brown eyes simmered to black coals and his face inched closer. She felt trapped by her own longings, unable to move, wanting only to feel his lips merged with her own.

The clicking sound of hard-soled shoes on the stairs clamored above. Someone else had entered the stairwell. Gill snatched her pumps off her feet and jabbed them into his hands, then ducked under his arm with a giggle and a quick burst of speed. He let out an expletive and a moment later she heard him chasing her. She spiraled round and round as she flew up the stairs, pushing herself to top speed. She passed a startled-looking woman descending the stairs and giggled again. At the top, she flung herself out the door, nearly colliding with a passerby--who gave her a dirty look--and gasped for air. Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome followed her into the lobby mere seconds later and Gill burst out laughing. He held both her red shoes in one hand, by the heels, and gave her a stern frown. He was barely even breathing hard and Gill had the distinct impression he'd let her win. And yet some sixth sense told her this man wouldn't normally let anyone get the better of him--in anything.

"If I'd known you were so competitive, I wouldn't have suggested a race," he drawled.

"But it was fun," she protested.

"Because you won."

"I take it you're not used to losing," she teased.

"No. And I don't intend to this time, either."

As he stepped toward her, with a very superior male look on his face, Gill knew she was in for a penalty. A penalty she didn't mind at all, she realized, as he tugged her against his body and kissed her. The light pressure of his lips on hers and the overwhelming feel of his masculine presence all around her, shifted her into a little sphere of heaven. When he pulled back, she stared into his eyes, slightly dazed. He smiled down at her, the expression on his face making it very clear he knew exactly how much his kiss affected her.

Enthusiastic applause from the handful of people in the lobby snapped Gill back to reality. She frowned at the strangers and watched the small crowd disperse.

"You know, I don't usually kiss perfect strangers," Gill told him as she withdrew her shoes from his hand.

"I'm hardly a stranger after that incident downstairs, but I'm glad you think I'm perfect." He grinned.

"Who were you trying to avoid anyway?"

"My mother." She tugged on one shoe, then the other.

His eyebrows arched upward. "Do you often go to such lengths to avoid your mother?" His lips curled into an amused grin.

"You wouldn't ask that if you knew my mother."

"Hmm. Sounds like we have the same kind of parental problems. My father affects me the same way."

"As for us being strangers ... you know, I don't even know your name yet."

"Ahh. You're right. My name is Cade." He held out his hand. "And yours is...?"

"Gill," she responded, smiling. She offered her hand to Cade and felt the warmth and strength of his hand envelope hers. When he finished the handshake, he didn't release her hand.

"Gil? Short for Gilbert?" he asked doubtfully, tilting his head sideways.

"Gillian. My mother loved this old movie, called "Bell, Book and Candle", where Kim Novak played a witch with that name." She grinned. "I'm just glad I wasn't a cat."

"Why's that?"

"The cat's name was Piwacket." She made a face and he chuckled.

"Let's go get lunch."

It was a heady feeling, being guided across the lobby by a man, the intimate touch of palm on palm, fingers curled around each other. Gill knew she shouldn't allow such blatant liberties with a man she barely knew, but somehow it felt right.

He walked at an easy gait which she kept stride with effortlessly. Being five foot nine sometimes had its advantages. The receptionist raised her eyebrows as they passed, but smiled and nodded in acknowledgment. Cade nodded back, a friendly grin on his face, and Gill realized Cade must work in the building.

He led her across the street and as he started to tug her to the left she pulled harder to the right.

"I don't know where you're headed," she explained, "but I can't afford much more than a burger. I may look like I have money," she said, plucking at the tailored linen suit she was wearing, "but I'm on a tight budget."

He stopped pulling. "I'm not going to hold you to your offer to buy lunch. I want to take you to this little

bistro over on Trenton Street."

Annoyance surged through her. She tugged her hand out of his grasp and planted her hands on her hips. "Hey, big spender, I said I'd buy lunch and I meant it. If you want to get along with me then you'd better understand right now that when I say something, I mean it. Got it?"

A broad grin transformed his serious expression to one of amusement. "I've got it, all right. And I definitely want to get along with you." He placed his hand on the small of her back sending tingles up her spine. "Lead on," he said with outstretched hand.

She pushed open the door of McDonald's and joined the end of the line. Turning to him, she asked, "Big Mac or something else?" The line moved away and she was faced with a smiling, teenage boy waiting for her order.

"You decide," Cade said. "I'll go call a garage."

As Gill placed her order, she couldn't help discreetly watching Cade waltz away, admiring the way he filled out his blue denims from the back. A few moments later, she chose a table by the window and plopped down the tray laden with food and beverages.

"Ahh, even apple pie," he commented, as he lifted a long leg over the back of the shiny plastic chair and settled across from her, eyeing the burger with the works, fries, large shake, and dessert she'd bought for him. "And you call me a big spender."

She tugged the clear plastic cover off her salad and glanced at his broad shoulders, let her gaze slide down his strong chest to his trim waist, then back up to his face.

"It looks like you need a lot of food to fuel that chassis of yours. I wouldn't want you to go hungry."

"I can see you're a woman who provides well for her mate."

"You're not my mate." She sipped her drink.

"No, not yet." His gaze seemed riveted on her puckered lips. "But we could remedy that." He reached across the table and stroked the back of her hand with his index finger.

She swatted it away, laughing. "You are nervy, aren't you?"

This man amazed her. If anyone else made comments like that, she would be annoyed, but when Cade said them she got both hot and shivery at the same time. She realized she'd love to get to know him better. Which came as something of a shock. Why had this man gotten to her? Other than his devastating good looks, his attractive sense of humor, his delightful chivalry.

"So what were you doing in the Farraday Building?" Cade asked, after swallowing a mouthful of burger.
"Do you work there?"

"No." She ripped open the packet of dressing and squirted a small portion onto her salad.

"Were you applying for a job?"

She nibbled on a mouthful of lettuce and considered her answer. She and Cade may have found an almost instant rapport, but they were still relative strangers. Annoyance still rattled through her because of what had happened in Farraday's office. How could she possibly explain that her mother was trying to marry her off for money? What would he think? The whole concept was positively medieval.

"Not really, but I did wind up with an interview." She grimaced. If you could call it that.

He put down his hamburger. "You went in there dressed in a suit, not looking for a job, and wound up in an interview?"

"Well, you see, this guy had a position he wanted me to fill, but I wasn't interested."

"Do you always have people begging you for jobs?"

More like bullying. "No. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He grinned. "You know, you're cute but you don't make much sense."

There he goes again. Making one of those comments I hate to love. She narrowed her eyes and sent him the evil eye. "You know, that sounds decidedly sexist to me."

He just laughed. "So tell me, was this position full or part time?"

She almost choked as some cola went down the wrong way. She sputtered a bit. "Oh, definitely full time--and long term."

"So what's the problem? The money?"

"No, the money's not an issue." She frowned. "Well, that's not exactly true. In fact, part of the problem is that there's too much money involved."

He shook his head, his crooked grin in place. "Nope. No sense at all. I thought you were on a tight budget. If this job pays more money, what could possibly stop you from taking it?"

Her light mood burned away. "Look, I don't do things just for the money. I've got a job I'm happy with and I have aspirations for something better. It's going to take some time, but...." She shrugged.

"And this change would interfere?"

"Of course. I'd have to quit my job." If she did that, she'd have to give up her dream of flying for a charter company or, better yet, a major airline like Air Canada.

"You usually do have to quit one job to start another. If you feel this way, why did you go to the interview?"

Gill grunted. "Because of my mother."

Cade grinned and sat back. "I see. I understand completely. Remember that father I mentioned."

She glanced at him, spurred by an interesting thought. "Say, do you think we could get them together? Then maybe they'd try to run each other's lives and leave us alone."

"Or they'd gang up on us."

"Mmm. You're probably right," she grumbled. Unable to resist, she lifted a fry from his tray and munched. He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He'd share his fries without complaint. Yes, he was looking more like her type all the time.

"There's the tow truck," he said. She glanced outside to see a green and white truck pull up to the curb outside and a man wearing a gray coverall climb out and head for the door of the restaurant. "I told the garage to meet me here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Cade got up and strode over to intercept the other man as he entered the restaurant. Gill continued eating her lunch as she watched the two men chat. Cade waved toward the Farraday Building and the two men went out to the tow truck and climbed inside. The driver started the truck and they pulled out into the traffic.

He'd probably be gone about fifteen minutes, Gill estimated. She glanced at her watch and almost choked on her food. Quarter to one. Good heavens, she still had to change. If she didn't rush, she was going to be late for her lesson. She gulped down the last of her drink and snatched up her purse. Dashing for the door, she mentally calculated her estimated time of arrival if traffic went well--and if it didn't. She might make it, she decided as she raced across the street and through the lobby, her heels clacking across the marble floor.

She galloped down the stairs and leaped into her car. The sight of Cade's pickup truck made her stop for a split second. She was surprised the tow truck hadn't arrived yet, but then she remembered the construction

on Bronson. She debated whether to leave Cade a note to tell him she'd had to go, but she really didn't have time. She really should leave him her phone number so that she could give him the money for the clothes she ruined. But then, she could track him down later. Phone books were good for that sort of thing. She started her car and lurched into motion. This time no one blocked the exit ramp, she thought wistfully.

Fifteen minutes and several miles later, she realized she didn't know his last name.

Chapter 3

Cade blinked as brilliant light flashed in his eyes then flickered out as a high-rise building blocked the sun again. He glanced at his watch as he wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead. They only had to go around the block to the garage entrance, but fifteen minutes had ticked by as they'd waited in backed-up traffic. Damned construction.

Finally, a workman waved them past and they turned left at the traffic light and descended the ramp. Cade directed the tow truck driver to Old Blue. The driver poked his head under the hood and confirmed Gill's assessment that the fan belt had broken. He had a replacement and set about affecting the repairs.

Cade decided to leave him to it, anxious to get back to Gill. When he turned toward the door, he noticed Gill's Neon, which had been parked in the space three down from his, was gone. His heart paused in mid-beat. Had it been stolen?

His heartbeat galloped forward at the thought he would have to tell Gill her little car had been stolen. With her flamboyant temper, fireworks would follow, but he knew losing her little car would upset her, especially since she'd told him she was on a tight budget. The thought of Gill unhappy disturbed him.

Maybe he could salvage the situation. He raced up the stairs and into the lobby, then headed straight for Mitzi at reception. She glanced up and smiled as he marched toward her desk.

"Hi, Cade. How are you doing?"

He rested his arms on the edge of the counter she sat behind and leaned toward her. "Mitzi, you saw the woman I was with earlier?"

"I sure did." Her smile curled into an amused grin. "The whole lobby saw you two in that clench. I was surprised when she zoomed by here a few minutes ago without you."

Cade frowned. "You saw her go by? Since she and I left for lunch?"

"Mmm hm."

"So her car wasn't stolen." He drummed his fingers on the counter top. "She ran out on me. I wonder why." He couldn't decide whether to be angry or upset.

"Is this a private conversation, Cade, or can anyone join in?" Mitzi asked, an impish glint in her eye.

He flattened his fingers on the cold, flat surface and stared at her. "I take it you have something to offer."

"Well, maybe you came on a bit too strong. She looked a little startled when you manhandled her."

"I didn't manhandle her." Is that how it had looked? Is that how Gill had perceived it?

"Oh?" The fine line of her eyebrows arched up. "What would you call it?"

"I just...." He had been charged by the potent attraction sizzling between them. Had he scared her away with his precipitous actions?

He hoped not. The memory of that feisty beauty in his arms, soft breasts pressing into his chest as she drew in air, made his heart pump faster and his body swell. Why did the memory of her have to be so vivid? If he kept thinking about that kiss, modesty would force him to stay facing this counter all afternoon.

An alarming thought jolted through him. I don't know her name! How am I going to find her? An emptiness burrowed into him. Oh, God, he had to find her.

"Look, Mitzi, the problem is, she's gone and I don't know anything about her except her first name and the color and make of her car." If only he could remember her license plate.

"Well, if it's that important to you, I could give you her full name...." She flashed big green eyes at him. "And tell you who she went to see ... for a price."

Relief coursed through him and he smiled. "A price? Mitzi, you opportunist. What do you want?"

"How about putting in a good word for me with your hunky friend?"

"Friend?" Cade's brows tugged together.

"You know. The tall, blond, good-looking guy who drives the blue truck."

"Luke? Are you kidding me?"

Her smile broadened and her face flushed an attractive pink color. She glanced down at her desk and fiddled with a pen. "No, I'm not kidding. He's the one I mean." The words came out breathy and her eyes took on a dreamy softness.

Cade felt his face stretch into a broad smile. Luke had asked him about the raven-haired receptionist several times. Cade had pushed Luke to ask Mitzi out, but his pal was too shy. Once Luke knew of Mitzi's interest in him, however, maybe he'd take the plunge.

"It's a deal, Mitzi. Now ... who is my lady-in-red?"

Mitzi dragged a large, flat book across the desktop toward herself and snapped it open. Her finger skimmed up the page and stopped, then tapped on a name penned in blue ink. "Her name's Gillian Right and...." Her finger slid horizontally across the page. "She went up to the eighth. The department secretary approved sending her up."

Personnel. "Thanks. You're a pal."

He strolled onto an open elevator. Ten minutes later, he climbed onto another upward-bound elevator from the eighth floor, frustrated. Everyone in personnel was still out to lunch.

Cade stepped off the elevator at the executive offices and Rita glanced up from her computer. Her strawberry blond curls had been plaited into a neat French braid, the hair swept off her face accentuating her high cheekbones and classic Slavic features. Her rosy lips turned up in a welcoming smile.

"Back again?"

"Yeah, the truck broke down. I thought I'd wait here until it's fixed."

Her gaze swept over him and her lips pinched together. "Good heavens. Did you try and fix it yourself?"

"Yeah, right."

Rita's delicate notes of laughter conjured an image of her in an intimate, but very elegant restaurant, her gold hair spilling over her shoulders and candlelight glittering in her blue eyes. Back then, he'd go to great lengths to make her laugh. Unfortunately, that had been the only time he'd really enjoyed her

company. She had been a little too sophisticated, a little too lacking in spontaneity. Unlike his lovely lady-in-red.

He noticed Rita staring at his jeans and he remembered the dark black streaks on his thighs. "I ... uh ... ran into a little...."

"Trouble?"

He grinned, remembering the well-shaped brunette and her vibrant energy. "No, she wasn't exactly that."

Rita giggled. "I should have known. Only you could take a day off to move and wind up with a date. Who is she? Anyone I know?"

Frustration tightened his gut. "That's the problem. I don't know who she is." But he was determined to find out.

He strolled to the coffee pot and helped himself to a cup. As he tossed in a sugar cube, he heard Rita giggle again.

"What did you do? Sweep the woman off her feet?"

"What?" Cade spun around to face her again.

"You've got hand prints on your back. She must have been hanging on to you for dear life."

He placed his hands on his hips. "Go ahead and laugh. When you're finished, do you think you can help me out?"

"You know I can never resist you, Cade," she said in a mockingly sweet voice. "What can I do?"

"I want you to help me find her."

She tapped her pen on the desk in a rhythmic cadence. "And how am I supposed to do that? I'm not omniscient, you know."

"I was hoping you could ask the secretary in personnel if a woman about five nine, wearing a bright red suit was in there--"

Rita stopped tapping. "Red linen? Did she have dark hair?"

"Yeah, why?"

"She was here about an hour ago."

Cade felt his heart beat increase a fraction. "Here? Why?"

"I don't know. Claire came up to drop something off and the other woman tagged along."

Claire Jenson. Head of personnel. Claire might have a résumé for her--with an address and phone number. His lady-in-red had denied looking for a new job, but why else would she have gone to personnel?

"I assumed she was a new employee," Rita went on, "and Claire was taking her to lunch."

Cade tapped on the desk distractedly. "She took me to lunch actually."

"Claire?"

"No, the lady-in-red."

Rita shook her head. "This story gets more convoluted all the time."

"And she wasn't a new employee. She told me she had an interview, though. Could her interview have been with him?" He jerked his head toward the office door behind Rita.

Rita's expression suddenly closed up. "I ... she's not in my appointment book."

"But...?"

"But she was in his office when I came back from running an errand," she admitted with obvious reluctance. "With Claire."

His eyes narrowed and he scrutinized Rita's expression. Why was she acting so strange? "Don't you find that odd? You would know about any interviews set up for a prospective employee. Especially for your boss."

A disturbing thought jolted through him. If a man was going to replace his secretary, he probably wouldn't schedule the interview through her. And the fact that it took place around lunch time, when Rita would usually be away from her desk....

Cade gently grasped Rita's hands. He knew how much this job meant to her. The prestige of being secretary to the president of a large corporation like Farraday Financial related directly to her sense of self worth. "Rita, you're not worried about your own job, are you?" he asked softly.

She squeezed his hands. "No, nothing like that." Their gazes met and he saw something in her eyes that told him she wanted to say more.

"What's the big secret?" He tipped his head toward the main office behind her again. "He got something cooked up he doesn't want me to know about?"

"That's really between you and him, isn't it, Cade?"

"Come on."

Slowly, she pulled her hands away. "I'm sorry, Cade. I can't."

The distress in her voice disturbed him. He didn't want to upset her. "Okay. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you in the middle. I'll go talk to him myself." He stood up and started toward the office.

"He's not in."

Right, he had a meeting with some investors this afternoon. "Later then." Cade returned to Rita and sat down on the corner of her desk. "Look, Rita. About the woman I'm looking for. Would you talk to Claire when she gets back and get Gillian's phone number?"

From Rita's taut expression and the way she shifted in her chair, Cade got the distinct impression she didn't want to ask Claire about this. What the heck was going on that had Rita so spooked?

Her gaze flickered to her telephone and her expression brightened. "That may not be necessary. While she was here, she made a phone call. Some kind of appointment she was checking on for this afternoon. Maybe...." Rita snatched up the phone and punched in a code. A phone number flashed on the digital display. Rita wrote the number down on a notepad and tore off the sheet. "Here. Maybe this will help you track her down."

Cade stared at the number and the tension he'd felt ever since discovering Gill had left lifted from his neck and shoulder. If he handled it right, he could find out where this place was and when she'd be there. Maybe he'd be seeing his lady-in-red again after all. Maybe this afternoon. The thought sent his heart dancing a Latin beat.

Cade leaned over and kissed Rita on the cheek. "Thanks. You're a doll," he said as he hopped to his feet and strode away.

"Cade...."

He turned back to face her and saw a haunting sadness overshadow her smile. Concern seeped through him. "What is it, Rita?"

"You and I...." She glanced away. "We...." She shook her head.

He suppressed his happiness at being handed a clue to finding Gill and concentrated on Rita. The downward curve of her lips. The gleam of her eyes. They'd broken up over two years ago. Surely she didn't still harbor feelings for him?

He stepped to her desk and leaned against it, taking her hand. "Rita, it's been a long time since there was a you and I."

She nodded. "I know."

Silence cast him into an uncomfortable position. He shifted slightly.

"Things didn't work out between us, but we've always been friends. I ... thought you were okay with that."

She gazed up at him. "I never really had a choice, did I?"

He noted the depth of longing in her eyes. Damn, why hadn't he realized? He stroked her cheek gently. "I'm sorry, Rita. I never meant to hurt you."

"I know," she said as she placed her hand on his and squeezed. "And don't worry. You were straight with me. I just wonder if...."

"If?"

"If I'd held you off longer...."

"Held me off?" What the hell did she mean by that?

"You know. Kept you out of my bed. But, with your reputation and all ... I never dreamed...."

"Rita, what are you talking about?"

She met his gaze squarely. "Well, how was I to know that Jeremy Kincaid Farraday liked his women sweet and innocent?"

* * * *

Gill parked her car in the lot at Tennington airport and grabbed her back pack and flight bag from the seat before rushing inside.

"You're late," Suzie pointed out needlessly as Gill flew by, the clack of her heels a quick staccato beat on the hard tiled floor.

"I know. I know. Is George waiting for me?"

"I'm over here, Gill." George, a tall, lanky man in his mid-twenties waved at her from the lounge, a Styrofoam coffee cup in his hand.

Gill paced toward him. "I'm sorry I'm late. I got held up. An appointment with my mother."

"Don't worry about it. I checked and Puff isn't booked out again until three so we can still do a full hour."

Puff was the nickname everyone affectionately called the training aircraft that had been painted to look like the mythical dragon. The other aircraft owned by the flight school were of a more subdued color, white with red trim in most cases, but the school used Puff for special promotions to attract attention to themselves. Gill liked flamboyant and booked Puff whenever she could.

George eyed Gill's suit and grinned. "Are you going up in that outfit? Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but I can't quite see you climbing onto the wing strut to check the fuel in that tight skirt and those heels."

"I don't intend to." She tossed her flight kit onto the table and raised her back pack, wagging it at him. "I'm off to change right now. See you in five."

Gill raced into the ladies room and tugged out her change of clothes, then stripped off her suit and blouse, rolled them neatly and stuffed them into her pack. Three minutes later, dressed in pleated jeans and a softly draping blue chambray shirt, poet style, she emerged and tossed her pack behind the counter, then signed out the aircraft.

"See you in an hour, Suzie. Ready, George?"

"I've been ready for ages."

Gill stepped outside and glanced up at the sky, a pale blue canopy unmarred by a single cloud. A good day for flying. George followed her across the hot, black pavement to good old Puff. The sight of the purple body with bright pink markings made Gill's heart thump a little faster in anticipation. Life

somehow fell into perspective when she soared through the sky and gazed down at the world laid out in a lopsided checkerboard pattern of farmers' fields, ribboned with roads, and speckled with a myriad of tiny little shapes.

Once finished their meticulous walk around, she climbed in and belted up, then watched George perform the internal checklist. Finally, he called the control tower for clearance and taxied onto the runway, behind the numbers.

Gill watched him pull back the throttle with a sure hand and the aircraft rolled down the runway, then climbed in an exhilarating thrust of speed and power, rising over the treetops and veering off to the right. Everything shrank beneath them. Sunlight glimmered on the rivers that laced through the landscape. While the plane climbed to the desired altitude, Gill stared at the horizon and saw the world slope away with the gentle curve of the Earth. The ground scrolled below them as the plane chased the limits of vision, the slow movement of the Earth calming her rattled nerves, slowly releasing the tension of the past few hours.

It was always like this. Anxieties may accompany her up here, but once in the air they dissolved with the force of the currents of air lifting her higher, releasing her to total enthrallment.

* * * *

Cade watched in horror as the garish purple airplane dropped onto the runway at an alarming rate. Good Lord, Gillian, his lady-in-red would be killed!

Rather than tumbling apart in a mass of flying pieces, however, the plane leaped about ten feet and accelerated off the end of the runway, ascending as it turned left ninety degrees.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded of the red-head behind the counter as he pointed at the disappearing plane. Damn, it looked like Gillian had hooked up with an incompetent instructor.

The woman, whose name tag said "Suzie", glanced out the window and grinned. "What? Did they bounce?" She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Don't worry. That's typical when a student's learning to land." When he raised his eyebrows in disbelief, she laughed. "Really. Hang around here for a while and you'll see far more spectacular landings than that."

Great. Just what he needed.

Women seemed intent on making this a very intriguing day. First, his lady-in-red threw his whole view of

the female species into a turmoil. Then Rita made her bizarre statement about him liking his women innocent.

He wondered if that comment had anything to do with the fact he'd told Dad he would only marry a virgin. The statement had no basis in reality, and he probably shouldn't have lied to his father, but he'd been at the end of his rope trying to figure out how to stop Dad from pressuring him to get married. After all, how many thirty-year-old virgins were around these days? His plan seemed to have worked, because Dad hadn't mentioned marriage in weeks. But why would Dad have told his secretary about it?

Rita had refused to say another word after that. Just like a woman. Grab a man's attention with a major statement of interest, then refuse to disclose the underlying data. Now this lady told him he could be entertained by watching students wind up in a heap on the runway.

What a great way to kill an afternoon.

* * * *

Gill unfastened the strap holding the small metal clipboard around her thigh and slid it into her flight bag as George taxied the plane off the runway. He stopped in front of the hangar and shut down the engine. Gill watched the propeller whir to a halt then shoved open the door and climbed out.

Henry, one of the mechanics in the hangar, waved to George.

"Gill, do you mind signing us back in?" George asked as he headed toward the three guys working on Golf Alpha Zulu Romeo, a white Cessna 172 with blue trim.

"No problem."

A gust of wind caught her hair and sent it spilling into her face. She shoved it back, running her hand over the crown of her head and trapping the bulk of her wayward locks at her nape. She crossed the hot tarmac with a long-legged stride that carried her toward the club house, anxious to escape the heat of the afternoon. Opening the metal and glass door sent a blast of cool air across her body and she sighed appreciatively.

"So how did it go?" Suzie asked as she processed the bill for the plane rental and instructor time.

"George really knows what he's doing up there. It's always great flying with him." Gill grabbed her log book from the shelf beside the counter and flipped it open. "And I'm one hour closer." One hour closer to

her dream.

"I guess that's one way to look at it. By the way, someone came by asking about you."

She stopped jotting down information in her book to glance at Suzie. "Someone? Who?"

"I don't know his name but ... he's a real hunk. I thought at first he was here for lessons. Made me wish I was a flight instructor. I'd love to be in a confined space with him for an hour at a time."

Gill finished her notes and replaced the book. "Did he leave a message or something?"

"No, but...." Suzie glanced at Gill and stammered to a halt. "I guess you could ask him yourself."

Gill had already felt a presence behind her and slowly turned around to see a familiar white rough-cotton shirt, the collar at eye level. Steadily, she raised her gaze to look into Cade's warm brown eyes, lit by the same cocky smile he'd worn earlier this afternoon when they'd met.

"Remember me?" he drawled.

He had to be kidding. The trick would be forgetting him. "Cade, what are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious? Looking for you."

"How did you know I was here?" she stammered.

"Well, now. That took a bit of detective work. Come on, I'll buy you a drink and tell you about it."

Her intended refusal withered in her throat as he smiled at her with that disarming half-grin of his. He should have that thing patented, she thought. What the heck? The guy came all the way out here.

He led her to a table by the window in the small bar off the club lounge where a frosty stein of beer sat. "What would you like?" he asked.

"A diet cola, please." She sat down and watched as Cade made his way over to the snack bar and ordered a drink for her. A few moments later, he placed a glass in front of her and settled back in his seat.

"So? You were going to explain how you found me."

He took a swig of his beer. "Ah, a lady with a one track mind. Okay. First, I talked to Mitzi at reception and she told me you'd been to see personnel. Then I found out you'd been to Farraday Senior's office and his secretary, Rita, told me you made a call from her office. The number was still in her phone memory

and that led me here."

"I see." She raised an eyebrow. "And why was Rita so helpful to you?"

"Well, she and I used to be an item."

Why did that thought send jealousy swirling through her? She'd already decided she didn't want this ... this ... Be honest, she told herself. He was a gorgeous hunk of man. Golden, remember?

That might be so, but she didn't want to fall for a guy who had proven he didn't respect her abilities. Keep cool, girl. "So why are you here?"

He leaned forward and held her gaze. "I wanted to see you again."

She could feel a warmth creep through her body, starting in her chest and emanating outward. So much for cool.

He covered her hand with his own, entwining his fingers through hers. "In fact, I wanted to know if you'd join me for dinner tonight." The feel of his hand enveloping hers sent a delicious thrill through her.

Reluctantly, she dragged her hand free. "No, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Really? I think it's a very good idea."

Gill wanted to. Everything inside told her to go for it. She opened her mouth to respond, unsure what words would emerge. Suzie chose that minute to interrupt.

"Gill, your mother just called. I told her you weren't available right now." Suzie threw a coquettish grin at Cade then drew her focus back to Gill again. "She told me to have you call her back as soon as possible."

Gill felt her mouth draw into a tense line, as Suzie scurried back to the desk. The last thing Gill wanted to do right now was talk to her mother about this afternoon's meeting.

"Are you going to make that call?" Cade asked.

"Hmm? Oh, no. I know what it's about." She glanced at Cade. "Had you been waiting here long?" she asked, trying to keep the discussion away from dinner to give her time to think.

This unnerving attraction she felt for him overwhelmed her senses. She'd never felt anything like it. It made her lose control and that disturbed her. She needed to be in control.

"About half an hour. I've been watching the planes come and go." He cleared his throat. "I saw you come in. It ... seemed like a bit of a bumpy landing."

"Yeah, well, that happens when someone's just learning." Not unlike starting a relationship, she thought. "It takes a while to get a feel for it." She took a sip of her cola. She was an amateur at relationships, that was for sure. "A landing is really a controlled stall, did you know that? The trick is to stall at just the right distance off the ground." Maybe, if she went out with Cade, she could learn the trick of controlling the effect Mother Nature gave her to this golden man. If she could learn to fly a plane, she could certainly learn to navigate a relationship. She glanced at the warm brown eyes of her companion and felt her heart wobble. This man would certainly be worth the effort.

His mouth turned up in a grin. "Well, I don't mean to criticize, but it looks like you haven't quite got the hang of it yet."

"I...?" He didn't think she had the hang of it? Her teeth clenched together painfully and her chest tightened. She glared at him through narrowed eyes. "You don't think I can land a plane?" My God. This man reminded her more and more of her stepfather. Because she was a woman, he assumed all kinds of thing. Like she couldn't fix a truck. Like she couldn't land a plane. Damn it, and she'd almost decided to go out with the jerk.

He held his hands up, palms toward her. "Uh, oh. I've seen that look before. Don't take offense," he tried to placate. "I'm sure you just need more practice."

"Practice?" She leaped to her feet and marched over to the desk. Fuming inside, she signed her name on the aircraft checkout list and snatched a key from one of the hooks. He stood at the counter watching her. She grabbed his arm and dragged him outside toward Puff. "Get in," she commanded in a tight voice.

He glanced warily at the vividly colored airplane. "I don't think--"

"Get in!" she demanded, this time with more authority in her tone. Damn it all. She'd show him.

He pulled open the passenger door and climbed in. Even though she'd left the aircraft only a half hour ago, she did a quick walk around, then ducked under the wing to the pilot door and climbed in herself.

"Do up your seat belt," she said as she inserted the key in the ignition and started the engine.

His harness clicked into place. "Are you sure we should be doing this?"

"I'm sure."

She plucked the microphone from its holder and tuned in the radio to the control tower frequency as she started the plane moving. "Tennington Ground Control, this is Cessna Golf Oscar Bravo Romeo. Over."

"Oscar Bravo Romeo, this is Tennington Ground Control."

"I'm going up for one circuit. Oscar Bravo Romeo."

"Proceed to runway niner six. You're second in line."

She taxied to the designated runway and the plane rolled into position behind another craft off the edge of the strip. Gill watched as an incoming plane descended onto the runway and touched down just after the numbers. The plane in front of them moved onto the runway and took off. She turned to look at Cade.

"Ready?"

He looked a bit stiff. "I don't know. Are you really supposed to go up without an instructor? And with a passenger along?"

"What's the matter? No faith in me?" she challenged.

"No, I didn't say that." He crossed his arms and leaned back, sliding a brave smile into place.

She laughed, some of her tension easing. The guy had guts, she had to give him that.

She changed the radio to the tower frequency and requested clearance.

"Oscar Bravo Romeo, cleared for take-off."

She clicked the microphone button twice in acknowledgment.

Cade watched Gill's movements carefully. She certainly seemed confident. She lifted her foot from the brake pedal and steered the plane onto the runway. With a sure hand, she pushed the throttle all the way in. The engine roared to life and the plane raced down the long strip of asphalt. The ride was a little bumpy until the moment when the wheels left the ground. Then they whooshed into the sky on the currents of air whipping past their wings. Once they reached a thousand feet, according to the gauge labeled altimeter, she veered the plane to the left. He'd never been in a small craft before. What a rush.

"Where are we going?" Cade asked, his voice raised over the noise of the engine.

"We're going to enter the landing circuit." She glanced at his face and seemed to realize he didn't know what she was talking about. "The circuit is a rectangular path around the airport that planes join when landing. Where in the rectangle they join depends on the direction they're coming from. One might join the downwind leg while another might come in directly on final. Since we've just taken off and have to go all the way around, we'll be doing a full circuit."

"I see."

When they neared the end of the runway, she grabbed the microphone and contacted the tower.

"Oscar Bravo Romeo, you're number two."

"That's our position in the landing sequence," she told Cade. After they turned onto their final approach, Gill flicked a control on the dash. Cade noticed the flaps on the backs of the wings pivot downward and felt the drag on the plane increase, slowing it down and turning the nose higher. Next, Gill pulled the throttle off.

"Uh ... are you supposed to do that?" Cade asked warily.

"Relax." She smiled. "I do know what I'm doing."

Cade braced himself slightly as they hovered over the runway, then gently ... very gently ... they touched down, right on the large, white, painted number declaring the runway designation. Cade released the breath he realized he'd been holding for the past thirty seconds. Wow. He had to admit, she'd made a great landing.

Once they'd pulled up in front of the hangar again, Gill turned off the engine and tugged the key out of the ignition. She tossed it into the air and caught it in one hand.

"Well?"

"I'm impressed."

She cocked her head to stare at his hands. "I'd believe you more if your knuckles weren't white from fear."

He released his stiff-fingered grip from his shoulder harness. "That's not fear, it's just nerves. I mean, having seen your landing earlier, I expected...." Sparks ignited in her eyes, warning him not to continue. He cleared his throat. "Why was your other landing so rough, anyway?"

"I told you, it takes time for a student to learn the timing. And that was a student flying the plane ... not me."

"A student? You mean...."

"That's right. I'm an instructor."

Chapter 4

The amazed expression on Cade's face told Gill all she wanted to know. Her jaw clenched and, before he had a chance to comment, she hopped out of the plane and marched toward the club. Damn him. She knew she shouldn't feel so angry. She was used to men underestimating her. But for some reason it bothered her so much more with this man.

She couldn't hear him following her over the noise of a white and blue plane taxiing by, but she could see his shadow bobbing across the black pavement, moving closer to hers. The dark head overlapped her shadow legs, then the figure drew along side hers.

"You are full of surprises, aren't you?"

She twirled around to face him, thrusting her hands on her hips. "Why is it such a surprise that I'm a flight instructor? Because I'm a woman?"

"It shouldn't be," he conceded. "Not after seeing you dig into my truck engine."

The stiff cord of anger holding her muscles taut slackened at his unexpected admission. "Good. Try not to underestimate me again."

He held his hand up, two fingers raised in a boy scout pledge. "I promise."

She spun around and started walking again.

"Wait." Cade fell into step beside her. "I'd like to ask you one more thing before we go back inside."

She stopped and turned to face him. "What is it?"

He smiled and she found herself staring into his mesmerizing brown eyes. "Have you decided about dinner yet?"

Rats. She thought she'd successfully sidestepped the issue of dinner. "I already told you no."

The warmth of his eyes intensified and the golden sunshine of his gaze threatened to melt away her resolve. "No, you told me it wasn't a good idea." He intertwined his fingers with hers. "And I disagreed."

Her hand felt comfortable nestled in the shelter of his, despite the disturbing flash of awareness short-circuiting her nervous system. A part of her wanted to agree to go with him, knowing she'd enjoy a pleasant evening with this charming man, but at the same time, she knew it would be intense. The crackling awareness she felt every time he came near tempted her to forget logic and throw herself into his arms. She'd already wound up there too many times already. She didn't even want to think about what might happen on a date.

"Cade, I'm sorry you came all the way out here for nothing, but..."

"Uh, oh. I feel a brush off coming."

Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand from his. How could she say no in a way that wouldn't hurt his feelings and yet convince him to stop pursuing her?

"It's just that ... you're not the right type for me."

"Not the right type?" His grin faded, extinguishing the brightness in his eyes. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

She shifted from one leg to the other. She couldn't tell him she thought he was a sexist pig. After all, he hadn't done anything worse than any other guy. In fact, every guy she'd ever met. And she couldn't tell him she wouldn't go out with him because she was worried about where their attraction would lead. Then she'd never get rid of him.

"You know. Personality wise."

He folded his arms across his chest. The cold look in his eyes chilled her. "Would I be the right type if I wore designer clothes rather than fraying jeans, and drove a shiny new Jag instead of a dilapidated old pickup truck?"

Her throat tightened and her fists clenched. She glared at him, trying to incinerate him on the spot. And to think she'd been trying to spare his feelings. "The only thing I hate more than a man with money," she choked, "is a man who thinks the only thing a woman wants is a man with money. I always thought the two went hand in hand ... until now."

His eyebrows shot up. "Lady, you're some character, you know that?"

"Meaning...?" She planted her hands firmly on her hips, eyes narrowed, awaiting an insult. If he started

flinging names at her, she might find it easier to forget him, and the undeniable, irresistible, attraction between them.

"Meaning...." The word trailed off as he stepped toward her and, unless she was mistaken, the hard glint in his eyes had turned to a glitter of amusement. He touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers, the gentle contact sent swirling currents of awareness spiraling through her. "...you have depths I'd love to plumb."

His lips curled up in a cock-eyed grin that made her heart tilt and threaten to topple over. Good heavens, how did he do this to her? No matter how hard she tried to hang onto her anger, she felt her resolve weaken and, from his broadening grin, he was fully aware of it. How could she resist his devastating charm? Or his highly leading comment?

"Or do you think I'm a plum ripe for the picking?"

He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her toward his tall, lean body. She could feel the heat of him, smell his spicy, male scent. "You're definitely soft and squeezable like a plum." Pulling her closer, he lowered his lips to within an inch of her own, his brown eyes simmering to the color of dark chocolate, in turn triggered a simmering heat within her. "And you taste as sweet."

Her eyes flared wider. Right at this moment, she wanted nothing more than to let him taste her again. "You're looking at me as though I'm a plum blossom you'd like to deflower." The words slipped out soft and breathy.

His eyes widened in turn. "Really? Are you telling me--?"

Good heavens, why had she said that? She wasn't in the habit of broadcasting that she was a virgin. Would he take that as a subtle invitation to keep pursuing her? Might he think she was playing hard to get? She pulled away and folded her arms across her chest, a slight flush heating her cheeks. "I'm not telling you anything. It was just a figure of speech."

Cade watched Gill spin away and escape into the club house. The delightful pink tinge to her cheeks appealed to him more than he would have believed. Seeing her go from angry to playful then to serious and withdrawn shouldn't surprise him. Gill was the most volatile woman he'd ever met. Watching her ride an emotional roller coaster should leave him dizzy but instead he found it exhilarating. He followed her to the desk and watched her pull her pack from the cubbyhole behind the counter.

"You done for the day, Gill?" the woman behind the counter asked. At Gill's nod, she said, "I'll sign you out." She turned to a white board with several names listed and erased the check mark in the 'IN' column beside Gill's name.

"Thanks, Suzie. See you tomorrow."

Gill turned to Cade and held out her hand.

She wanted to shake hands? He took the hand she offered, loving the feel of her slender, yet strong fingers within his own. Even more, he loved the way she drew in deeper breaths while he touched her. She shook his hand then drew away. He released her reluctantly.

"It was interesting to meet you, Cade. I hope your truck is better soon. Goodbye." She turned and strode toward the exit, but he kept pace with her.

She seemed intent on keeping him at a distance, but he was equally intent on closing the gap she forced between them. She might be a strong-willed, independent woman, but he was strong-willed, too, with a deeply ingrained determination to succeed at whatever goal he pursued. And, right now, that goal was to spend time with Gill.

"Gill, I need to ask you something else."

"If it's about dinner...."

"No, actually it has to do with the truck."

She glanced toward him. "What about it?"

"Well, it's still being repaired and ... I was hoping you'd give me a ride back to town."

Her eyes narrowed. "How did you get out here?"

"A friend drove me, but he had to go back. I assumed you'd give me a lift after dinner."

She stopped and turned to face him. "So, you're bumming a ride from me? Would I have had to pay for dinner, too?"

He pushed open the door and gestured her through. "Would that have bothered you?" he asked, amusement flickering through him.

She sighed. "I guess not--as long as we went dutch. I couldn't afford another mouth to feed on a regular basis."

"Does that mean you're reconsidering--?"

"No!"

She glared at him, then the only sound that broke the silence of their trek to her yellow Neon was the sound of crunching gravel under their feet. She unlocked the passenger door and continued around to the driver's side.

Cade folded himself into her little car, relieved he'd at least been able to talk her into the lift. He really would have been stranded if she had refused. Although he could afford to have a cab take him the thirty kilometers back to his car--for that matter, he could have called the family chauffeur to pick him up--he preferred not to do either of those things. He really wanted Gill to think he was the poor working stiff she thought him to be. No woman had ever affected him this dramatically before and, from her reaction to his comment about rich men, she could care less about money.

He definitely wanted to get to know this woman better. She may have a volatile temper, but that only added to the excitement of being around her. Her mere presence lowered the boiling point of his blood and sent his hormones bubbling out of control.

She tossed her pack into the back seat, then climbed in beside him and shoved the keys in the ignition. "So where's this little detour taking me?"

He had just finished moving into a luxury apartment building in downtown Ottawa, but he couldn't have her drive him there. That would blow his poor-man cover right out of the water. Besides, he had left his Jag at Luke's.

"Bell's Corners. I've got a friend who has a townhouse there and I...."

Oops. He couldn't tell her he had to pick up his car at Luke's. She thought he owned Old Blue. If she knew the shiny red Jaguar sitting in Luke's driveway actually belonged to Cade it would ruin everything. Not only would she know he was rich--which would destroy his plans to get to know a woman who didn't know about his money--but judging from her earlier comments about rich men, she might just drop him on the spot.

"And?" she prompted at his pause. "You want me to take you to your friend's house? Not home?"

"I've been staying with Luke temporarily." Which was true, except that, as of today, he had officially moved out.

"Okay, Bell's Corners it is." She shifted into reverse and pulled out of the parking spot, then zoomed onto the main road.

She zipped in and out of traffic with an easy confidence, every bit in control. He settled back into the seat and watched her. The wind rippled through her hair, sending it fluttering in a long black mass behind her. Wild and unrestrained. Like Gill. The urge to gather it up and stroke it into submission rose to an almost irresistible level but, like the woman, the black waves would resist capture.

She took the Moodie exit off the Queensway and turned left. As she neared the light at Richmond, he gave her directions to Luke's. She turned into the townhouse complex and pulled into visitors' parking.

"There you go. It was nice meeting you, Cade. I wish you luck with the rest of your life."

Hmm. A not so subtle get lost.

She was so determined to end their short association as soon as possible. How would he change her mind? He knew she felt the same attraction for him that he felt for her. He could see it in her eyes every time he touched her, feel it in the unsteady rhythm of her pulse when he held her in his arms, hear it in the huskiness of her voice after he kissed her.

"Can I change your mind about dinner? There are at least four different fast food restaurants within a five block radius."

She sighed and her face took on a patient expression--which seemed totally at odds with her personality. "You are persistent, but I just don't think we're right for each other. Romantically speaking."

"You've got to be kidding."

She had definitely chosen the wrong argument. If that's how she intended to convince herself she shouldn't go out with him, he'd blow her argument right out of the water.

He smiled at her--the smile he'd already found successful in melting her cold front--and leaned toward her. She leaned back slightly, looking a little nervous. He plucked her hand from the steering wheel and turned it over, then pressed her palm to his lips. Her fingers trembled. He slid his lips over her wrist and felt her pulse quicken.

"The way sparks fly between us every time we touch," he murmured, "I would say 'romantically speaking' we have everything going for us. I bet Romeo and Juliet didn't have the chemistry we have."

She tugged her hand loose. "The answer's still no. I'm sorry, Cade, I really do like you. Maybe we can...."

He slapped his hand on his forehead and groaned out loud. "You aren't going to say maybe we can be friends, are you?"

Gill clamped her mouth closed, biting back the response he had correctly predicted. "I guess not."

She tapped her fingertips on the dash, trying to figure out how to get rid of him. Twenty minutes in a confined space with him and his potent masculine aura had taken their toll. When he'd kissed her hand,

she'd desperately wanted to lean into him and offer her lips for the same treatment.

It must be some kind of dementia. Maybe a strong attraction like the one she felt for Cade acted like a current of electricity through the brain killing off logic cells. Obviously, she couldn't afford to be exposed to it much longer.

She raised an eyebrow and stared at him. "If I ask you nicely to just give up and leave quietly, would you do it?"

He shook his head, silver highlights glittering in the depths of his golden eyes. Of course not. That would be too easy.

She drummed her fingers faster, and peered longingly out the windshield toward the exit--and escape. "So where does that leave us?"

Again, he leaned toward her, and she drew back, inhaling in a slow breath which settled deep in her lungs. Her gaze drifted to his lips, full and sensuous, only inches away, and her throat went dry. She shifted her focus to his eyes.

His hands settled on her shoulders, holding her steady as she fell headlong into the depths of his intense golden gaze.

"It leaves two people who are very attracted to each other in a very frustrating position."

He cupped the back of her head and stared into her eyes, the smoky depths telling her to surrender. His face lowered to hers and she felt herself swept away, like being caught in an overflowing dam, carrying her to parts unknown. And there was no way she could fight the overwhelming current. His lips met hers and her eyes fluttered closed. She felt the warmth of his flesh on hers, the heat of his passion seeping into her, setting her blood on fire. His arms slid around her, pulling her against his body. Her breasts seemed to sigh at the pleasure of being pressed against his hard, solid chest. She knew she should push away, escape the tempting radiance of his desire, knowing reality would interrupt all too soon. But she couldn't. God help her, she wanted this as much as he did. Maybe more.

And that frightened her.

Somehow she knew something that felt this good couldn't be good for her. She'd never felt an overpowering attraction like this, hadn't believed such a thing existed outside Hollywood. When people told her they had felt like this--specifically, when her mother told her she'd felt this way with her stepfather, Eric, back when they'd first met--Gill hadn't understood it. How could her mother have fallen for such a jerk? A jerk who had nearly destroyed everything they'd ever cared about.

Well, if this was the same thing that had blinded Mom to the kind of man Eric had been, then it was to be

avoided at all costs. She stiffened and pushed against his chest. He released her and she drew away from him and the wild attraction he triggered in her.

Mom had called it infatuation. Cade called it chemistry. Gill just called it dangerous. Far too dangerous for her. She wasn't about to let a failed chemistry experiment ruin her life.

Cade watched emotions scroll across Gill's face like text on a computer screen, too fast to read. He didn't know why, but he had lost her. A moment ago, she'd been clinging to him like a damp cotton shirt in an August heat wave, and now she sat as rigid as an icicle. Even her expression had hardened.

He was sure she had been close to saying yes, at least to dinner. He never pushed a woman to go out with him--if he thought she didn't want to. But he could sense Gill did. She responded to him like dry grass to a match, igniting at his touch. But for some reason she felt compelled to douse the flame.

She tugged at her shirt, trying to straighten it. "Mauling me will not convince me to go out with you."

"Why not? It's been working so far."

Her lips compressed and her eyes glazed with frost.

Oops. Obviously she was in no mood to be teased.

"I'm sorry, Gill. It was a joke." He would have said more, but the glaze on her eyes seemed to turn liquid. Was the reason she pressed her lips together so tightly to stop them from quivering? Could he have hurt her feelings?

"Gill, I didn't mean to--" He reached for her to pull her into his arms, but she jerked away.

"No, you're right."

Her voice sounded hard, yet quivery at the same time. Like an icicle in a windstorm, he feared it would break at any moment.

"I've allowed you to kiss me two--no, three--times already, and we've only known each other a couple of hours." Her hands clenched tightly in her lap. "It's obviously not your fault you got the wrong impression about me." Her eyes hardened again. "And it is the wrong impression. Since we won't be seeing each other again, however, I won't worry about whether you believe me or not." She curled her fingers around the steering wheel, her hands rigid. "Goodbye, Cade."

"Gill--"

"I've given you a ride home, now please get out so I can be on my way." Her voice sounded so tight, he

thought it might crack.

Damn, him and his big mouth. He knew that pushing would only make things worse so, with reluctance, he climbed out of the car. As soon as he closed the door, she zoomed away.

Cade shook his head and strolled across the small parking area, trying to figure how he had blown it so badly. Sometimes he seemed to read Gill so clearly then, suddenly, out of the blue, she'd zigzag in a totally unexpected direction.

He wound through the maze of townhouses to the last unit at the far end of the complex, beside a large clump of maple trees. He knocked on the door and waited, but Luke didn't answer. A quick glance at his watch told him Luke must have left for work by now so he dug into his pocket for his copy of Luke's door key and let himself into the house. He kicked off his shoes at the front door, not wanting to track dirt across the spotless, white tiled floor. Luke's place might be small and sparsely furnished, but Luke kept it so clean it glistened.

As Cade wandered down the hall, then into the kitchen, he realized he'd miss this place. He and Luke had spent some great times sitting around this table playing cards and catching up on their friendship after six months apart.

A scrap of paper sat on the table with Cade's name boldly printed across the top. There's pizza in the fridge. Help yourself.

Cade pursed his lips. Clearly, Luke hadn't had the same confidence that Cade would succeed in convincing his lady-in-red to go out to dinner that Cade himself had had. He opened the fridge and tugged out the large, flat box, along with a can of cola.

After what just happened between him and Gill, he didn't know how to proceed. Her barriers had gone up even higher than before.

He tossed the pizza box on the table and flipped open the lid. He took a bite of cold pizza and chewed thoughtfully, reviewing the past afternoon as a series of images which fluttered through his brain. There had to be some clue to help him unlock the puzzle that was Gill. Remembering the hurt in her eyes during his last few moments with her, he nearly choked on his pizza. He wished he could go back and cut that comment about mauling from the conversation. But, then, come to think of it, her barriers had gone up before that. He rewound the scene in his brain. She had fought so hard to resist her attraction to him the whole time, but when he'd kissed her in the car, she'd succumbed briefly, then pulled away.

Something from earlier in the afternoon niggled at his memory. Another time when she'd switched moods suddenly.

Plums. They'd been enjoying a fun by-play of words when she'd surprised him with her comment about

deflowering. He'd wondered briefly if she'd been trying to tell him something. At his startled reaction, however, she'd promptly denied it, claiming it had only been a figure of speech.

But, of course, she would say something like that. Now, her subsequent awkwardness made him wonder anew.

Could the beautiful Gillian be untouched? Innocent? A virgin?

It would explain why the electric attraction between them unsettled her so much.

The theory seemed a little farfetched. Gill must have had plenty of offers.

Still, he sensed a woman like Gill wouldn't share such an intimate experience with anyone unless she felt a strong bond. He also sensed she kept her barriers so well fortified it might be nearly impossible to get close enough to form any kind of bond.

He would really like to know what--or who--had driven her to build such a strong fortress around herself.

A deep longing to pull down that fortress, brick by brick, surged through him. To take her in his arms and initiate her into the world of loving. More than longing surged. His erection pressed painfully at his fly and he groaned.

Cade, you fool, he admonished himself, you must be buying into that theory you told Dad.

For years his father had been pushing Cade to get married, and in a desperate attempt to make him back off, Cade had told him he would only marry a virgin. It wasn't true, of course, but it had the desired effect. His father had approved of Cade's choice and seemed to understand that a woman like that, in Cade's general age range, would be nearly impossible to find. He had stopped pressing Cade, obviously believing Cade really was seeking an appropriate wife.

Wouldn't Dad be thrilled if he knew Cade had found just such a woman?

He dropped his half eaten slice of pizza onto his plate and opened his can of cola, then took a swig.

Yeah, right. Like Gill really was a virgin.

Just because she was skittish around him, didn't mean she'd never been with a man. He was reading too much into her resistance. After all, he'd rarely had a woman turn him down before, and maybe that fact had gone to his head. And it was probably less because he was totally irresistible and more because few women would turn down a chance to date a millionaire.

Too bad Gill hated rich men.

The thought stunned him for a moment. He lowered the can of cola to the table as he considered the thought that had slipped into his brain. Could he actually be regretting he couldn't use the fact he was rich to win Gill? That would totally defeat the purpose of chasing her.

He chewed on that idea as he chewed on the rest of his pizza. Must be his strong determination to win. And he would. But how?

He tossed the pop can into the recycle bin and strolled to the garage where he dropped the empty pizza box on the growing stack. Back in the kitchen, he grabbed another cola and sat back down. The phone stood in a caddie on a wall-mounted shelf above the table, and Cade noticed a pen sticking out. He picked it up and tapped it between his fingers as he thought.

He could send Gill a couple dozen roses.

No, too cliché.

He grabbed a notepad and touched the pen to paper. A large rose took shape on the page. What about a single rose every hour on the hour?

No, too extravagant for a working stiff.

Somewhere along the way he'd drawn Gill's face on the flower, and pointy thorns along the stem. Her defenses? He had to find some way to wear them down. So far, direct contact had worked quite well. Since she wouldn't come to him, he'd have to go to her. Since he didn't know where she lived, he would have to hang out at the flying club.

Where she would do her best to avoid him. And she'd probably be very successful, since no doubt she spent most of her time in the air with her students.

Her students.

An idea zoomed through his head. Cade grabbed the phone and dialed his office.

"Rita, it's Cade. Listen, tell Dad I've decided to take some time off after all." He sketched an airplane on the pad next to the rose.

"You? Take time off from work? That's a first. How long?"

"Oh, a couple of weeks."

He heard a choking sound. "You're kidding, right?"

"Rita, Dad did suggest I take some time off to settle in. Besides, I think three years without a vacation entitles me to some time off."

"I'm not giving you a hard time, Cade. In fact, it seems I've used the same arguments trying to persuade you to take a break from the long hours you put in. I think it's great you're finally doing it." She paused. "There's just one thing, and I hate to bring this up."

"What is it?"

"Well, your father scheduled a meeting of the board Monday morning and he wants you to attend."

Seven days from now.

"No problem. I don't plan to go out of town, so I'll just pop in for the morning and everyone will be happy. In the meantime, tell Jenkins to oversee the details of the Japan contract. If he has any concerns or questions he should send me an e-mail. I'll check my mail once a day."

Since Cade had just returned from managing a large contract in Japan, he had no specific responsibilities here yet, except tying up loose ends with Japan, and Jenkins could handle that.

"Do you have a definite date you'll be returning?"

"No, not really. I'll play it by ear." He'd never done anything like this before and rather liked the feeling. Taking time for himself. To be spontaneous. Not to be tied to a schedule. It gave him a feeling of freedom he'd never experienced before.

"I don't think your Dad will be pleased."

No kidding. Dad would hate not knowing exactly when Cade would return.

"If Dad gives you a hard time, tell him I'm pursuing a woman. That should stop him."

He drew Gill in the front seat of the plane, a wide smile reflecting the sheer joy he'd witnessed as they'd taken off in that little plane when she'd wanted to demonstrate her flying abilities.

"I take it you found your lady-in-red."

"You bet."

"So you're taking time off to woo a woman?" Her voice sounded doubtful. "That's not your typical approach."

He smiled widely, drawing Gill's hair as a flowing cloud behind her. "She'd not a typical woman."

"I'm curious, Cade. Just how do you plan to win Ms. Right?"

His busy hand sketched himself in the seat behind Gill, reaching forward with one hand to grasp her mass of hair, intent on taming it.

"By taking flying lessons."

Chapter 5

Gill's stomach churned as she sipped her tea. Mom happily finished the last bite of blueberry cheesecake on her plate, totally oblivious to Gill's anxiety. Gill had picked up Mom's favorite desert from the Richmond bakery after dropping Cade off this afternoon, then she called Mom and invited her over. They typically met Tuesday nights for dinner and a movie, and would this week, too, but this was her peace offering after this morning's incident in Farraday's office. It also gave her a chance to discuss something with her mother that weighed heavily on her mind. She just wasn't sure how to broach the topic.

Thankfully, Mom hadn't mentioned the meeting with Farraday Sr. That would not have helped Gill's frame of mind. After all the emotional turmoil she had suffered today, she didn't think she could cope with having to defend herself. She still felt too raw from the encounter with Cade.

What Cade had said had bugged her not because he'd meant to insult her--she knew he hadn't intended that--but because it was so close to the truth. Every time he got near her, he knocked her off balance. Ready to tumble into some kind of trouble. She didn't like the wild longings he triggered in her. Not exactly. She did want to understand them, however, so she decided a good, long talk with her mother was in order.

Gill leaned back in the rocking chair, one hand curled over the end of the armrest. She rocked a few times, gathering courage.

"Gill, when are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Hmm?" Gill realized Mom was staring at her with those alert mother-eyes of hers.

"Does this have anything to do with what happened today at my office?"

She leaned forward. "Mom, I'm really sorry if I embarrassed you, but--"

Mom held her hand up. "Gill, don't worry about it. I understand why you were upset."

She glanced at her mother sheepishly from behind her tea cup as she took a sip. She had left Mom in an awkward situation. "Did Mr. Farraday give you a hard time?"

"No, of course not. He knows that parents don't have total control over their kids."

"He knows that, does he?" Gill asked, a note of skepticism coloring her words.

"He really is a very nice man, you know. He just doesn't handle people well in social situations."

Gill couldn't help wondering if like father like son and cringed inside. Thank heavens she'd avoided meeting Jeremy Farraday all these years. How could Mom possibly think Gill would be interested in meeting him? Of course, the answer was simple. Mom was a very nice person and saw the good side of everyone. That's why she thought Farraday Sr. was nice. She wasn't always the best judge of a person's character. And that led Gill back to the reason she'd wanted to talk to her mother.

Gill placed her tea cup on the coffee table and took a deep breath. "Mom, when you first met Eric--"

Mom waved a hand dismissively. "Please, I didn't come here to be depressed."

Her off-hand remark made Gill wonder if she ought to pursue the questions she'd planned to ask her mother, but she felt Mom's keen gaze focus on her.

"What is it, Gill?" Her mother's concerned expression warned Gill if she went down this path she might wind up explaining more than she wanted to, but her need to know overrode her caution.

"Why did you marry him?"

Mom sighed. "Good question. I've asked myself that a thousand times."

They'd started this discussion about a thousand times, too, but Gill had always backed off when Mom successfully diverted her initial questions. This time, she had decided to push it.

Gill leaned forward, linking her hands in her lap. "Mom, I really want to know. It's important."

Mom stared at Gill for a moment, as though gauging her resolve, then put her plate on the end table. "All right." She gazed off into space for a few moments, as though searching for words in the air around her, then she looked back to Gill.

"You remember how difficult it was after your father died?" Mom's face seemed to grow older right before Gill's eyes, overcome by a deep sadness. "How much I missed him?"

Gill slipped onto the couch beside her and took Mom's hands in hers, sorry she'd started this. Mom looked into Gill's face and smiled, a slight tremor on her lip.

"How much we both missed him." Mom's voice came out shaky.

Gill wrapped her arms around her. "I know, Mom. I miss him, too."

Tears welled up in her eyes. For her mom. For herself. For her dad.

She glanced at the picture on the shelf beside the television. Her dad's face smiled back at her. The same smile she used to look forward to every Saturday morning when he'd rouse her out of bed to take her flying. She could still remember the giant bear hug he'd give her as he swept her out of bed.

She missed his strong arms and the wonderful camaraderie she and her father had shared. A deep ache at losing such a special man, a man she had loved so dearly, almost overwhelmed her. If she still felt his loss so profoundly, what must Mom be feeling? She held her mother in her arms, patting her back, and tried to give back some of the comfort her mother had given her during those lonely years after Dad's death.

He had played such a special part in both their lives. How had Mom ever thought she could replace such a gem? Especially with a jerk like Eric?

Finally, Mom leaned back and sent her a tremulous smile, her eyes glistening with tears. Gill snatched a tissue from the box on the end table and handed it to her.

Mom wiped her eyes. "It was hard to make ends meet."

Mom had looked so lost after Dad's death, and she'd been so worried about supporting the two of them.

"But you did it. You got a job and--"

She clasped her fingers around Gill's. "But it wasn't easy, and I missed having a man around. Someone I could depend on. Someone I could talk to." She patted Gill's hand. "And you needed a father."

She scrunched up the tissue and dropped it on the empty plate.

"Then Eric came along. He was charming and attentive. He had money." She sent Gill a mildly challenging look. "Which I don't happen to think is a bad thing."

Gill leaned her shoulder against the back of the couch. "As long as it's not the only reason to get married."

"It wasn't."

Gill stared at Mom for a moment, pushing herself to ask the one question she'd never asked before, but had wanted to a million times. "So, did you love him?"

Mom sighed. "I thought I did. I felt a kind of magic when he was around, a feeling that sent my senses haywire and made my brain forget how to reason."

Gill shivered, hating the thought of being so out of control. "It sounds like insanity."

"No, not insanity. Infatuation. Like the fool's gold of emotions. You think you've found pure gold, just to find it's all glitter and no substance."

Gill drew a knee up to her chest and wrapped her arm around it. "So how do you ever know if you've found the real thing?"

"You'll know." Mom laid her hand flat on her chest over her heart. "Deep down inside. Where it counts."

"If that's true, why did you marry Eric?"

Mom smiled, but no humor lit her eyes. "Sometimes that spark between two people--that magic we mistake for the real thing--can blind you. Sometimes you want it so bad, you ignore that inner voice that always tells the truth."

It sounded frightening. Relying on little voices and inner feelings. Gill relied on hard facts and reason, not instincts or emotions. Those were too easily misunderstood. Too fuzzy.

She waved her hand back and forth in a flurry. "So you got caught up in this magic and forgot about everything else?"

She recalled the first time Eric had come by the house to pick Mom up for a date, remembered the feeling of rejection at being left with the neighbors' teenage daughter while Mom went out with this stranger. She remembered staring out the window of her bedroom long after the sitter had put her to bed, her cheek plastered against the hard, cold glass while she stared out at the snowy street below, waiting to catch sight

of the black limousine. Waiting for her mother to come back to her.

Mom laid her hand on Gill's, the warmth driving back the bitter cold of lonely memories. "No, I never forgot about you. Maybe you felt like I had when Eric and I first started dating and I spent so much time with him, and then later when...."

She glanced away and Gill knew she must be remembering those terrible episodes when Eric would scour Gill's ego clean with his steel wool personality. She had never figured out why he had disliked her so much, or why he had constantly berated her. Maybe forcing her self-confidence into the sub-zero levels somehow boosted his own.

Mom took Gill's hand in both of hers. "Oh, Gill, I really thought he'd be a good father to you. He seemed to adore you, but then, after we were married ... I didn't realize it was all an act. I know I should have left him earlier, but I've never been as strong as you. I'm so sorry for--"

Gill put her arms around her. "Mom, it's okay. It wasn't your fault."

Gill wasn't the only one hurt by Eric. Even before their first wedding anniversary, she'd seen the unhappiness etched in her mother's eyes. During the divorce, Gill had heard about the other women. Mom had known about them, but had put up with his indiscretions because she'd wanted a stable home for Gill. When Mom finally did leave, the prenuptial agreement left her with nothing but bad memories.

"You did what you thought best, Mom. I know that."

Mom eased away and smiled, though Gill knew she did it to hide her emotional turmoil. "So, what brought on this discussion?"

Gill settled her hands in her lap. "You've told me before about this all-consuming attraction you had for Eric and I was curious. I've never understood how someone could feel so drawn to someone that they lose track of all common sense."

"And you're asking about this now because...?" Mom prompted. Her eyes had intensified, warning Gill she had definitely said too much. "Have you met someone?"

Gill sighed. "No, Mom. At least, not the way you mean."

"But you have met someone new. And you're attracted to him?" The look of hope in her mother's eyes started a queasy feeling deep in the pit of Gill's stomach. "That was you I saw kissing that young man in the parking garage, wasn't it?"

Every muscle in Gill tensed. "Why do you think that?" She did not want Mom to start asking a lot of questions that would lead to her thinking there was something between she and Cade, especially when

she'd already decided never to see him again.

"Let's just say, you should have taken my advice and worn the black suit."

So, Cade hadn't been quite as effective a shield as she'd thought. "Why didn't you come over?"

"Don't be silly. The flash of red I saw before you ducked behind him wasn't enough to tell for sure. If it wasn't you I would have felt like a fool. And if it was, there was no way I was going to interrupt a doozy of a kiss like that! I'm the one who wants you to meet a nice man and get married, remember?"

Most mothers would be shocked to see their daughter kissing a strange man in a parking garage, but not her mother. She assumed it meant a trip down the bridal path.

"I'm not going to marry him, Mom. In fact, I'm never going to see him again."

Mom's eyes widened in surprise. "Why? After that kiss, didn't he ask you out?"

"Oh, he asked. I just said no." Several times.

"And I thought I raised a smart daughter."

"Mom."

Mom locked gazes with Gill. "I mean it. If a guy makes your heart flutter, you're supposed to say yes, at least to going out. After a few dates, if you still get that quivery feeling around him, then, maybe, you know...."

Good grief, she couldn't believe this was her mother talking. She grabbed the cushion sitting beside her and plunked it on her lap, clamping her fingers around the softness. "Mom, forget 'you know' or anything else. I am not getting involved with a guy because my heart goes pitter pat. In fact, I want to stay well away from anyone who affects my senses so badly I can't think straight."

Her mother grinned over the china cup she'd raised to her lips. "You've got it bad, eh?"

Gill's fingers dug deeper into the cushion. "But it's no reason--"

Mom put down the cup and planted her hand on Gill's shoulder, her teasing expression transforming into something more serious. "You're wrong. It is exactly the reason. You may not understand it. You definitely may not like it. But your intuition is telling you he's the right man. Unfortunately, you're so busy trying to prove a woman can be as logical as a man that you're ignoring your intuition--probably dismissing it as something far too feminine to rely on--so this attraction is your heart screaming at you at the top of its lungs."

A denial bubbled up in Gill, but she knew expressing it would be pointless. Mom understood a lot about her, but not everything. "My heart doesn't have lungs. You're getting carried away with your metaphors."

Mom tightened her grip on Gill's shoulders. "Listen to what your heart is telling you."

"Just like you did with Eric?" Gill asked gently.

Mom released her and stood, then strode across the room to the window. Gill could see Mom's reflection in the glass as she stared at the lights of the city below. "That was different. If I'd been honest with myself ... if I'd listened to my heart...."

Gill stepped to her side, confused by Mom's words. "Are you saying you knew you really didn't love him but you married him anyway?"

Mom gripped the edge of the curtains. "You know, they call it fool's gold because it can make a fool of you." The words came out like pebbles whisked across fine sandpaper. "It can make you believe it's the real thing if you want it bad enough." She turned back to face Gill. "But deep down inside, I knew the truth."

Gill put her hand on Mom's shoulder. "Maybe I know, too."

* * * *

Forget about Cade. Just forget about him.

Gill thumped one clenched fist on the steering wheel in an accompanying rhythm to the words which had become a mantra over the past twelve hours. She flicked on her left signal then turned into the flying club parking lot. But how did she go about forgetting the most unforgettable man she'd ever met? Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome had played a starring role in her dreams all night.

She pulled into a parking spot two down from the flying club door, then climbed out of her car. Heat shimmered off the blacktop of the road and her light cotton shirt clung to her. She shaded her eyes from the glint of sunlight reflecting off her boss' shiny pickup truck parked in the spot next to hers. It was the same make as Cade's, though several years younger and in much better shape. She grabbed her flight kit and backpack from her passenger seat and locked the door.

As she walked across the parking lot toward the flying club, she marveled at how many things reminded

her of Cade. The sunshine gilding the glass door a lustrous golden color. She pulled open the door and strode inside, breathing a sigh of relief as cool air surrounded her. She strode across the large room toward the desk where she would stow her pack. The broad back of a man standing looking out the window.

"Gill, got a minute?" Dave, her boss, called to her from inside his small office next door to the meeting room used for ground school classes.

She changed course and headed toward his office. "Sure. What's up?"

He stood up and intercepted her at the door. "I have someone who wants to sign up for the current session of ground school."

She raised an eyebrow. "It's a little late. Did you tell him it started last Wednesday?" Whoever it was had already lost two nights out of fifteen.

"He said he's willing to pay extra for tutoring so he can catch up. I thought you'd be willing to spend the time. If you do, he'll probably sign on with you for dual instruction."

"Sounds good."

It also sounded like the guy had more money than brains. Why he couldn't wait a few more weeks until the next session stumped her. After all, even if he was really gung ho to get into the sky--which she wholeheartedly understood--he could take lessons in advance of the theory.

She shrugged mentally. Who was she to question good fortune when it jumped into her lap? Her current number of students wasn't enough to keep her working full time and the ground school sessions didn't cover the difference in income, not to mention the hours she needed to build up so she could go for her commercial license.

"I assume he's willing to spend time tonight reading the material?" she asked.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Dave ushered her toward the window. "Mr. Smith?"

The broad back she'd seen earlier turned around to reveal a familiar half-grin.

Her heart plummeted in a bungee jump toward her ankles then back into her chest. "Cade. What are you doing here?" She stared at him in disbelief. "You're interested in taking flying lessons?" After she'd dragged him into Puff to prove her flying skills, she could have sworn he would prefer never to set foot in a small aircraft again.

"You seem to make a habit of answering your own questions."

That reminder of their first meeting and the fact he had obstructed her exit from the parking garage with his truck switched on her 'anger button'. He obstructed her retreat now, too. A hasty and definite retreat from an attraction she didn't understand. And didn't want to understand.

She glared at him, her fingers drumming against her thigh. She didn't want to spend time with him. Why couldn't she make him understand that? Didn't the man take a hint? She didn't want to spend time with him. The thought of spending several hours inside a small aircraft with this man--which would be a hundred times worse than the experience in her Neon--made her nerve endings crackle like staticky fur on a long-haired cat. She could almost see the sparks flaring.

One of those invisible sparks ignited an idea. There was one sure way to find out if he really wanted to learn to fly. She folded her arms across her chest as she offered a challenge. "Why don't I take you up on one of our introductory flights to show you some of the things you'll learn?" Like stalls and spins. She'd seen many a man turn green while spinning directly toward the ground from five thousand feet.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Gill," Dave's warning voice cut in. "The man's already sold." His expression assured her he'd recognized her intent and wouldn't appreciate her scaring away a client. "Now, why don't you get him a flight kit, then the two of you can discuss how you're going to bring him up to speed?"

She threw a sidelong glare at Cade, who smiled pleasantly back at her.

Dave, either not seeing the exchange or ignoring it, turned to Cade. "I'll leave you in Gill's capable hands, Mr. Smith."

As Dave strode away, Cade turned to Gill and sent her a devilish grin. "I can't think of a better place to be."

Her cheeks flared in a combination of anger and embarrassment at the memory of him being in--or rather, under--her hands when she'd used him as a grease rag. And that particular memory affected her in another way entirely--turning her body into a great impression of a Jell-O jiggler. How could he say something so predictably male and still make her insides quiver?

"Exactly what are you up to?" Gill barely suppressed the snarl in her voice.

"I thought we'd covered that already. I'm here to take flying lessons and--"

"Really?" She narrowed her eyes. Could he even afford the lessons? Judging from the vehicle he drove, and the clothes he wore, she'd guess no. "Has anyone told you how much flying lessons cost?"

He shrugged one shoulder in a maddeningly casual manner. "Don't worry about it. I've got it covered."

She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyebrows darting up. "Dipping into the money you've set aside for a rainy day?"

"My motto is, why save up for bad weather, when you can surround yourself with sunshine?"

He sent her a significant look, his smile broadening, but she ignored his implication. Great. He'd probably saved a lump of money for who knew what and suddenly flying--or, rather, chasing her--had become a higher priority and he'd decided to blow the bundle. She should feel flattered, but she didn't. Not much, anyway, and the little she did feel, she stomped into insignificance.

"With that kind of attitude you'll be broke forever."

"What's wrong with being broke? I thought you didn't like rich guys."

Oh, good. He'd mistaken her dislike of overbearing rich men for disdain of money entirely. Time to set him straight. "Maybe not, but I believe in planning and setting goals."

He stroked a finger down her cheek. "Oh, but I do have goals." His murmured words, along with his gentle touch, sent alarms buzzing through her, triggering her mantra of the past two days.

Forget about Cade. Just forget about him.

But his warm chocolate gaze triggered memories too sweet to forget. Like his arms pulling her close. His heart beating against her chest. His lips warm and insistent against hers.

Her logical side pushed away the memories--or, at least, side-stepped them for now. She drew in a deep breath to steady her voice, determined to set him straight.

"I mean trying to get somewhere in this world, trying to prove yourself."

"I don't need to prove myself to anyone." His expression hardened a little and she wondered if she'd hit a nerve.

"That's where you and I differ. I need to prove myself every day."

She marched behind the desk and tugged open the top cupboard. Ten new flight kits lay in a stack and she grabbed one off the top.

He rested his elbows on the counter and propped his chin on his hands. "Why?"

She tucked the kit under her arm and led him to a couple of chairs near a low table in the lounge. Out the

large set of windows, she could see a blue and white Piper Cherokee taxi by on its way to the runway.

"Because no one allows a woman to get ahead in this man's world unless she's better and brighter and more qualified than any of the men she's up against. It's not enough to be as good as the next guy, or even a head above. A woman has to be--"

Damn, get off the pulpit, girl.

She drew in a deep breath. "Never mind." She plunked the vinyl portfolio on the table in front of him. "Here's your flight kit." She unzipped it and pulled out the text book. "There are two classes a week. Monday and Wednesday evenings at seven o'clock. You'll need to read the first two lessons to catch up with the rest of the class, and do the exercises in the workbook."

She opened the textbook. "I recommend you read over the table of contents to get an idea of what we'll be covering. We can set a time tomorrow to go over the lessons and exercises, and answer any questions you have." She stood up and strolled to the counter to check her schedule book. She flipped to tomorrow's date and scanned the page, looking for an empty slot. Depressingly, there were a lot of them. "How's four o'clock sound?"

He glanced at the schedule. "Eleven's better."

She gazed at him questioningly. "Is that going to give you enough time? It's important that you understand the basics covered in those chapters."

"No problem."

She raised an eyebrow but did not share her thoughts on the matter. "Okay." She wrote him in. "I'll see you then." She turned and strode toward the door leading to the hangars.

"That's it. You aren't going to cover any of the material now?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Read the book, then we'll talk."

He raised an eyebrow. "Can I have your phone number in case I have any questions as I'm going along?"

He was so transparent. "Nice try, but no way. And asking for a ride home won't get you very far, either. I've got a date for dinner right after work."

Cade watched her stroll outside and cross the pavement toward the hanger, disappointment gripping him.

"Don't worry," a female voice said.

He glanced up to see the red-headed receptionist smiling at him.

"The date's with her mother."

* * * *

Cade felt like he was back in school as he pored over the ground school material. First he read the two chapters of the manual, then spent all evening at the club watching the videos that accompanied the class segments. When he got home around ten, he started on the exercises.

The next morning, he arrived at the club at ten thirty, thoroughly prepared for his meeting with Gill. He'd specifically chosen an eleven o'clock appointment so he could talk her into joining him for lunch.

He had studied all the material in-depth, and filled out the exercise book with great care, intending to impress her, but at noon he found himself alone, driving back to Luke's to return Old Blue.

When he arrived at the townhouse complex, he pulled the truck into the parking space in front of Luke's unit, then crossed to the door and knocked. After several knocks, Luke pulled open the wooden door.

"Hey, buddy." Luke stepped aside to let Cade in. Fine white dust clung to his dark blond hair and clothes. "I thought you had a date for lunch."

Cade grumbled and stepped inside. Luke slapped his shoulder, chuckling. "Well, even you can't win 'em all."

Cade grumbled a little louder. A vague comment about him deserving to win them all. He leaned back against the entrance wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

"So, do you want to grab some lunch?" Obviously, Luke was working, so he shouldn't entice him away, but damn it, he was depressed. And anyway, Luke had to eat, too. "I'll treat at Belamy's."

Luke smiled. "Sure, let me clean up downstairs first."

Cade followed Luke into the basement where he was working on his latest creation. A three foot statue of a dancer, her skirt flowing behind her in graceful curves, stood in the center of the work area. Cade noticed Luke had added more detail to the face, her features taking shape quite nicely. It would be a beautiful piece when it was finished. Of course, all Luke's pieces were.

Cade glanced around at the dozen or so sculptures on shelves lining the room. Cade admired Luke's talent, but he couldn't understand how he could spend so much time working on something that in all probability would never make him a decent living. Chances were very slim he'd luck out and be discovered, then be able to sell his pieces for an extravagant amount of money. Until then, Luke worked six nights a week as a waiter, and every day laboring over his art. Of course, Luke said it didn't matter if he ever made it big, as long as he could spend the time doing what he truly loved. He said that was the true measure of success. Cade thought Luke a bit misguided.

Luke finished tidying up his tools, then grabbed a shower. Cade sipped a cola while doodling on the pad on the kitchen table.

"If that's what this woman looks like, no wonder you're so eager to go out with her."

Cade glanced up to see Luke, freshly laundered, grinning at him. The picture taking shape on the page showed a curvaceous Gill, sitting on the wing of a plane with a wide smile on her face. The smile he'd seen on her face today. A smile not meant for him, but for the guy who had the twelve o'clock lesson with her. A guy she seemed very friendly with. He drew a few bold strokes to show detail on the airplane.

"I still can't believe you--a self-proclaimed workaholic--taking time off to pursue this woman."

Cade finished the sketch by adding a few sprays of grass and a sun shining brightly in the sky. "Hey, even workaholics deserve a vacation."

"Sure, but it's been so long since you've taken one, you seem to have forgotten the basic principle. If I had your money and time to kill, I'd go somewhere like Bermuda and spend my time wind surfing or scuba diving. You know, fun stuff like that."

"You pick your sports and I'll pick mine."

Luke laughed and slapped him on the back. "You always did march to your own drummer, buddy."

Cade stood up. "My car or yours."

"Let's take Old Blue. You've been using her so much I hardly get to see her anymore."

Cade grinned. "You're the only person I know who would prefer to drive an old pickup truck rather than a shiny new Jaguar."

"Well, you're the only one I know who'd borrow an old pickup truck to impress a date."

Cade smiled at the irony. "You mean, to un-impress her."

Luke shook his head. "Whatever you say, buddy."

* * * *

Gill's last lesson ended at six, giving her little more than an hour to grab dinner and set up the classroom before her ground school students arrived. She rolled the overhead projector into the room, then plunked her backpack on the old wooden desk at the front of the room. As she uncoiled the electrical cord from the trolley, she found herself glancing up at every sound, expecting Cade to peer inside and offer to help.

He had been underfoot most of the afternoon, but she had successfully avoided him most of the time. Luckily, she'd had a fairly full schedule. When she wasn't in the air with one of her students, she'd holed up in the instructor's lounge doing paperwork. Last time she saw Cade, he'd been watching her stroll out to Puff for her five o'clock lesson.

She sat down at the desk and opened her pack, then tugged out her notes and the various textbooks included in the students' flight kits. Cade had impressed her this afternoon when she'd reviewed the course material with him. He'd obviously read the chapters in detail and carefully gone over the exercises. Aerodynamics, even in such a rudimentary form as covered in the first chapter, intimidated a lot of students. Cade, however, had breezed through it. He obviously had brains. Why didn't he use them to find a better job?

The minute hand on the clock flicked to the nine. Quarter to seven.

She heard footsteps and glanced toward the doorway. Disappointment flooded through her when she saw it wasn't Cade. Idiot, she scolded herself. She didn't want him to be the first one here. She didn't want to be alone with him and his powerful charisma.

She nodded and smiled at the two students who sat down in a couple of seats near the front. As the minutes ticked by, more people arrived and she greeted each one as they came in.

Finally, Cade arrived with a minute to spare. Her heart did a backwards tumble at the sight of him. He smiled at her as he moved to a seat in the center row, about halfway back. Less than two meters from her.

Far too close.

His presence surrounded her. Crowded her. She wanted to leap to her feet and step back, needing to put more distance between them. Instead, she took a deep breath and smiled, then glanced around the room.

Everyone had arrived, so she stood up.

"Hello, everyone. We have a new student joining us this evening."

* * * *

Cade grabbed a coffee and carried it back to the classroom. Gill had slipped away as soon as she'd announced the fifteen minute break. He lounged at the back of the room idly watching clumps of students gathering together and chatting.

"Yeah, but what does a woman know about aircraft engines?"

Cade swung around to look at the group of three young men sitting two rows over.

"She did a good job covering the basics of aerodynamics," another countered.

The first speaker shoved the red textbook across the desk. "Basic is the key word." He jabbed the cover with his index finger. "I bet she doesn't know anything not in the book."

Cade forced his expression to stay calm, fighting the building anger within him. A surge of protectiveness shot through him. He wanted to drag this jerk outside and bury his fist in the guy's teeth.

Gill stepped into the classroom and the three guys took their seats. Cade noticed a sly smile slide across the jerk's mouth. He meant trouble, Cade could feel it in his gut.

Gill moved to the front of the room and waited until everyone quieted. She didn't have to speak over the group to garner their attention. Her mere presence in the room, and her air of authority, did the trick. "Next we're going to cover weather," she said.

"Excuse me, Ms. Right. Before we go on, I had a question about the last segment."

Gill turned toward the jerk. "What is it, Mr. Kent?"

Although she appeared relaxed, Cade had been around her enough to sense her restrained annoyance. Cade would bet this guy had given her trouble in the past.

"You've explained some of the basics of the aircraft engine, but I don't quite understand how the controls

work."

Her eyes narrowed. "What exactly do you want to know?"

"I mean," he said, glancing around at his peers, clearly quite certain he'd embarrass Gill with a question she couldn't answer, "how does turning the control stick translate to the ailerons moving?"

Cade recognized the anger igniting in the depths of her eyes and wondered if she'd lose her temper here in the classroom. If she blew up like he'd seen her do in the past, she might lose the respect of her students. He desperately wanted to do something to defuse the situation. She knew something about car engines, but did she know the details of aircraft design? If he could have answered the question for her, he would, but he knew nothing about cars, let alone airplanes.

Gill paced toward Mr. Kent, her hands balled into fists at her side and he feared she would slug the guy, but she quickly clamped down on her reaction and shifted into a cool, authoritative stance.

"There are three common systems used for the transmission of stick and pedal movements from the cockpit controls to the control surfaces." She counted off fingers. "Cables and quadrants. Push-pull rods and levers. Torque tubes."

She folded her hands behind her back and strolled across the front of the room. "The most popular is the cable and quadrant system which uses a pulley with a flexible steel cable serving the purpose of the drive belt. The cockpit control rotates a forward pulley which is linked to another pulley which deflects the control surface, such as the aileron. There are several advantages of such a system."

Cade watched Mr. Kent's eyes glaze over while Gill listed advantages, then disadvantages. Clearly, the guy hadn't expected Gill to actually give an in-depth technical answer. Pride surged through Cade at her competence--both in knowing her subject and her handling of the situation--as her words slipped in one of Cade's ears and out the other, with the odd phrase like "high strength-to-weight ratio", "constant tensile stress", and "true linear actuation" snagging in his brain. It seemed the rest of the class didn't follow much either because many glared at her antagonist. Maybe the jerk would think twice before challenging her again.

"Since we don't have time to go over the other systems in detail and still cover the required course material, I would be happy to discuss them with you after class, Mr. Kent, and anyone else who'd care to stay."

Her gaze scanned the faces of her students, most feigning great interest in their notes, or the blackboard, or anywhere but Gill, probably terrified she'd ask them a question about her mini lecture.

And he had thought she needed protecting? When would he ever learn?

Her focus zeroed in on Cade, challenge crackling from her blue eyes, and he realized she expected the same attitude from him as she'd received from Mr. Kent.

He smiled and winked at her. She blinked, obviously surprised at his response. Her gaze drifted to the doodle he'd been working--a class of bulgy-eyed students with blank expressions on their faces staring at Gill holding a pointer toward a blackboard scrawled with complex equations. Her cheeks tinged pink, probably because of the miniskirt and revealing sweater he'd drawn her in, but her mouth stretched into a brief smile before she returned to teacher-mode and started discussing the topic of weather.

When class ended, Cade noticed that Mr. Kent was the first one out the door.

Cade waited while the classroom cleared of students--in record time he was sure--and then he strolled to Gill's desk at the front of the room.

She raised an eyebrow. "Did you want to hear more about airplane control systems, Mr. Smith?"

He shook his head while waving his hands in front of him. "Heaven forbid. I just came to ask permission to carry the teacher's books."

She shoved her notes and textbooks into her backpack. "I can manage fine, thank you." She flung the strap over her shoulder and marched toward the door.

"Do you get that kind of thing often?" he asked as he followed her.

"You mean Mr. Kent? Sure. All the time."

He shook his head. "Where does a jerk like that get his ideas?"

"I don't know, Mr. Smith." She tugged open the door. "Where did you say you're from?"

Chapter 6

That might not have been fair, Gill thought as she marched out of the classroom, Cade following close

behind, but she didn't feel like being fair. She was tired of jerks like Kent trying to bring her down and, right now, she was mad at the whole male gender. Even though Cade had never overtly questioned her abilities, he seemed surprised every time she showed her competence.

Dave called her name as she walked by his office. Now there was one male, at least, whom she wouldn't categorize with the Kent's of the world. He had proven his confidence in her abilities time and again since he hired her.

She peered into his office. "Hi, Dave. What's up?"

"I need to talk to you." Dave's voice lacked his usual cheery note. At his gloomy expression, uneasiness prickled through her. He gestured toward the chair across from his desk.

"I'll watch your stuff." Cade took the backpack from her hand.

She barely noticed her lightened load as she stepped into Dave's office, now carrying the weight of apprehension.

"What is it, Dave?" she asked.

"Gill, close the door, would you?"

She pulled it closed and, as it clicked into position, the office seemed to close in around her. She'd never realized how small this room was before. Of course, she'd never been inside with the door closed before, either. Dave ran things in a pretty casual manner. Closed doors weren't his style.

"Sit down." He gestured to one of the two navy vinyl chairs facing his desk. As she sank into one, he leaned forward. "I hate to do this, Gill, I really do."

Her stomach muscles grew rigid. She leaned forward in the chair. "For crying out loud, do what?"

He stroked his mustache with one thumb, his fingers curled over his chin. "This is hard for me, Gill, so let me do this in my own time." He folded his hands on the desk in front of him and drew in a deep breath. "We've known each other a long time. You know I believe in you, and in your skill as a pilot."

Her fingers clenched around the arms of the chair. "Dave, you're making me very nervous."

"I wouldn't do this if I had any other choice."

She bit back a repetition of her previous question, sure she already knew the answer. An answer she didn't want to face. An answer that would mean the end of her dream. Unfortunately, once Dave got to the point, she would have to face it--and her future.

"I'm going to have to let you go."

A blow to the stomach couldn't have been more painful. She leaped to her feet and leaned toward him, flattening her hands on his desk. "Why? I'm every bit as good a pilot as any of the other instructors here and--"

He held up a hand in a stopping gesture. "I agree with you. But the simple fact of the matter is, most people don't want a female flying instructor."

Her face went numb as the blood drained from her cheeks. He couldn't really be saying ... It wasn't possible this was because....

No, Dave, of all people, would not do this to her. She trusted Dave. Believed in him. He believed in her. He'd just said so.

His words bounced around in her head like a ping pong ball gone wild.

The simple fact of the matter is, most people don't want a female flying instructor.

But it wasn't simple. And it damned well wasn't fair.

Rage scorched through her like a flash fire, burning away the numbing shock that threatened to dull her reactions.

"You're firing me because I'm a woman?" Now that she'd said it aloud, it seemed to be more real, more horrible. She felt her hands start to shake, so she clenched them tightly at her sides, but she continued to stand firm before him.

"It's not that--"

"But you just said--"

"I'm letting you go because you don't bring in enough students to justify keeping a position open for you."

She stared at him, searching her mind for some scathing comeback, but she came up empty. It probably had something to do with the fact that she saw real regret in his eyes.

"But you only pay me the hours I work and--"

"And benefits and administrative costs. For every employee there are costs involved beyond salary."

She crossed her arms. "If you fire me because I'm female, it's discrimination."

He stood up and paced across the small office, rubbing furiously at the back of his neck. "And you could take me to court." He turned toward her. "But I hope you won't do that." He held his hands wide at his sides in an imploring gesture. "Gill, you know I recommend you to every student who walks in here." His hands clenched into fists. "But I can't force them to fly with you."

Her cheeks heated and she bit her lip. Damn, she'd worked for Dave a long time and everything she knew about him told her he wouldn't do this if he didn't have to.

Guilt burrowed into her. This was his business. She couldn't expect him to run at a loss just to keep her dream alive. She sank into her chair.

"Gill, if I could change the world, I would. I know how hard you've worked to get this far."

She stared at her hands, loosely clasped in her lap. "How will I ever log the hours I need without this job?" A pilot needed to log two hundred hours before applying for a commercial license and there was no way she could afford to rent a plane and fly them on her own.

Dave moved to her side, dropping one hand onto her shoulder. "Gill, I know things look pretty bleak right now, but with your determination, I know you'll make out okay."

"Yeah. Thanks." Her words didn't sound very sincere, but then she didn't feel very sincere.

He leaned back against his desk and watched her. She could see the concern in his deep green eyes. "I can keep you on for another two weeks ... if you want to work the time out."

She mustered a little of her composure, straightening her back and saying in a firm voice, "Of course, I'll keep working."

The severance wouldn't amount to much, but the hours in the air were vitally important to her. Besides, two more weeks would allow her to see at least two of her students through their flight tests.

* * * *

Cade heard the office door open and glanced around in time to see Gill, her face pale and drawn, leave Dave Martin's office. To his surprise, she strode straight out the front door, without even a glance his way. He snatched her pack from the table and raced after her.

He pushed open the door and stepped outside. The quiet warmth of the night settled around him. Crickets chirped and the stars glittered brightly. He could see Gill heading toward her car so he hurried after her, closing the distance between them with several long strides.

"Gill."

She didn't turn around so he grasped her arm to get her attention. She turned to face him, looking deathly pale in the glow of the parking lot lights. He wondered if it was a trick of the light, but her arm trembled under his hand, convincing him it wasn't.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Her voice sounded dull and lifeless.

"Come on, Gill. You're white as a ghost. Something is wrong."

She tugged her arm from his grip. "I don't want to talk about it. I..." She turned to her car, tugging her keys from her pocket. "I just want to go home."

"Wait. You're in no condition to drive." He scooped up her hand and held it in front of her. It quivered like a dry autumn leaf in a light breeze. "You're shaking." He tugged her away from her car and headed toward Old Blue. "I think you're badly in need of a drink."

She didn't even protest, which meant whatever it was had rattled her pretty badly. "Okay, a drink, but I don't want to talk."

"It will do you good."

She stared up at him. "Cade, I..."

She hesitated, then shook her head and glanced away. In that brief look, he'd glimpsed something he never thought he'd see in Gill's face. Vulnerability. The sight, along with the plaintive sound of her voice, made his stomach drop to his knees.

"Maybe I better just go home." She drew away from him but he eased his fingers around her arm.

"No, Gill. Wait."

He couldn't even guess what had gone on in Dave Martin's office, but a deep need to console Gill, to make whatever it was better, nearly overwhelmed him. He wanted to drag her into his arms and hold her close, to stroke the hair back from her face and murmur words of encouragement, but instead he turned to the passenger door and unlocked it. He desperately wanted to know what was wrong, but right now she needed space, and he'd give it to her. Otherwise, like a frightened bird, she'd fly away.

"If you don't want to talk, that's okay. We'll go somewhere for a drink so you can calm down, that's all, then I'll take you home. Okay?" He opened the door for her.

She gripped the edge of the door and stood silently for a moment. A car drove by on the main road, briefly casting her face in bright light etched with shadows. He thought he saw a tear glimmering in her eyes and his gut knotted.

"Gill?"

"Okay." She nodded and climbed in, closing the door behind her. He stared at her profile for a moment, wanting to do something, but feeling totally helpless. He walked around the truck and climbed in beside her.

Fifteen minutes later, he led her into Tommy Tango's roadhouse and they settled into a wooden booth by a window. It wasn't very busy on a Wednesday night.

A cheerful waitress wearing black jeans and a white shirt stopped at their table. "Good evening. What can I get you folks?" She glanced at Gill.

"I'll have a diet Coke."

"Why don't you get a cocktail, instead, Gill?" Cade suggested.

"I don't know. I don't usually drink alcohol."

"So break tradition and try something new." He noticed a blackboard with drink names written in neon green chalk. "How about a Hawaiian Hula?"

"It's a good choice, if you like pineapple juice," the waitress offered. "It's pretty smooth."

Gill nodded. He turned to the waitress. "A Hawaiian Hula for the lady and a Coke for me, since I'm driving."

The waitress hurried away and Cade sat quietly watching Gill. She sat staring at the wood grain on the table top, one finger tracing the outline of a knothole. A moment later, the waitress reappeared with a yellow drink in a tall curved glass for Gill and a highball filled with Coke for him.

Gill clasped her hands around the drink as though happy to have something to do with them and took a sip. "This isn't bad." She sipped again.

She looked very fragile sitting on the wooden-backed bench seat, her fingers clinging to the stem of the fancy glass. She stared into the soft yellow contents, deep in thought.

Soon her hands stopped shaking and she looked more settled. Of course, judging from the fact that half the drink was gone, she was probably feeling very settled.

"Gill, why don't you tell me what happened tonight to upset you?"

Her gaze flickered to his. "I thought we weren't going to talk about it."

"We won't if you don't want to--"

"I don't."

--but it might make you feel better."

"Trust me. It won't make me feel better." She sipped her drink. "Nothing will make me feel better." She sipped again. "Except maybe another one of these. This is good." She peered at him as she drew on the straw again. "Are you sure there's alcohol in it?"

He smiled. "I'm sure." He signaled the waitress for another.

Maybe if he got her talking, she might relax enough to tell him what was bothering her. "So, Gill, how did you start flying?"

She shrugged. "I've always wanted to fly. I guess it's in my blood."

He laughed. "Like a disease you mean? Little biplanes shooting down the cells carrying oxygen to your brain?"

She ignored his attempt at humor. "My dad was a pilot. When I was about five years old, he took me up for the first time." As soon as she'd mentioned her father, her face had softened, like a little girl dreaming of the candy canes and toys she'd get at Christmas. "It was in a little white and red Cessna, similar to the training craft you've seen at the club. He started taking me up every weekend, and when I got a little older, he even let me take the controls for a bit."

It sounded wonderful. He wished his own father had taken time to do things with him when he was a kid.

Like playing ball, doing puzzles, going to the movies. Anything. But his dad had always had meetings to go to and deals to close. Even on weekends.

"He sounds like a great guy. I'd love to meet him sometime."

The softness left her face, her jaw tightening. "He died when I was eight."

He reached across the table and placed his hand on hers. "Gill, I'm sorry."

She withdrew her hand, but not before he noticed the tiny tremor. She reached for her purse and pulled out a small plastic folder from the front of her wallet. "You know, my grandfather had the first pilot's license issued in Canada." She handed it to him, pride lining her features. "See the 'P1' in the corner. That's the license number."

He glanced at the document. Charles S. Right.

"I see why you say it's in your blood. So what do you study at school to become a pilot?"

"Well, I studied Math and Engineering. I figured it could only help my credentials." Her expression turned bitter. "And I'm smart enough to know that dreams don't always come true. I figured I should have something to fall back on."

That explained how she'd been able to show up Kent this evening. With an engineering degree, it would be trivial to put an upstart like him in his place when necessary. And with an Engineering degree, it would be easy to have a real career that made real money, not this erratic lifestyle she lived as a flying instructor

Her gaze returned to her drink. She pushed back her hair. "Cade, have you ever had a dream?" She glanced at him, her expression frank and questioning.

A dream? Sure. He wanted to be accepted as more than his father's son. That's why he put in the hours he did. Why he'd left his friends and family behind to take off overseas for six months to manage a project. Why he didn't take vacations. To prove that he was capable, in his own right, to be on the board of Farraday Financial. Not just because he was born into the family that owned it. He deserved respect for his accomplishments, not just his name.

Funny, he'd never thought of it that way before. It seemed that despite what he'd told Gill, he did want to prove himself. Had been trying to prove himself all his life.

He also wanted to be accepted as more than a man with money. He wanted people to like him for himself. Like Luke did.

He wanted women to date him for himself. Because they enjoyed his company. Because they liked to talk

to him. Because they found him attractive in a myriad of ordinary ways, totally unrelated to wealth or where he took them.

He wanted one special woman to love him for the man he was inside.

He glanced at Gill. Even though she avoided dating him, she seemed to enjoy his company. And she certainly didn't care about going to fancy places. McDonald's would do for lunch, a casual roadhouse for a drink. And he sure enjoyed her company. She was intelligent. She was fun. She certainly knew her own mind. And she could dream. What more could he want from a woman?

What more could he want?

He had no answer to that. Gill was exactly the kind of woman he could fall in love with. A woman he'd love to spend his life with. And what she liked about him had nothing to do with him being a Farraday, or having money. Because she didn't know about either of those aspects of his life.

As for dreams, he'd been dreaming of Gill for days now.

"No dreams, Cade? I shouldn't be surprised. You seem to be the kind of guy who lives for the moment."

Ironic that she should see him as someone with no dreams. He had goals that involved earning millions of dollars and setting him as partner in a major corporation, yet her goal of becoming a commercial pilot would only achieve a small step up in a career that was far below her potential. But he couldn't tell her about his goals, and he knew her goal was very important to her, and he respected that, even if he didn't understand it.

He placed his hand on hers. "Don't worry, Gill. You'll get your dream. From what I've seen of your determination, you can get anything you want in life."

She jerked back, looking a little stunned. "That's what my dad always used to say."

The waitress stopped by. "Anything else, folks?"

"Another?" Cade asked Gill. She shook her head. "That'll be it, thanks." The waitress laid the bill on the table and Cade opened his wallet and started to tug out his MasterCard. As soon as he saw "Farraday" embossed in gold letters across the front, he shoved it back in. If he used his card, Gill might notice his name and that would blow everything. He glanced at the amount on the bill and checked his cash. He rarely carried a lot with him, usually depending on credit or bank cards.

Rats. Not enough.

"Uh, Gill, I don't seem to--"

"I should have known." She turned to grab her purse, which was sitting beside her on the bench seat near the window. "Silly me. I thought when you invited me here for a drink, you were actually going to pay. I should know better by now, shouldn't I?"

He couldn't see her face, but he would bet he'd see sparks when she turned back to face him. He didn't blame her if she was angry, but, to his surprise, a good-natured smile lit her face. She pulled a twenty from her wallet and handed it to him.

As he took the bill from her fingers, warmth ricocheted up his arm and through his torso, surging to one prime point. All she had to do was touch him and his interest peaked, so to speak.

"What am I going to do with you?" she asked, shaking her head.

He could think of a lot of things he'd like her to do with him, but he knew she wouldn't agree to a single one.

* * * *

As soon as she stepped into the night air, Gill realized how much alcohol she'd consumed. Just enough to make her light-headed, but that's more than she ever allowed herself to be affected. She really should have headed straight home, not gone off with Cade to a bar, and she certainly shouldn't have had two of those pineapple drinks. She stepped carefully down the wooden stairs to the parking lot, then walked toward the truck. But they'd tasted so good and, being honest with herself, she hadn't wanted to be alone.

Cade opened the passenger door and she climbed in. He crossed to the driver's door and got in beside her, then turned the ignition. The big, blue truck sputtered to life. Sort of.

"When was the last time you changed the plugs on this thing?" she asked.

"Plugs?"

"Spark plugs. You know, they fire to ignite the compressed fuel in the cylinders and that makes the engine go. You need to change them once in a while."

Cade pulled onto Carling Avenue and turned left. "Oh. Well, maybe I'll take it in next week."

"Good idea."

She settled into the seat and gazed out the window, hoping the fuzziness in her brain would dissipate soon. Cade turned on the radio to a soft instrumental melody, and she felt her muscles relax. The gentle rocking motion of the vehicle relaxed her even more and her eyes closed.

"Gill, I need to know which direction to go."

"Which direction?" She flipped her eyelids open. Her head felt a bit foggy.

"Should I go east or west?"

She pushed herself up in the seat and saw the large green signs indicating highway 417 ahead on Pinecrest. She must have dozed off for a few moments.

"Oh, you don't get on the highway to get to my place. Actually, you'd better make a one eighty degree turn. I'm in one of those high-rise buildings by Mooney's Bay."

"Okay." He grinned at her. "You can go back to sleep if you like. I know the way."

She folded her arms across her chest and stared out the side window. "I wasn't asleep."

"Really? I guess that was someone else I heard snoring then."

She glared at him in indignation. "I don't snore."

"Now, sweetheart, you wouldn't exactly know that, would you? Unless you have an eyewitness report?"

She felt her face flush at the thought of someone watching her while she slept. And of course, he was talking about a lover. She turned back to the side window, holding her silence.

He lowered his voice to a murmur. "If you don't, I'd be happy to volunteer. And I'll say anything you like about your sleeping habits."

She gritted her teeth. "I don't think so. But thanks anyway." Only a little sarcasm tinged her words.

She continued to stare out the window, focusing on the full, white moon, as he drove the rest of the way. When they approached the vicinity of her apartment building, she gave him specific directions. Instead of pulling up to the front entrance, Cade drove to visitors' parking.

"I'll see you up to your apartment."

She started to protest but he'd already hopped out of the truck. She reached for her door handle but he was already pulling it from the other side. He pulled open her door and offered his arm to help her out, but she ignored it. She grabbed her pack and tugged her keys from the front pouch as they walked toward the front door. She let them into the lobby, then Cade pushed the button to summon the elevator.

She leaned against the marble wall across from the elevator doors, knowing from experience they'd be here a while. "You're lucky, you don't have to put up with a long wait for an elevator when you go home."

"Are you kidding? Sometimes I wait so long I think it would be better to take the stairs, even if I have to go up...."

She stared at him, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

"Why are you looking at me funny?" he asked.

"Cade, you live in a townhouse. They don't usually come equipped with elevators."

"Oh, right." He cleared his throat. "I mean at work. Sometimes I feel like I live there."

She smiled. "Really. I could have sworn you were living at the flying club." She eased her pack to the floor, the weight of textbooks and other course material causing her shoulder to ache. "So you actually have a job? What do you do?"

He shrugged. "You know. A little of this, a little of that. Kind of cleaning up after other people."

A janitor? She remembered the first day she'd met him, she'd thought he must work in maintenance in the Farraday building, but he'd been totally clueless about fixing a simple thing like a fan belt on his truck, so she doubted he actually had a job where he was expected to fix things. Still, it didn't make a lot of sense to her why a guy who was obviously bright and well educated wasn't doing more with his life than janitorial work. Obviously, he had no ambition. No aspirations.

The elevator door whooshed open. Cade scooped up her pack and they climbed aboard. When it opened on the eighteenth floor, she turned left and led him down the green carpeted hall to the last door on the end.

"This is it."

She inserted her key in the lock and turned to say goodbye to Cade. That sexy half-smile curved his lips. Funny. She'd been trying so hard to avoid him and she should be anxious to get home, but she was reluctant to take the last few steps and put a door between them. A big reason was because, once inside, she'd be alone with her thoughts. Alone to be swept away by depression. But that wasn't the only reason.

She liked Cade. A lot. And she'd really appreciated his company this evening. Talking had helped. And remembering her dad had helped, too. And when Cade had said the same thing her dad had always told her--that she could do anything she set her mind to--a quiver had gone through her. She'd thought he wouldn't understand wanting something as badly as she wanted to fly. But he had. And he'd said just the right thing.

She turned toward him and stared into his eyes. What started as uncertainty in those golden depths evolved into a glowing intensity as he stared back.

"Cade...."

"Yes, Gill."

Their bodies seemed to align, like two planets drawn together by the pull of gravity.

She wanted to say something, to tell him how much this evening had meant to her. She reached out--something she'd never done before--and rested her hands lightly on his shoulders. The feel of strong muscle under her fingertips reassured her, giving her courage. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"Thank you."

His eyes widened and his smile broadened.

"For what?"

"For being there." She stroked his cheek, the light stubble pleasantly scratchy under her fingertips. "For listening."

He was so close, so tempting. Only a breath away. His lips had felt warm and comforting. She longed to lean forward and resume the kiss, to deepen it until she lost herself completely in the pleasure only he could provide.

As though reading her thoughts, he smiled and slid his arms around her waist. He drew her close and she felt the heat of his body combine with hers, felt the hardness of his chest against her soft breasts.

"You're welcome." The words, a soft rumble from deep in his chest, vibrated through her. His lips met hers again, this time firmer, more purposeful.

The heat overwhelmed her, drawing feelings from deep inside that she'd never felt before. She slid her hands around his neck, delighting in the feel of wisps of hair against the sensitive inner flesh of her

fingers. She pressed herself closer to him until not even a breath of air could squeeze between them. Need built within her like pressure building inside the piston of an engine. Just one spark and she'd explode.

Cade couldn't believe Gill had actually kissed him. A few moments ago, in the lobby, he'd almost blown it big time. Damn, who would have thought an innocent comment about an elevator would nearly blow his whole story?

Now, at the feel of her enthusiastic response to his kiss, he almost lost it. He wanted to sweep her up and carry her into the apartment. Straight to her bed. But he held back. Keeping himself in check. Maintaining his self control. Even when her fingers stroked lightly over his shoulder and down his chest.

Damn, he'd dreamed of having her in his arms again, of exploring her hills and valleys in a very slow, very purposeful voyage of love. And now seemed like just the right time to start the journey.

The tip of her tongue pressed against the edge of his lips. Oh, yeah. Exactly the right time. He welcomed her inside, surprised at her boldness as she stroked the inside of his lips. He slid his tongue over hers, and the two melded in an undulating dance, then he slid back into her mouth, anxious to taste her sweetness. And sweet she was. Like pineapple.

In fact, like a Hawaiian Hula.

He drew back, gazing into her dewy, melting eyes. She'd drunk two of those pineapple bombs this evening and he knew how potent drinks like that could be, especially to someone who didn't partake often. And he was certain Gill fit that category. She wasn't the type to allow herself to lose control, to alcohol or anything else.

She wasn't tipsy, but she wasn't entirely sober either. Even if the effect was only enough to lower her barriers a little, to cause her to lose control to her own desires, this very in-control lady would not be happy--with herself or with him--tomorrow morning.

A hasty exit on his part would be in order. At least he had a good excuse to see her tomorrow morning, since her car was still at the flying club.

"Gill, how about breakfast tomorrow?"

A languorous smile curved her lips and she drew him close again. "Mmm. I make a great omelet."

His resolve almost shattered, but he found the strength to ease away. "I was thinking of breakfast out. How about I pick you up at eight?"

"Pick me up? But--?"

He gave her a peck on the cheek, not trusting himself to her lips again, then opened her door and eased her inside.

"Tomorrow, Gill. I'll see you tomorrow."

Once the door closed behind her, he leaned against it to catch his breath. Idiot. How could he have turned down the most desirable woman he'd ever held in his arms? He'd wanted her. She'd wanted him. So what was a little alcohol between friends?

He tromped down the hall to the elevator. Fool. Either way, you aren't going to win this battle, so you might as well be noble. And frustrated.

Really frustrated.

He glanced back down the hall at her door. On the other hand....

* * * *

Gill leaned against the inside of her apartment door and swallowed hard. Good heavens, had she really almost thrown herself at Cade? One more minute in his arms and she'd have started tearing off clothes. Probably his.

How embarrassing. This attraction thing was a force to be reckoned with. Thank heavens Cade had enough sense for the both of them. He'd realized things were getting out of control so he'd hightailed it out of here.

Rejecting her.

She groaned. Now she really felt depressed.

At least he'd stopped her from making a fool of herself. Well, no, actually she had already done that when she'd assumed his comment about breakfast meant he wanted to stay the night.

Damn, she knew all along this stupid attraction she felt for him would get her in trouble. At least it was only a minor case of embarrassment, rather than ... good heavens, how would she have felt tomorrow if he'd stayed with her tonight? If she'd taken the step she'd avoided all these years just because he'd been nice to her? She covered her eyes with her hand.

Still, if he were to come back right now, she had a sneaking suspicion she'd drag him inside and climb all over him.

The doorbell rang.

She went rigid, her breath locked in her lungs.

It rang again.

Slowly, she turned around and peered through the peephole. Cade stood there. All six foot four of him. Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome himself.

She pulled open the door. Her heart quivered. Her pulse raced.

"I forgot something." He grinned sheepishly.

Her gaze locked with his. "You did?" Her heart pounded against the inside of her chest as though trying to push her towards him.

His golden brown eyes simmered with heat. "I mean, you forgot something."

She clung to the edge of the door, staring at him. "I did?"

For a moment, she was sure he was going to lean forward and kiss her. And she wanted him to. But instead he cleared his throat and lifted his arm.

"Your backpack." Her blue canvas bag, full of course material, hung from his hand.

"Oh." Was that really disappointment flooding her insides, making her vision hazy? She grabbed the bag from him and hugged it to her chest. "Thanks."

"No problem. So ... eight tomorrow?"

"Yeah, eight. Goodnight, Cade."

She closed the door, her fingers trembling on the doorknob. She couldn't take much more of this hormonal roller coaster.

Chapter 7

The doorbell rang again.

Cade? Excitement skittered through her. "Come in," she mumbled. This time she wouldn't let him get away.

The bell rang again.

"I said come in." She stared at the door in the hazy light, but it remained closed. She pulled it open, grabbed Cade's hand and tugged him inside. "Cade, darling." She flung her arms around his neck and thrilled at the feel of his lips meeting hers in a hard, enthusiastic kiss. Her body ached with need and she moaned, pressing herself against him, wrapping herself in the sweet bliss of his presence.

The damn doorbell rang again.

The doorbell?

The warmth of Cade's body against hers melted away. Her eyes opened to bright sunshine flickering through her vertical blinds as they rattled in the breeze. When she realized she clung to a pillow, not the golden man of her dreams, she flung it onto the floor. She glanced at the big red digits on the clock beside her bed.

Eight o'clock.

She groaned. That would be Cade at the door. She leaped out of bed and stared at herself in the mirror. The oversized sweatshirt and leggings weren't the most flattering outfit in the world, but they would have to do. Her hair needed work, however. She couldn't go to the door with it flattened down on one side and sticking out like porcupine quills on the other. She grabbed a brush from the dresser and dragged it through her erratic mane.

Oh, man, she never slept past seven. She scurried to the door. Why had she slept in today of all days? Maybe because you spent half the night wondering why you didn't drag Cade into your bed, and the other half worrying about the fact that you almost did. She pulled open the door. "Uh, hi. Sorry, I seem to have overslept."

Heavens, he had no right looking so gorgeous first thing in the morning. The light in his golden eyes

rivalled the sunshine gaily dancing across her living room carpet. His faded blue jeans hugged his long legs and his denim shirt, with the top few buttons open, revealed curls of crisp, dark hair. He smelled woodsy and warm. She could just imagine snuggling up to him and breathing in his essence. In fact, the urge became almost overwhelming.

"May I come in?"

Good heavens, she realized she'd been leaning against the edge of the door staring at him in a daze. After that crazy dream, he was having a much more potent effect on her than usual--if that was possible.

"Uh, yeah, of course." She moved back, keeping her body far enough away from him so he wouldn't brush against her as he stepped inside. If just looking at him was making her crazy, she'd hate to think what would happen if she touched him.

She closed the door. "Make yourself at home. I'll just be a minute."

She raced across the room and down the hall into her bedroom. After grabbing some clothes from the closet, she hurried into the bathroom. When she jumped under the shower, the prickly spray of water revived her brain function and she realized she didn't have to be at the club until noon. If Cade dropped her off right after breakfast, what would she do until then?

Of course, she could suggest they come back here after breakfast. Maybe spend some time getting to know each other. Maybe get to know each other real well.

At the images that idea conjured, she shoved her head under the shower, letting the water flow over her face, hoping this time it would revive her common sense, too.

Cade watched Gill scoot across the room and disappear down the hall. He hooked his finger under his collar and tugged, trying to release some of the heat Gill had built in him. Wow, how could a woman manage to look so indescribably sexy in a huge sweatshirt and pants? Of course, the black pants had been skin tight, hugging her long legs so intimately they showed every curve in detail. And the sweatshirt might be large, but the hint of her round breasts under the draping fabric had teased him, making it difficult to keep his gaze on her face. The dreamy expression on her face as she'd stared at him, naked hunger in her half open eyes, had almost been his undoing. He'd wanted to drag her into his arms and kiss her silly.

He stepped into her living room and sat down on her dark green, floral couch, linking his fingers together to keep them occupied. After last night, he hadn't stopped thinking about Gill, thinking about holding her and kissing her, feeling her flesh pressed against his. About taking her to bed, then to the clouds.

Cade could hear the shower running and images of Gill, totally naked, water streaming over her lithe body, came unbidden to his mind. He pushed himself to his feet and paced a few times. All that kept him

from seeing the vision in reality rather than in his overactive brain was a thin wooden door. Probably not even locked.

Damn, now he desperately needed a shower--long and cold.

He stared at the door in question.

Or better yet, hot, soaping Gill all over, caressing every part of her silky, naked skin. His fingers tensed, curling and uncurling as wild thoughts pulsed through his brain. Last night, he'd stopped himself from sweeping her inside and making love to her, despite her willingness, because she'd been vulnerable. Now, he couldn't think of one good reason to hold back. With the way she'd looked at him at the door, she might as well have given him an engraved invitation. He strode across the room, then down the hall.

When she'd looked at him with that dreamy, half-lidded expression on her face, he'd had the feeling if he'd pulled her into his arms, she would have melted against him. He should have scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom right then. He should have mated his mouth with hers and ignited the passion bubbling just below the surface like a keg of jet fuel. He reached the bathroom door, then paused, his hand hovering six inches from the doorknob.

But maybe he'd only seen what he wanted to see. What he'd hoped to see after a night of dreaming about Gill. Dreams of her passionate and loving in his arms, calling out his name, begging him to make love to her. Then him begging her not to stop the pleasure that held them both enthralled.

His hand gripped the doorknob, the metal cold against his sweaty palm. Damn, what was he thinking? He couldn't just barge into her bathroom and make love to her. If she'd really wanted him to, she would have let him know. She wasn't the type to play games.

He spun around and marched down the hall. Across the living room he saw a doorway with a stove and cupboards visible beyond. The kitchen. He strode past the small table to the refrigerator and pulled open the door. He found a full carton of eggs and the meat drawer well stocked. He laid some supplies on the counter, then started digging through cupboards for mixing bowls.

When Gill stepped into the kitchen ten minutes later, smelling of gardenias, her skin a pleasant pink hue, he groaned inwardly and dug inside the refrigerator again. There must be something else in here he needed. The cold air might not be as effective as a cold shower, but it was better than nothing. He pulled out a bottle of orange juice.

Gill stared at the eggs, mixing bowls and utensils on the counter. "What are you doing?"

"Well, last night you offered to make me an omelet."

Her eyebrows quirked upward. "And last night you offered to take me out to breakfast."

Her hair, still slightly damp, flowed down her shirt like an ebony waterfall, caressing her body in silken waves, softly fluffing at the ends. His fingers itched to reach out and touch it. To stroke the length of it, then part the soft strands and ... he shoved his hands in his pockets. Damn it, he should grab her hand, drag her to the nearest restaurant and make sure a crowd surrounded them at all times. That way he wouldn't keep getting these unreasonable urges. Well, he would keep getting them, but he wouldn't actually consider acting on them.

Despite the sense of that action, he couldn't bring himself to give up this opportunity to have her all to himself.

"Would you be disappointed if we ate here instead?"

She smiled. "No, of course not." She stepped toward the counter and opened the egg carton. "Ham and cheese or western?"

"Ham and cheese. How about I make some home-made biscuits?"

Her eyes widened and a broad smile claimed her face. "Really? I love biscuits."

They hovered around each other for the next twenty minutes. Pulling stuff from cupboards, mixing ingredients in bowls, cooking and baking. Gill couldn't believe how well they worked together. Her kitchen was fairly small, but not once did they get in each other's way. In fact, whenever they brushed against each other while performing their tasks, her heart clamored for more contact. She had to stop herself from finding excuses to reach around him for things.

Gill set the table with matching dishes, a feat not easily achieved from her cupboards. She used wine glasses for the orange juice to add a certain elegance to the meal, and for coffee she chose her favorite mugs--the cobalt blue glass ones sprinkled with yellow stars. She slid the omelets onto the plates, then sat down at the table.

Cade followed her with a wicker basket filled with hot, aromatic biscuits wrapped in a red checkered cloth. He held it before her. She eagerly chose one and placed it on her side plate. As she spread the butter, it melted. When she bit into it, it tasted like a little slice of heaven.

"Mmm. Cade, how did you learn to make such wonderful biscuits?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You know, I find your attitude very sexist. Why are you surprised I can bake something that actually tastes good? Because I'm a man? I do live alone, you know, and I have to eat."

His teasing words struck a chord inside her. She lowered the half eaten biscuit and smiled. "You're right. I apologize. I'm sure someday you'll make some woman a great housewife."

She took another bite of the biscuit, savoring the delightful flavor. If he could make food like this, he would only be alone by choice.

Except, from what he'd told her, he didn't live alone. She glanced at him. "Wait a minute. I thought you lived with your friend?"

His expression shifted fractionally, as though he'd been caught in an awkward situation. Could it be that he was embarrassed he had to share with someone?

"Well, yes, if you want to get technical, but he doesn't cook, and--"

She laughed. "So you're already making some man a good housewife."

He grinned. "I guess so." He pushed his chair back. "If I'm such a great housewife, I'd better get to those dishes."

* * * *

After the dishes were done, Gill went into her bedroom to retrieve her bag. When she returned to the living room, Cade stood by her bookshelf looking through her books on aerodynamics and aircraft design.

"You don't have much here in the way of light reading."

She shrugged. "I guess not." She didn't tell him about the shelf in her bedroom filled with romance novels and fantasy books. Knowing him, he'd use it as an excuse to go into her bedroom to take a look, and her hormones would use that as an excuse for further mischief. She was certain if she wound up in a room with both Cade and a bed, she would not survive intact.

"Let's go." She strolled to the door, Cade falling in step beside her.

When they arrived in the lobby, Cade led Gill through visitors' parking to the truck. Once they were settled inside, he shoved the key in the ignition. "So when do you have to be at work?"

"Not until noon."

His eyebrows arched. "Really?" He glanced at his watch. "That means I've got you for another two whole hours." He leaned back and smiled. "What would you like to do?"

If she was doing what her she'd really like to do, they would never have left the apartment, but luckily her common sense was still in control. Anyway, she had another plan. She shoved her hair behind her ear. "I don't want to tie up your day, so you could just drop me at work." She made her tone tentative and glanced at him expectantly.

"Or?"

"Or, we could go shopping."

"What? Surely we could find something better to do than that. I was thinking a nice drive up to the Gatineaux Hills or--"

She crossed her arms and put on her most stubborn expression. "Cade, this is not a date." No matter how much she'd like it to be. The thought of driving through the beautiful tree-clad mountains, parking overlooking one of the crystal lakes and snuggling against Cade's side as they soaked in the view made her quiver inside. But she had to be sensible. She couldn't trust her desires when it came to Cade. Muddled senses were not conducive to good decisions.

"I appreciate you driving me home last night and giving me a ride to work today, but that's all this is about."

"But you don't mind if we go shopping together? Isn't that more of a tenth date kind of activity?"

The image of she and Cade strolling through shopping malls picking out things together wavered through her mind. The very casualness of the activity, and the feeling of rightness about it, scared her silly.

"Cade, the reason I want you to go shopping with me is so I can buy those jeans I promised you," she explained in as patient a tone as she could garner.

"Jeans?" His eyes started to glitter. "Oh, yes, how could I forget how you got black marks the length of my thighs."

The thought of his hard, muscular thighs under her hands sent a tremor through her. No, she was much too vulnerable for those kind of images this morning. She had to keep focused on her purpose.

"Yes, well, I still owe you a pair of jeans. And a shirt."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Forget about it."

Darn man. Why couldn't he make anything easy? Well, she could be hard to get along with, too.

"Okay." She twirled a few strands of hair around her finger as she stared out the window. "Then I guess you should just take me to the club. I'm sure I can find some work to do."

He chuckled. "I see. Blackmail." He started the truck and pulled away from the curb. "All right, shopping it is."

He drove to the Rideau Center and parked in the large underground parking lot. He seemed to know where he was going as he led her through the crowded mall. Mannequins wearing trendy, casual clothes sat alongside a life-sized replica of a moose in the window of the third-floor store he'd led her to. Cade might not want to shop, but he seemed to know exactly which store he wanted. Well, he had to buy clothes, too, so she shouldn't be surprised. Gill had never been in this store and one look at the price tag on a sweatshirt told her why she wouldn't be here again.

She grabbed his elbow and leaned close. "Uh, Cade, maybe we should try somewhere else."

"This is where I get all my jeans. They've got just the right fit." He took her arm and hooked it around his. "I always find exactly what I want here. Trust me."

Yeah, trust him to spend way too much of her money.

Gill followed his lead through the store to a shelf with reams of jeans ordered according to size. He scanned the labels, then flipped a pair out.

"I'll go try these on."

"Wait, Cade. Don't forget a shirt."

"Oh, right."

He skimmed through the rack of shirts and pulled one out that looked exactly like the one he'd been wearing, except newer, and cleaner. She even noticed it had the same little picture of a loon on the pocket, like his had. This must be where he'd bought his stuff before because, apparently, that was the store's logo. Maybe the jeans and shirt weren't as much as the high-priced sweatshirt.

He headed for the change room then disappeared inside. As soon as he was out of sight, Gill sneaked a peek at another shirt just like the one he'd taken with him.

Yikes. She glanced at the tag on a pair of jeans. Double yikes.

She gulped. Her mother had always told her one day her fits of temper would cost her. She hadn't realized it would mean a week's wages, after taxes.

I'll just tell him, that's all. After all, he shouldn't be spending that much on clothes. Clearly, he can't afford it.

But that was his decision, and he had already spent it on the clothes he'd been wearing when she met him--and she had ruined them. A feeling of nausea flitted through her stomach. She didn't have the money to spare, especially with the fact she would be out of work soon, but she had an obligation to replace them.

She sighed. One more reason not to get mixed up with a guy with no money sense.

The fitting room door opened and Cade strolled out. He stood in front of a full length mirror then turned and bent over, checking the fit. "So, what do you think?"

Gorgeous, that's what she thought. The denim, pulled taut across his back end, outlined his finer features in a very exciting manner. The jeans certainly did fit him well. He strolled back and forth, showing her every angle. She especially liked the view as he walked away, but when he turned to face her, her gaze fixed on the trim line of his waist and, as her focus drifted lower she realized any angle was a good one.

"Gill? Do you like them?"

She felt her cheeks flush as she realized where he'd caught her staring. In a nonchalant manner, she forced her gaze down the pants to the hem. "They're a little long," she observed.

"No problem. The store has someone who'll take them up."

Cade gestured to a clerk, a young woman wearing tight jeans and one of the store's sweatshirts. She marked the bottom of the pants with white chalk and pulled the tags off both items of clothing. While Cade went back to change, she took the tags and rang up the bill.

Gill flinched when the final total displayed in big green digits on the cash. The clerk handed her the receipt and she examined it closely. "What's this extra twenty dollars you've added on?"

"That's the alteration fee, Miss."

"Twenty bucks? To hem them? Forget it. I'll do it myself." She handed back the receipt and waited while the woman fixed it, then handed over her credit card.

Cade reappeared, the jeans and shirt draped over his arm, and saw Gill signing the credit card slip, a frown on her face. The clerk took the items of clothing and folded them into a bag. Cade started to protest that the pants had to stay for alteration, but at the glare Gill sent him, he simply picked the bag up from the counter and followed her.

Once they were outside the store, he tipped his head and asked, "What's wrong, Gill?"

She glanced toward him, her features drawn tight. "Let's just say, next time I offer to buy a man clothes, I'll make sure he shops at Wal-Mart first."

Oops. He hadn't even thought about price when he'd taken Gill to his usual clothing store to buy the jeans. It hadn't even occurred to him to look at the price tags. From the look on her face, she'd spent more than she could afford, and all because she'd promised to replace an old pair of jeans and shirt he didn't even care about. Damn, but he felt guilty.

He wanted to fix the situation, but what could he do? He couldn't just hand her the money. For one thing, she wouldn't accept it. She had promised to replace the clothes and she prided herself on keeping her word. Also, how would he explain having a wad of money like that?

She probably wondered how he could afford them in the first place. Not that she'd suspect he was rich, but she might think he was stupid.

He'd have to watch himself much more carefully from now on.

Well, if everything worked out between them, he'd tell her who he was eventually. And if they didn't, well, he would still tell her, so either way, he'd be able to pay her back. Though, even if she knew he could afford it, the possibility existed she still wouldn't accept the money. She was that stubborn when it came to her independence.

Which, he suddenly realized, was part of the reason he was falling in love with her.

* * * *

Gill slumped onto the couch, contemplating choices for dinner. Her stomach rumbled loudly but she barely had the energy to get up and look in the fridge, so she kicked her feet up, exhaustion outweighing hunger for the time being. It had been a long day. Yesterday, she'd told a handful of her students, the ones closest to taking their flight tests, that she'd be leaving soon, so they'd promptly booked frequent appointments with her to try and complete their hours while she was still available.

She hadn't seen Cade all day and, as much as she told herself she didn't want him around and that the attraction between them was better ignored, she had missed him. She smiled at her own contrariness. She must be going punchy.

She couldn't help wondering what had happened to Cade. Could it be that the attraction between them had

finally shaken him as much as it had her? If so, maybe he would stop chasing her with such determination. She dropped her head against the pillow. Yeah, like that was going to happen.

A tightness in her stomach, which had nothing to do with lack of food, made her wonder if she really wanted Cade to leave her alone. She raked her fingers through her hair. What had happened to her? Once upon a time, she'd known exactly what she wanted, and what she didn't. An attraction like the one she felt for Cade was definitely on the list of what she didn't want, and yet the thought of never seeing him again disturbed her more than she thought possible.

The doorbell rang. She pushed herself to her feet and trudged to the door. Peering through the peephole, her tiredness melted away at the sight of Cade standing on the other side of the door. She pulled it open.

"Cade?"

He held a large pizza box. "I come bearing gifts. May I come in?"

She stepped back to let him pass. He deposited the pizza on her dining room table.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might be up for dinner and a movie."

Annoyance flickered through her at the audacity of the man. Did he think she had no social life? She planted her hands on her hips and scowled at him. "You just show up at my door assuming I have nothing better to do than--"

He held up his index finger. "Correction. I checked your schedule at the club and found out that your last lesson ended at eight. I figure after skipping lunch, then working straight through, you wouldn't feel much like cooking." He grinned. "And as for having nothing better to do, you are here, aren't you?"

She crossed her arms. "And if I hadn't been?"

He flipped open the box, letting the aroma of spicy sausage and bacon help win her over. "I would have had to eat this delicious pizza all by myself. It's Mario's house specialty." Which he knew was Gill's favorite. Suzie at the club had been a gem about sharing information about Gill's likes and dislikes. The woman was a real romantic. "And if that isn't enough to tempt you, how about a movie featuring a cat named Piwacket." He held up the video he'd rented for this evening, hoping this would convince her.

Her eyes widened. "'Bell, Book, and Candle'?" Her eyes glowed as she reached for the cassette and held it reverently in her hands. "Where did you find it?"

He smiled. "It took a bit of searching, but I called around to the video stores in town and finally found one

that carried it. So?"

Her gaze flicked from the cassette cradled in her hands to his face. "Well...."

He flapped the top of the pizza box to send the aroma her way.

"Okay," she said reluctantly, "I guess--"

He snapped the lid down. "Great, I'll go grab some plates." He strode toward the kitchen, not giving her time to change her mind.

Gill cleared the coffee table, wondering why on earth she'd said yes. Being in the same room with Cade could only mean trouble for her. Already the danger signals had started. She felt pleasantly warm all over, her pulse quivering slightly. A sense of excitement settled deep in her stomach, like the light brush of butterfly wings against her insides. And her lips felt tingly and sensitive, yearning for the familiar touch of Cade's.

He returned to the living room with plates, glasses, and a large bottle of cola. He placed them on the space she'd cleared and nodded his head toward the television. "Do you want to watch during dinner or wait until after?"

"After."

He served up the pizza while she poured the pop. He slumped down beside her on the couch as she took her first bite. Mmm. She loved this pizza. Cade may not spend a lot on a date, but the man sure had style.

She straightened a little. Of course, this wasn't a date.

She glanced sideways at him. Not that it would be a bad date. She'd never had someone go to this much trouble for her. Discovering her favorite pizza. Seeking out her favorite movie. What he lacked in finances, he made up for in determination and ingenuity.

"Who's the man in the picture?"

She glanced around to see Cade gazing at the photograph of her father which sat on the bookshelf beside the television.

She leaned back against the couch, turning her misty gaze to her father's beloved face, the memory of her and Mom's recent hug-fest still strong in her mind.

"That's my dad. It was taken a few weeks before he died."

Cade turned toward her, his golden gaze settling on her face. She couldn't help but meet that gaze with her own.

"You mentioned that he died when you were fairly young." His voice, gentle and warm, offered soothing comfort. "What happened?"

She tried to shut her mind to the images his question triggered, the horror of that afternoon her mother came into her room and sat beside her on the bed. Gill had looked up from her coloring and seen the tears spilling from Mom's eyes, seen the tremor of her lip, and cold had gripped Gill's heart. Somehow, she'd known her life was about to change forever. She hadn't known what or how, but she'd known whatever her mother had come to tell her, she didn't want to hear.

They'd stared at each other soundlessly, Mom's lips quivering as she searched for words. Unable to find them, she had finally dragged Gill into her arms, tears flowing freely, and held on for dear life. In broken words, she'd explained what had happened and slowly Gill had realized she'd never see her father again. Never know the joy of his secure embrace, his loving good night kiss, his warm, rumbling chuckle. She'd never be able to share with him her deepest fears, her greatest successes. She and Mom had clung to each other then, two souls lost on a sea of pain.

Although that pain had diminished over the years, it still dug deeply.

"Gill, I'm sorry." Cade's hand enveloped hers. "I shouldn't have asked."

Gill drew herself from the past, seeing Cade's eyes filled with concern. She knew she should draw her hand from his, but it was so warm and comforting. So strong and reliable.

Damn. She was strong and could rely on herself. And she wouldn't fall apart because he asked about something that happened twenty years ago.

She eased her hand from his and grabbed her glass from the coffee table.

"No, it's okay. He died in a plane crash."

His eyebrows lowered and he stared at her in amazement.

"And you decided to take up flying for a living?"

Annoyance rushed through her and she pinned him with a sharp glare.

"If he'd died in a car accident, would you be asking me why I learned to drive a car?"

"Well, no."

"Good. One point for me." She sipped her drink and plunked the glass down.

"But you must think about it sometimes. When you go up in that plane, knowing someone you loved died--"

She shoved her plate onto the table and turned to face him.

"Look, Cade, I love flying." Her hand swept out to the side. "When I go up in that plane, everything is right with the world." Her palm flattened on her chest. "And with me. There's nowhere I'd rather be."

He smiled, his golden eyes glimmering as he stared at her. She stared back but he said nothing, just stared and smiled.

"What?" she finally blurted in exasperation.

"Well, it's just that--I know this sounds a bit corny but--do you know how beautiful you look when you're angry?" He leaned toward her.

"I, uh...." She blinked at him several times, unsure what to say. The heat of anger seeped from her, pushed out by confusion then, as he reached forward and trailed his finger across her cheek, replaced by another kind of heat. It shimmered across her skin at his touch, then melted through her.

"Your whole face lights up and your eyes kind of ... sparkle."

"Sparkle?"

He cupped her face with his hand. "That's right."

Electricity shimmered through her at his touch igniting flames deep inside her. She longed to reach out and touch him back, to turn her head and press her lips into his palm. To let go of the restraint she'd kept tightly secured around herself. Oh, she wanted to let go so badly. To fly with Cade to a place she'd never known. To explore heights that promised more excitement than she'd ever conceived possible.

But she couldn't. This attraction between them was far too dangerous. Even more dangerous than she'd first suspected because the seductive pull was nearly impossible to resist. She would not allow herself to fall into the trap of a loveless marriage just because the chemistry was great. All she had to do was remind herself of the dullness that had pervaded Mom's eyes during her whole marriage to Eric. The solution which had promised Mom a lustrous life actually provided a tarnished existence. All because she'd been a fool for a golden attraction.

She stood up, freeing herself from Cade's lingering touch.

"Umm, why don't we put the movie on?"

"If you insist."

She pushed the video into the VCR and adjusted the volume, then walked back to the couch. One part of her insisted she sit in the easy chair, keeping a safe distance between her and Cade, but she ignored it. It would be obvious why she'd moved and she didn't want Cade to think she couldn't resist his attractions. With her strength and determination, she could do anything she set her mind to. She sank back onto the couch and grabbed another slice of pizza. That's what her father had always said. She took a bite. And that's what Cade had said, too. She swallowed, the pizza sticking on the way down.

She finished her dinner, then settled back on the couch to enjoy the movie. Cade sat only inches away, his legs sprawled in front of him. She could feel his warmth. When he reached to get his pop from the table, his arm brushed hers and hot and cold mingled in an electrical discharge of sensation across her nerve endings. Good heavens, if the lights had been lower, would sparks have danced across her skin? Would her awareness of him be so visible? She glanced at him, worried she'd see a knowing smile, telling her he knew exactly how much he affected her, but his gaze remained fixed on the television screen.

She leaned forward to grab her drink from the table and he stretched his arm across the couch behind her. Trying to sneak his arm into position around her? Why did that thought cause her stomach to cartwheel? But, no, he grabbed the cushion lying unused beside her, fluffed it, then dropped it on the armrest beside him and leaned against it. Did she actually feel disappointed?

Damn, girl, concentrate on the movie.

On the screen, the witch named Gill held the cat, Piwacket, on her lap, in the midst of casting a love spell on the hero, Shep. The haunting tune she hummed threaded through Gill, and it stirred something deep, leaving her feeling unsettled and restless. The odd light shining on Gill-the-witch's face and the shadow of the cat's ears paralleling her eyebrows made a mysterious and powerful image.

Cade's fingers stroked across hers in a feathery touch and she glanced at him. The light from the television cast his face aglow the same way. The image of his fingers brushing across her nipples came unbidden to her mind and her breasts tightened. Gill felt a deep longing for something she'd never experienced, but wanted to share with Cade.

Could he be casting a spell on her? He had no cat, but then, with his charisma, he didn't need one. That sexy half-grin of his could hold any woman spellbound. And he chose that precise moment to use it.

Magic. Pure magic.

Beware, her heart cautioned. That kind of magic is dangerous.

She turned back to the screen to see Gill-the-witch and Shep in an ardent embrace. Cade slid his arm around her and drew her against his side.

Pull away, her heart cried. Shut up, her body snapped.

Her mind concurred with her body. After all, snuggling beside him didn't mean she'd made some major commitment. And she liked leaning against him, feeling the length of his body against hers. A lot. Despite the wild tremors careening through her. Or, actually, because of them, she admitted to herself.

On the screen, disembodied voices spoke as the camera panned over a winter scene. The voice of lovers lost in each other. The camera focused on the couple in each others' arms atop the Pan Am Building.

"There's a timelessness about this," Shep said. "I-I feel spellbound."

So do I, Gill thought. Why must I fight it?

Cade stroked the back of her neck and her spine quivered at his delicate touch--designed to affect her just that way, she was sure. But she didn't want him to stop.

"...I want never to stop seeing you," Shep went on. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I have an idea I must be in love with you."

Of course, he was in love with her. Gill-the-witch had cast a spell on him. Gill felt a magic between her and Cade, too, but she knew it was no more love than the feeling the poor enchanted Shep had for Gill-the-witch.

If she kept that firmly in mind, if she kept her perspective--

"I want you as much as you want me," Gill-the-witch responded.

Oh, man, I know how she feels.

"Would you like it to go on for always?" Shep asked.

"Does anything go on for always?" Gill-the-witch asked, clearly avoiding the issue.

"Well, one likes to think some things do," Shep answered.

His words triggered a realization in Gill. One likes to think some things do. Like marriage. Like love. But Gill knew that one couldn't depend on love lasting forever. Especially when based on a magical

attraction. Gill had always figured the magic between her mother and Eric had been the problem, or their acting on it, but that wasn't it at all. It was the unreasonable expectation that it would last forever.

"Maybe this is one of those things that burn themselves out," Shep went on. "If it is, it's a whale of a fire."

As it would be between her and Cade. If she let this magic between them ignite, it would light the night sky in a burst of brilliant fireworks. It would burn brightly, searing them both in pleasure. A pleasure she longed to experience.

And why not? Just like people handling fireworks, if she kept in mind the danger and took precautions--like keeping her heart a safe distance away--she wouldn't get hurt and they would both enjoy an exhilarating ride.

She might not want a long term relationship with Cade, but that didn't mean they couldn't both enjoy the delicious consummation of their powerful attraction. After all, this kind of chemistry would produce quite an explosion--one well worth experiencing.

Chapter 8

Gill snuggled closer to him, enjoying the riot of sensations shimmering through her body.

"Cade?"

He turned to face her and she felt the heat of his gaze like the full force of the noon sun.

"What is it, Gill?"

"I know this isn't really a date...." She leaned toward him slightly and licked her lips. His gaze fixed on her mouth. "At least, it didn't start out to be...." His eyes darkened and she took his hands. As his large, strong fingers curled around hers, desire surged through her. Intense. Hot. Powerful. Her nipples tightened.

"But...." The last word fell from her lips, a mere whisper of sound.

For a moment she felt suspended in time, floating through the seconds as she and Cade gazed into each other's eyes, his face moving closer to hers. His lips nearing at an achingly slow pace. Her eyelids lowered as he neared, her lips parting slightly. Waiting. Wanting. Needing.

If she didn't hold onto him, she'd melt like ice cream on hot pavement. She slid her hands up his arms, over hard, well-developed muscles, to his shoulders. His fingertips touched her cheeks in a tender gesture that took her breath away, leaving her light-headed. Her eyes fluttered closed and his mouth finally brushed hers, a light, painfully sweet contact. She'd never been as aware of her lips before, the ultra-sensitive flesh sending tingling messages of pleasure to every point in her body. She wanted to move slowly, to enjoy every step thoroughly, but holding back became difficult. Anticipation pulsed through her with the accelerating flow of her blood, filling her with explosive need. His hand cupped the back of her head and his mouth mated more snugly with hers. The tip of his tongue grazed her lips, burning away the last of her restraint.

Her arms flew around his neck and she plunged her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and slid back onto the couch, pulling her with him. Her breasts, cushioned against his hard, broad chest, tingled with need. She nibbled his lower lip and drew it into her mouth. His answering groan thrilled her.

"Oh, sweetheart, you're driving me crazy." He flipped her under him.

As she lay flat on her back, staring up at his molten gold eyes, she realized she had to get a grip. These feelings were too intense, too frightening. Like the driving waters of Niagara Falls, carrying her to the edge. If she didn't cling to some small barrier, she'd lose herself completely, shattered in the rocky waters beyond the rainbow.

She took a steadying breath. Distance. Just a little. To keep her heart intact.

She smiled.

"Crazy? You're already there. I'm just joining you for a while."

He laughed and briefly captured her lips again, but when he eased back, his eyes had turned dark and serious, and indecision scrawled across his features.

"I hate to chance jinxing this whole thing, but...." He hesitated, brushing a tendril of hair from her face, his fingertips lingering on her temple. "Why?"

Her heart quivered and her breathing grew heavy. Why? Could she tell him that her attraction to him had proven so powerful even her strong-willed determination couldn't save her from surrendering to it? Could she admit her weakness?

She drew up her lips in a grin, the perfect shield.

"Let's just say, I can't resist any longer." Her fingers wandered to his shoulders and she linked her hands behind his neck. "You want me. I want you. Why fight it?"

"You sound like a B-grade movie." Doubt still flickered in his eyes.

His intense scrutiny worried her. What if he didn't find whatever he was searching for in her eyes? She'd come too far to turn back now.

"What are you worried about, Cade? Do you think I'm after your money?"

"What?" The expression of complete surprise on his face looked absolutely comical. What an actor he would be. He could almost convince her he believed exactly that. She laughed. Her golden man--totally broke, and totally irresistible.

She grasped his face between her palms and stared him squarely in the face.

"Cade, you've been chasing me. I've been running. Now that you've caught me, are you telling me you don't want me?"

His expression relaxed with his broad smile.

"No way." He rested his forehead against hers. "You just confuse me sometimes, that's all."

"Does this confuse you, too?"

She slid her hands to his cheeks and trailed the tip of her tongue along the edge of his lips, outlining his mouth slowly and intently. He groaned. He framed her face with his hands and proceeded to do the same thing to her.

Oh, sweet heaven. The feel of his tongue caressing her lips with a gentle pressure sent her pulse gyrating to an explosive level. She couldn't take much more, so she nudged him onto his side, then shifted her mouth to the pulse point at the base of his neck, reveling in the salty-male taste of him as she released his shirt buttons, from neck to waist. He tugged off his shirt and tossed it onto the floor.

He turned back to her and smiled, his gaze resting on her face then shifting to her fuchsia cotton blouse. His index finger toyed with her top button.

"Now it's my turn."

Those words, husky and hot, held the promise of wonderful delights. He opened the first button. Then the second. Cool air caressed her skin as her top slowly parted. Nervousness shuddered through her as he

exposed more of her, but it fled when he lowered his mouth to her neck and nuzzled. Then his lips followed the opening of her top. The warmth of his breath on her cool skin sent her nerve endings dancing on sunlight. He released another button and his lips slid further down, grazing the crevasse between her breasts. Sparks blazed across her skin. She drew in a deep breath, and held it as he eased the fabric apart, revealing her white lace bra, then his hands slid under her shirt and around her midriff.

"What a gorgeous landscape you've been hiding under here." He drew his hands over her contours, triggering her nipples to tighten into hard buds, and then he released the front clasp.

She sucked in another breath, wondering how she'd survive such a wonderful onslaught of sensations.

"Absolutely gorgeous."

The look of admiration in his eyes filled her with feminine satisfaction, something she'd never felt before. She'd always spent so much time ignoring the fact she was a woman that she'd never learned to appreciate the benefits of the gender. Like enjoying the awe of a man.

His hands skimmed over her breasts and exquisite pleasure rippled through her as her nipples became impossibly tight. He cupped her and she sighed.

"You're so beautiful, Gill."

She opened her eyes and stared at his gorgeous, golden face. She raised one hand to his cheek, reveling in the feel of light stubble under her fingertips.

"So are you."

He scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom. She dropped her shirt on the floor and slipped out of her jeans while he shed his clothes.

She had never realized how magnificent a male body could be, especially naked. His hard, firm lines, silhouetted against the soft light of the bedside lamp, formed a composition of artistic perfection. Her gaze slid down the planes of his chest, following the arrow of crisp hair past his navel, then fixed on the part of a man she'd never seen before. His penis.

As she watched, it transformed before her eyes. Curving upward. Stiffening. Growing longer and harder. Erect. Proud. Ready for action. His cock. The word seemed so much more appropriate. A sharp, intense ache clamped through her vagina as she stared at it, imagining it pushing inside her.

He stepped forward and embraced her, pulling her against the firmness of his chest and she marveled at how his skin, pulled taut against hard muscle, felt like satin against her own.

He eased her onto the bed and lowered himself beside her. Tentatively, she reached out and stroked the width of his shoulders, feeling his muscles ripple beneath her touch.

He cupped her breasts. Her nipples peaked, pressing into his warm palms, eager for more of his touch. He lowered his mouth to one breast. The hot, moist feel of him surrounding her sensitive flesh made her gasp. Her nipple tightened to an almost painful hardness.

"Oh, Cade. That feels incredible."

He smiled and moved to her other breast, leaving the first cold and wanting, but the second perked up in immediate excitement. The contrast threw off her equilibrium more than any flying maneuver. Even in a full spin, she might not know which way was up, but she knew which direction she was going, even if it was straight down. And she knew she was in control.

Here, she had handed control of her senses to Cade, and he succeeded in guiding her on a spiraling pattern of pleasure. Clearly, she was in for the ride of her life.

One of his hands glided over her hip, setting course for the lower reaches of her anatomy. When his fingers grazed her inner thigh, pleasure shivered through her. He stroked and she sighed. He slipped his fingers inside her melting heat and she sucked in a breath, the tiniest bit of embarrassment she felt thrust away by the flood of pleasure.

"Gill, you're as ready as I am."

She glanced down at the length of his erection and grinned.

"Is that possible?" Fascinated by how impossibly hard it looked, she curled her fingers around him and stroked. Supple kid leather stretched over taut muscle.

Cade's jaw tensed and his hand surrounded hers, stopping her movement.

"Slow down, sweetheart, or I won't do this justice for either of us."

Uncertainly spiked through her.

"Don't you like me doing this?" Funny, she had always thought men loved this. But then, she had no direct experience in this area.

"Of course I like it." He kissed the tip of her nose. "After this first time, I'll let you--hell, I'll beg you--to do it until your heart's content, but right now I want you so bad I won't be able to hold back."

He slid his finger along her moist flesh, then flicked. She gasped at the intense pleasure he triggered. He

flicked again and she grabbed his shoulders and pulled him against her, arching her lower body against his hand. Now she understood where the term turned on came from. He'd discovered a very special 'on' button.

"Cade, if you keep doing that, I won't last."

The edges of his mouth lifted in a devilish smile.

"I'm counting on it."

He slid out of her grasp and grazed her chin with his lips, then kissed an unsteady line down the center of her torso like a butterfly happily fluttering home. As he passed her navel and continued down, she tensed.

"Cade, what are you--?"

He covered her hidden pleasure point with his mouth. The wild sensation of high voltage electricity combined with a tremendous riptide bombarded her with waves of sensory bliss. She felt dragged away by an undertow, drowning in pleasure--and loving every second of it. The waves started to spiral into a whirlpool, and she clung to Cade's shoulders as she sucked in a breath, then another, seemingly unable to exhale. She was thrown into a wild vortex of pleasure, her consciousness rising and expanding with the incoming air until suddenly it burst out in a long groan as she reached the height of ecstasy.

Gasping for air, she stared at him in utter awe. So that's what all the excitement was about.

"Cade, do you have a license for that tongue of yours?"

His sexy grin still had a devastating effect on her.

"I take it you liked the ride?"

"Oh, yeah." She circled her arms around his neck. "But it's not over yet, is it?" The pleasure had been intense, but it hadn't satisfied some deep need within her. To be with Cade. To have him fly over that rainbow with her.

He prowled over her, kissing her firmly.

"Not on your life." He stroked her inner thighs, the delicate touch sending wild sensations pulsing through her. He lowered himself and she felt his erection brush her moist flesh. Her inner muscles contracted tightly. Excitement built within her as he positioned the tip of his cock and pushed inside her in a slow thrust.

Then stopped.

Nooo. Not now.

"Gill, you're awfully tight." He nuzzled her neck. "Has it been a while?"

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders. Why did men pick the craziest times to ask questions?

"Try forever."

He jerked his head back to stare at her in shock.

"Forever? You mean...?"

From the wide-eyed look on his face, she feared she'd made a tactical error in admitting that. Since she'd already set herself on this course, however, there was no turning back.

"That's right. I've never done this before."

He eased away and sat up beside her.

"Oh, God. You're a ... a virgin?"

She pushed herself up on her elbows. He looked positively shaken.

"For heaven's sake, Cade. Some men actually like that in a woman."

"Well, yeah, maybe ... in a new bride, or ... or...." He shook his head, seemingly at a total loss to think of any other appropriate situation.

Irritation grated through her. Oh, brother. Had she actually stumbled upon another medieval man who believed a woman had to save herself for marriage, as Mom had so tritely put it?

"I see. So, you're making a not-so-subtle comment about my mores." Her teeth ground together as she rolled away from him, but he grabbed her elbow before she could skitter across the bed.

"No, Gill. Nothing like that. It just surprised me, that's all."

She stopped pulling away from him and curled into a sitting position, knees drawn to her chest. His golden eyes glowed sincerity--and a sensuous promise that melted away her annoyance. Surprise? Okay, she could understand that.

"I mean, I didn't think there were any women your age who were still...."

"Oh, good, now call me old." She kept a straight face, intending to make him suffer a little longer.

He grasped her arms, gently drawing her closer.

"Gill, listen to me for a minute. I just don't understand, given your obvious old-fashioned values, why you're willing to do this with me now."

She eased closer to him.

"I'm not old-fashioned. I've just never met someone I wanted to do it with before."

He stroked her cheek, then rested his finger on the tip of her chin and smiled tenderly.

"And you want to do it with me?"

She hooked her arms around his neck and arched against him, her breasts pressing flat against him.

"Well, yes. If you actually want to do it."

The strained expression on his face gave her a great sense of satisfaction. His hands clamped around her waist.

"Gill, we really should talk about this." His voice seemed to be shredding around the edges.

She nipped his earlobe, then trailed her tongue down his chest to his nipple and lapped. Her hand crept toward the other one and toyed with it playfully.

"Talk isn't what I had in mind." She slid her hand down his stomach toward his stiffening cock.

He grabbed her wrists and pushed her flat on the bed, pinning her hands above her head, effectively stopping her distracting maneuvers.

"Mmm. Now this is more what I had in mind." She arched her eyebrows and sent him a devilish grin. But it faded as he continued to stare at her.

Her confidence burned away like morning fog under the heat of his gaze. Could it be that he really didn't want her? Pain arced through her. Because of her inexperience? Or, over the last few moments, had she overwhelmed him? Been too assertive?

"Oh, God, it's true, isn't it?" She sagged beneath him.

His eyebrows lowered. "What's true?"

"My stepfather always told me that...." She shook her head, unable to continue.

"That what, Gill?"

"He told me I was too aggressive. He said men wouldn't want--"

"Gill, your stepfather sounds like a real jerk." His coarsely tender words assured her. "This has nothing to do with your aggressiveness."

Relief surged through her.

"So you do think I'm aggressive?"

"No, I...." His taut expression eased, when she grinned. "I just don't want you to have regrets tomorrow."

She feigned an expression of surprise.

"You want me to have them now instead?"

His teeth clenched.

"Gill, you're driving me crazy. What I'm trying to say is, I want to be sure you're not doing this in the heat of passion."

She laughed.

"But isn't that how you're supposed to do this?"

He smiled tenderly, brushing stray hair from her face.

"Gill, your first time should be with someone special."

Her smile faded.

"You are special, Cade." Her words came out soft and breathy. "What we have is special."

"Gill, I don't know what to say." His eyes glowed with an inner light and the intensity of his emotion

disturbed her.

She nipped his right shoulder.

"Don't say anything." She undulated, stroking the tips of her breasts against his chest, re-igniting flaming desire within him. "Do something."

He smiled broadly.

"Do something? Like this?" He kissed the sensitive flesh below her ear, starting a chain reaction of sensation down her neck. "Like this?" He kissed the base of her throat, her pulse quickening under his lips. "Like this?" He lapped his tongue over the tip of her nipple. The pink nub beaded to pebble hardness. He flicked it and she groaned.

He smiled down at her. "Is that what you had in mind?"

She nodded, feeling slightly dazed.

"What else would you like me to do?"

Great, more questions. How could he expect her to think?

"Well, uh, continuing where we left off would be good."

"Oh, no. I can't do that. We need to start all over again."

"All over?" Her voice sounded a little faint.

"We don't have to do exactly the same thing." He nuzzled her shoulder. "We could be a little creative this time."

"Creative?" she asked weakly.

He smiled, amusement flickering like sparks in his golden eyes. But more, a warmth, more intense, more compelling than she'd ever seen before, shone through. His lips touched down on hers, lightly, like the brush of a feather, then moved in the gentlest of caresses. Her breath locked in her lungs and she barely dared to move, so entranced by the tender movement of flesh on flesh. He eased back a little and traced the edges of her mouth with the tip of his tongue, sending quivery strands of pleasure threading through her. He shifted his lips to her earlobe, then traced the line of her jaw.

She wanted to touch him, to feel the silk of his thick waves of hair running through her fingers.

Cade felt her wrists press against the confines of his hands.

"Uh, Cade?"

"Yes, darling." He continued under her chin, delighting in the feel of her silky skin.

"Do you think you could let go of my hands now?"

He smiled. "I don't think so."

Her eyes flared and her words came out tight. "What do you mean, you don't think so?"

Uh, oh. That tone he'd learned to dread had crept into her voice, pushing out the charming timidity of a few moments before. Not that he would ever want Gill to be timid, but it had been fascinating to succeed in throwing her so off kilter she had lost her usual cool. Now, however, danger bells clanged.

Still, he couldn't help teasing her.

"I kind of like you like this."

Her eyes darkened to midnight blue, sparks glittering in their depths like stars in the night sky.

"This being...?" she demanded.

He nuzzled the inside of her elbow and she trembled beneath him.

"Totally under my control."

He expected her eyes to blaze into fight mode, but instead she smiled. One of those smiles every man dreads, because he has no idea what it means.

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

He lowered himself onto her, pinning her with his weight.

"Yes, I do."

She smiled wider. As she swirled the tip of her tongue around his ear, blowing lightly, his groin tightened and he got an inkling of what that smile meant.

"I think you may be a little confused." She slowly dragged her toes up the back of his calf, then rested her

leg across his thigh. The action pressed the warm softness of her mound against him. His cock twitched. Her voice, throaty and coarse, sounded in his ear. "Who did you say was in control?"

"I said I--"

She drew in a deep breath, crushing her breasts against his chest, then she rocked back and forth. The feel of the hard beads of her nipples pressed against him by the soft cushion of her breasts, robbed him of breath.

"Who?"

"I, uh...."

She wrapped her other leg around him. His erection--so hard now it almost hurt--pressed against her soft, curly hair. She shifted her body up and pivoted her hips slightly. He felt the tip of him easing into her dampness.

"You." He groaned. "You are." Laughing, he let go of her wrists and slid his hands the length of her body in a long caress. "Now slow down. I want to do this right."

Her eyebrows curved upward.

"You mean we've been doing it wrong so far? I find that hard to believe." She arched against him. "Like the song says, if this is wrong, I don't want to be right."

As her hot, sexy body moved against his, he nearly lost it. Man, if she didn't cool it, he'd be finished before they even got started.

"I mean it, Gill. This is your first time and I don't want you to get hurt."

She raised her hand to his cheek, her eyes dewy soft.

"Oh, Cade, you would never hurt me."

A swell of protectiveness surged through him and he kissed her.

"You've got that right." He eased into her slowly, feeling her stretch around him. "But this might be a bit uncomfortable."

"Honey, I'm a big, strong girl. I can take it." She grinned. "All of it." She pushed forward, unsuccessfully trying to sheath him totally.

He clamped his hands on her hips.

"Gill, this isn't a bandage we're trying to tear off. We don't have to get it over with. Just this once, let me take the lead."

She pursed her lips in a considering fashion.

"Okay. This once."

As he gazed down at her, the full import of what they were doing finally sank in. She wanted him to be her first lover. His heart throbbed with pure joy.

"Gill, I...."

He wanted to tell her how he felt, to express his awe at what she wanted to share with him, but he couldn't find the words. So, instead, he lowered his lips to hers.

He kissed her slowly at first, moving his lips tenderly on hers, then more persuasively. At the same time, he pushed forward, burrowing deeper inside her. The feel of her hot, tight flesh encircling him made it hard not to thrust forward all the way. Her hands flattened on his back, but as he eased out, her fingers arched and, as he pushed forward again, her nails scraped across his skin.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he murmured.

"Oh, yes. I. Just. Want. You." She groaned. "Deeper."

His control started to fray. He wanted to be deeper. This time he thrust almost all the way in and, at her muffled cry, instantly regretted it. As a ring of mild pain filtered through the pleasure, he realized her cry had been muffled because her teeth were attached to him.

"Gill, are you all right?"

She nodded.

"Then could you let go of my shoulder?"

The pain faded.

"Oh, sorry."

He debated whether to ask her if they should stop, but she made the decision for him by hooking her legs

behind him and pulling him the rest of the way in. He lay still for a moment, allowing her body to adjust to his, and to allow himself to catch his breath, which had grown raspy and shallow.

"Cade, don't we have to move for this to work?"

Despite being on the edge of sanity, he laughed.

"Yes, sweetheart. I'm just trying to ... contain myself." He kissed her cheek. "But I'm ready now, if you are."

"Oh, honey, I've never been so ready for something in my life."

He pulled back and thrust into her. She arched to meet him.

He thrust again and heard a delightful catch in her breath. Her lips parted and her eyes closed. She looked like an angel headed for cloud nine.

He kissed her shoulder and thrust again. A little moan escaped her and he felt his control slip.

He thrust again. Her eyes widened in an expression of pure amazement and her long groan of pleasure swept him over the edge. He continued to thrust, riding the wave of her orgasmic moan. His balls tightened and semen gushed through his penis in a sweet release.

Chapter 9

Gill felt herself drifting from the depths of slumber. She felt wonderfully warm and cozy, as though enveloped in the cherished embrace of a lover's arms. The cheerful twitter of a bird outside and the light she sensed beyond her eyelids told her morning had arrived.

A soft breeze sent a tendril of hair fluttering across her cheek, tickling her nose. A finger trailed across her face and over her temple, stroking it away.

Not her finger.

Her eyes snapped open. Cade's golden eyes stared back at her, his face only inches from her own on her soft, green paisley pillow. His lips turned up in a smile, making his whole face glow brighter than the sunshine glaring in the window.

"Do you know how beautiful you look when you're sleeping?" he asked.

The misty quality in his eyes disturbed her. She made a concerted effort not to pull back.

"Um, no."

He'd been watching her sleep? The thought was wildly romantic, but it made her feel way too vulnerable.

She became intensely aware of his arms encircling her waist. Bare skin against bare skin. Taking stock, she realized she was totally naked. Her gaze trailed from his face to the golden tan of his broad shoulders. Memories filtered through her daze. Of her unbuttoning his shirt. Trailing her fingers down his hard, tight stomach. Arching her hips to meet his.

The soft haze of sleep surrounding her burned away and her face flamed. Oh, God, she had slept with Cade last night.

Well, not slept, exactly.

He rested his fingers on her temple and stroked with a feather-light touch. Tendrils of quivery delight threaded through her.

"How do you feel?"

"Um, fine." She couldn't quite bring herself to look at his face.

"You aren't too coherent in the morning, are you?"

"I guess not."

He placed his finger under her chin and tipped her head up so she had to look at him.

"Gill, relax. I'm not going to bite you."

A shiver coursed through her. Maybe he didn't bite, but he'd used his mouth with great expertise for other things. More memories slipped through her brain. His mouth on her lips, on her breasts, on her--

Embarrassment blazed through her even more fiercely. She became increasingly aware of the closeness of

his warm body, exuding a strong masculine aura.

Her chest tightened and she didn't dare move for fear of one of her body parts coming in contact with one of his body parts. Which was ridiculous because all their body parts had been in pretty intimate contact last night.

But it was the morning after and she didn't feel quite as comfortable with the idea of, well, intimacy, as she had last night.

Damn, she'd heard about how uncomfortable these morning after things could be. Didn't most men slip out in the middle of the night just to avoid them, uneasy at the thought of facing the woman and her typical questions of commitment come the light of day? She'd heard that, too. So why had she chosen a man who was the exception to the rule? Or was it that Cade understood her so well he knew he wouldn't have to face a scene like that?

"Gill, are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Why do you think anything's wrong?"

He stroked his fingers over her cheek.

"Well, for one thing, I've never seen you quite this color red before."

She tried to think of something to say--anything--but came up empty.

His delightful smile faded to a grim line.

"You're having regrets, aren't you? You're sorry you made love with me."

A lump formed in her throat. Last night, he had been so sensitive, so concerned with ensuring she had thought through her decision. After all that, was she having regrets? A resounding no thundered through her. What they'd shared had been wonderful, far exceeding anything she'd come to expect--and, after all the sparks between them, that had been a lot.

She rested her hand on his cheek.

"No, Cade, it's not that. It's just that...."

He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"That what?"

"I'm just feeling a bit awkward. I've never done one of these morning after things."

His mouth spread in a wide smile, setting his eyes alive with mischief.

"Is that all?"

How easily he dismissed it. She envied him his experience.

He rested his hand over hers, pressing it against his morning stubble. Thick and coarse, it felt incredibly masculine under her hand. She longed to rub her cheek down his, to hear the sound of her teeth dragging over the whiskers on his chin, to feel the graininess under her tongue.

"I have a cure for that." He slid his arms around her and pulled her against him. The feel of his hard, warm body pressed against her from shoulder to knee, and all the interesting places in between, sent her pulse thrumming like a Spanish guitar under the guidance of a master musician.

She flattened her hands on his shoulders.

"Cade, maybe we should just get up and...."

The feel of his lips caressing the base of her throat made her lose track of her words. His hand stoked across her chest and slid over her breast. Her nipple hardened immediately.

"You were saying?"

"I, uh...."

He kissed her.

"You really do have a problem with words in the morning." He covered her breast with his mouth and she lost the ability to talk at all. His tongue flicked mercilessly across her nipple, forcing it to painful tightness, then he lapped at it gently.

"Oh, God, that's incredible."

He drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked gently, then switched to her other nipple. Her hand slid down his chest, over his taut stomach muscles, then curled around his growing cock. She squeezed, then dragged her hand the length of him, satisfied at his low groan.

"As an experienced pilot, I feel that I should learn more about this new equipment I'm learning to fly."

She threw the covers off him and eased him onto his back, then stared down at his long, hard cock. It twitched under her scrutiny. She ran the tip of her finger the length of him, from his furry testicles to the bulbous head of his penis. She ran her finger around the ridge of the head, noting with satisfaction Cade's half-closed eyelids and his increased breathing. She wrapped her fingers over the head of his cock, curling her fingers around him, the tip firmly in her palm.

"This is the throttle, right?"

"Well, maneuvering it will certainly get me going full speed."

She smiled.

"Maybe I should have a closer look."

She knelt beside him and leaned close, then stroked his penis from base to tip with her finger. Next, she ran her fingertip over the loose, furry flesh of his testicles.

"Mmm, that's great." Cade's eyes half closed as he enjoyed her exploration.

She wrapped her hand around his cock and licked the tip. His relaxed body tensed slightly. She swirled her tongue around the ridge, then swallowed the head into her mouth. His quick intake of breath spurred her on. She drew him deep into her mouth, then pulled back, swirling her tongue around him as she reached the tip, then thrust deep again.

"Oh, God, Gill. That's wonderful."

As she pulled back this time, she sucked on him.

"Gill, if you keep doing that, I'm going to come ... and if we're not careful, I'll come in your mouth."

She released him and stared at his taut features.

"Would you like that?"

"Coming? Of course."

"Sure, but I mean coming in my mouth."

"Um, yeah. Absolutely."

She smiled.

"Okay. Let's do it."

She sucked and swirled, swirled and sucked. She tucked her hands around his testicles and fondled them gently.

"Oh, God, Gill. I'm close."

His balls tightened in her hands. She stroked the length of his penis with her hand as her mouth moved to the tip, then she wrapped her hand around him below her lips while she sucked hard. Then she flicked her tongue around the head, swirling and teasing. His body tensed and she felt his balls harden more.

"Now, Gill. It's happening."

She felt hot liquid erupt into her mouth, spurting against the back of her throat. She licked him and swallowed, then swallowed some more. Salty sweet.

As soon as she released him, he flipped her onto her back and ravaged her neck, then kissed down her chest. He captured her nipple and tortured it thoroughly with his tongue. When he pulled it deep into his mouth, she groaned at the exquisite pleasure.

"That was fantastic, Gill."

His hand slid down her stomach and dipped between her legs. His fingertip caressed her slit, then slid inside.

"You're wet, Gill. You're ready for me."

"I am absolutely ready. So why are you keeping me waiting?"

His lips swooped down on her, taking her mouth in a warm, passionate kiss. She felt the head of his cock push against her opening, then slowly slide inside. Unlike the slow, purposeful entry of last night, he entered her in one long, slow stroke, then stopped once he'd impaled her fully, allowing them both to catch their breath.

She arched against him, wanting to feel every blessed inch of his body pressed the length of hers. The ridge of his penis dragged along the walls of her vagina as he pulled back. Then he thrust forward again.

"Oh, yes, Cade. More."

He pulled back and thrust forward again. She felt an energy build within her. Sensations sparked. Her body flooded with warmth.

He thrust again and again. Every cell in her body seemed to expand, stretched to capacity. He thrust deep and hard. She moaned as each cell burst in a wild explosion of pleasure, the catalyst to a fierce, eruption of uninhibited, passionate ecstasy surging through her body. Her moan fractured as she burst into orgasmic flames. Cade groaned, hot on her heels. She actually felt his release as hot liquid spurted inside her.

They both fell back on the bed, panting. Gill started to laugh uncontrollably and Cade joined in.

Twenty minutes later, he led her to the bathroom and tugged her into the shower with him. Her body had never been so clean after he'd soaped up and lovingly scrubbed every part of her. By the time they sat down to breakfast, the awkwardness of the morning after was a distant memory. So much so, that after breakfast, she dragged him back into the bedroom.

* * * *

Gill and Cade spent the day together. Watching movies. Making love. Taking a walk beside the waterfall at Mooney's Bay. Making love. Ordering Chinese food--which Cade paid for. Making love.

Now that she'd had more practice at it, she liked it even better, which was saying a lot, since the first time had been pretty spectacular.

After they sailed into the night on a wave of ecstasy, she burrowed into his embrace and fell asleep as though she was where she'd always belonged. In Cade's arms. The last thought that wavered through her brain as wakefulness slipped away was it's too bad this has to end.

Light drifted into her awareness like a thief, stealing away her delightful dreams and replacing them with a foggy awareness of lying naked under her soft duvet, a slight chill shivering through her. She rolled onto her back, sliding her arm out to touch Cade and be reassured by his warm, masculine presence, but only cool sheets met her searching hand. Her eyelids popped open and she glanced around to see an empty pillow with an indent in the center where his head had been.

"Cade?" Sheer panic stabbed through her and she bolted upright. Had he slipped away during the night? Left without a word of goodbye? Her heart crumpled like a sheet of paper. It shouldn't hurt this bad.

"Careful, Gill. I might get the impression you like having me around." Cade's voice, filled with amusement, spiraled through her, surrounding her heart with warmth.

Her head snapped around to see him stretched out in the easy chair across the room, his legs crossed. Relief whooshed through her, leaving her slightly dizzy from the results of the adrenaline rush. She dragged her gaze over him to reassure herself he was really here.

He had a large notepad on his lap, the only thing covering his naked body. He'd pulled the chair from its original position near the window so it faced the bed. She had the sneaking suspicion he'd been watching her sleep. Just like yesterday.

Confusion at her reaction to finding him gone still coiled within her, and she knew she would have to come to terms with those feelings. Her heart pounded in her chest as vague thoughts that his presence, or absence, shouldn't affect her so intensely flitted through her brain. Thinking he'd left had hurt. Badly.

She couldn't allow her feelings for him to grow so strong. Desire she could accept. Right from the start she'd known that when she was close to him, he sent her system way off kilter. That's why she'd decided to go to bed with him and experience the wonder of Cade, but she'd gone into this thing knowing it would end. She had to remember that. She dare not let this fling turn into something serious, because that meant serious trouble. All too soon, it had to end and she would never again see Cade stretched out in her sage green easy chair, the sunlight glazing his skin a rich bronze.

Of course, that meant while he was here, she should enjoy every exciting minute together. An overwhelming need to touch him took over her senses. She wanted to push aside the covers and saunter over to him, to slide her fingers over his broad shoulders and down his chest. She wanted to ease herself onto his lap and feel his maleness harden under her, then slide into her. She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and pull him so deep he would think they were permanently attached.

That's what she wanted to do, but the fact that she was totally naked under the covers kept her locked in position. She knew it was silly to be shy given how uninhibited she'd been the last two nights in his arms, but she couldn't help it.

"Cade." She patted the mattress beside her and said in her most sultry voice, "Why don't you come over here?"

He put down his pencil and pad and leaned forward, smiling. The sight of him sitting there, his body totally naked, made breathing difficult. Her gaze drifted to his belly, then lower. His penis sat nestled between his thighs. Flaccid, then rising to a semi-rigid state. A sharp need spiked through her as she saw the effect her gaze alone had on him. She had to concentrate on drawing in a breath, then letting it out again.

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come over here?" The challenge in his eyes was clear.

His cock now stood at full readiness.

Shyness warred valiantly with pride in her strength of will--but lost miserably to her growing desire. She could do this. All she had to do was fling the covers aside and stroll across the room. No big deal. She did it every morning of her life. Of course, typically covered from neck to ankle, and with no one watching, but that was beside the point.

She pushed back her shoulders, took a deep breath, and shoved the covers aside. Instantly, she sensed the change in Cade. His whole body seemed to tighten. Her breasts felt heavy and round under his dark-eyed gaze. A flood of awareness swept through her as she watched his tongue flick over his lips and she remembered it lapping over her breasts, remembered the warmth of his mouth surrounding her nipples. They hardened to pebbles as she walked toward him, somehow keeping her steps even and sure despite the cacophony of physical reactions assaulting her. As his gaze grew more intense, her confidence grew. She liked this power she had over him, even though it had just as effective a hold over her.

She forked her fingers through his hair, cupping her palms around his ears, then brought her lips to his. The feel of his mouth on hers filled her with a sense of completeness, filling a need she couldn't understand, and didn't even want to try. He tried to deepen the kiss but she eased back, teasing his lips with the tip of her tongue. His arms closed around her and she felt strength harnessed beneath powerful muscles, holding back because she playfully insisted. She nibbled his lower lip, then drew it into her mouth and sucked gently. He groaned. She sensed his control would explode in a devouring kiss at any moment if she didn't stop tormenting him, so she grazed his chin with her tongue, reveling in the contrast of soft and wet on dry and coarse. She dipped her head to his nipple and lapped across the small bead then ran her hands across his shoulders. As she nuzzled his ear, his embrace tightened.

"Why don't you come back to bed with me?" she whispered in his ear. Her hand closed around his still growing erection. "I miss you."

The invitation seemed too much for him. He bolted to his feet, sweeping her up and carrying her to the bed. She found herself flat on her back with Cade looming over her, kissing her neck, then her shoulder, then his mouth planted firmly on her nipple and she cried out in intense pleasure.

Her body oozed with need and she knew she couldn't wait another minute to feel him inside her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself to him, and guided his cock to her waiting warmth. He pushed into her and she moaned--low and heavy. He kissed her--fiercely sweet and giving--then thrust into her.

"Yes, Cade. Yes."

That one stroke nearly swept her over the edge. She couldn't believe how incredibly profound the experience of joining with Cade had become. Each time more so than the last.

He thrust into her again and pulled back. Her composure started to come unhinged. His long cock slid the length of her vagina again, knocking her sensibilities reeling. She tightened around him and he groaned.

"Oh, Gill. I love it when you do that."

He thrust forward again, this time with a slight spiral motion, spinning her on a wild, swirling ride of delight.

Oh, God, the intense pleasure he gave her was becoming addictive, she realized as the now familiar wave of passion rose to orgasm.

A small part of her brain shrieked that soon it would become nearly impossible to end this relationship but her long moan of completion, followed by his short, sharp groan as he erupted inside her, drowned it out completely.

* * * *

Cade reveled in the feel of Gill pressed against him spoon fashion. He couldn't believe the passionate, sexually assertive woman Gill had turned into these past two days. When he'd decided to show up at her door with her favorite movie and pizza, he'd never expected the night would end the way it had. She'd held him off so adamantly before, he'd been surprised when she'd made the first move.

Then, when he'd discovered she had never been with a man before, he'd been touched. And--as old-fashioned as it sounded--honored that she'd chosen him. A treasure she could only give once, she'd given him. His heart swelled with emotion and he tightened his arm around her waist. It had been the most wonderful gift anyone had ever given him.

He'd hated seeing her withdraw the next morning. Lying stiff in his arms as though afraid to move. He couldn't stand the thought of her putting distance between them. He'd had enough of detached relationships. Every relationship he'd ever had in his life had been like that. His mother had loved him in her way, but kisses and hugs had been few, and highly sanitary when given. No warm embraces. Kisses light pecks on the cheek.

He stroked his hand along Gill's shoulder and she sighed. If he'd allowed her to withdraw physically that morning, he felt sure she would never have let them experience this wonderful intimacy again. After all, he had no idea why she'd decided to drop her barriers and make love with him in the first place so when he'd seen those barriers go right back up he'd been convinced she'd never let them down again.

He didn't know why she'd originally erected those barriers, but he felt sure it had something to do with the jerk of a stepfather she'd mentioned. The fear she'd expressed about men not liking her because of her aggressiveness told Cade the guy had obviously tried to tumble Gill's natural self-confidence. It seems

he'd knocked out the foundations, leaving her ego precariously balanced on an unstable foundation.

That would explain her shyness, too. A woman with a body as spectacular as Gill's must have a real self-esteem problem to hide her beautiful curves even from her lover.

Her stepfather had definitely done a number on her. If he ever met the guy he'd be sure to thank him with a right cross to the jaw.

At her awkwardness yesterday morning, his only option had been to remind her how wonderful they made each other feel. That had worked like a charm. Now he intended to work on making her more comfortable with her own body.

Gill rolled onto her back and smiled up at him. "I'm hungry."

He nuzzled her shoulder. "Again?"

His hand stroked down her chest and she captured it, then nibbled his fingertips. "I mean for food."

He trailed his finger along her lower lip. "Okay, you just relax, I'll get breakfast this morning."

Her eyes glittered with mischief. "Working on that housewife role, are you?"

"You bet." He planted his arms on either side of her and lowered himself to within an inch of her lips. "That way maybe I can convince you to keep me around for a while."

He kissed her, his lips lingering on hers. Finally, he eased away and pushed himself to his feet. He tugged on his jeans, then picked up the sketch he'd cast aside when Gill had decided to entice him back to bed. When she'd used her sexy Jessica Rabbit voice to invite him to her side, he'd had trouble not bounding from the chair to close the distance between them, but he'd decided to use that opportunity to help her become more comfortable with the intimacy between them, including her nudity. When he'd challenged her to come to him and she'd shoved aside the covers and sauntered toward him, her glorious curves drenched in morning sunshine, his whole body had clenched to full arousal. Man, she was more than he'd ever believed possible in a woman.

He still couldn't believe she had chosen to be with him, giving him her sweet innocence. The thought overwhelmed him with deeply rooted feelings that turned his insides to mush. He had wanted to find a woman who would like him for himself, who didn't care about his wealth or position. Gill had actually accepted, and embraced, him despite believing him to be totally broke and without ambition. She truly cared about him for the person he was, not the external aspects of his personality.

And he cared about her. More than cared.

"What's that?" Gill sat with her hands around her knees, her focus on the sketch pad he held in his hand.

He glanced at the picture and debated whether to flip the spiral pad closed and distract her or whether to show her the drawing he'd been working on while she slept. He glanced at the sketch, showing her sweetly angelic features as she slept, and her partially uncovered body, and wondered what her reaction would be--pretty sure he knew.

Embarrassment. Withdrawal, perhaps. But the drawing showed how he really saw her, and he felt it was important to share that.

He stepped toward the bed and handed it to her. Sitting down beside her, he watched her face as she looked at his work. Her gaze took in her sleeping likeness, then her cheeks bloomed crimson as her gaze drifted lower to the dark nipple showing above the draping fabric.

He slid his arm around her waist. "I hope you don't mind. You looked so beautiful I couldn't resist."

She shifted her focus to his face. Her eyes, deeply serious, were filled with emotion. "Cade, you do beautiful work."

He knew she was embarrassed at his rendering of her partially nude body, but he could sense something more. He'd told her many times how beautiful she was. Could it be that he had finally brought home the truth of those words with his drawing?

"With you as a subject I couldn't help but create a masterpiece." He kissed her shoulder.

"No, I mean it, Cade. You're very talented. I'd love to see your other drawings."

"You mean, you'd like to come to my place and see my etchings?" He wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

At his suggestive tone, her lips turned up in a smile. She linked her fingers in his. "Really, Cade. I'd like to see your work."

He took the pad from her hands and laid it on the bed. "There isn't much else. Only things I did years ago."

Her eyes filled with concern. "But why? You're so talented."

"I just never seem to find the time."

He'd always loved drawing, but it had no place in his life. When striving to meet, and beat, that all important bottom line, to win bigger contracts and bring in more money than anyone else to prove he was

worthy of being his father's son, he rarely had time for anything else.

"Even if I could sell my work, it's not a very lucrative undertaking."

She placed her hand on his arm, a charmingly endearing gesture that touched his heart. "But, Cade, it's not about the money. It's about following your heart. Fulfilling your inner self." She picked up the drawing and gazed at it with wide, troubled eyes. "From what I see here, there's a sensitive artist inside you longing to be freed." She shifted her gaze to his face and rested her palm on his cheek. "Let him out, Cade. You'll both be happier."

His heart compressed at her heartfelt words.

At one time, when he'd been in school, he'd dreamed of being an artist. When he'd woken up in the morning, he'd spent all day thinking about the hour he'd allow himself that evening working on his art. Sometimes he'd paint, sometimes he'd work in pastels or charcoal, sometimes pen and ink. As he proceeded through higher levels of education, he found less time for his hobby, as his father called it, until finally, once he started working, he ran out of time altogether. Funny, he'd never really missed it until recently. For so long, all his attention had been focused on work.

Until he'd met Gill. Every time he saw her, he longed to capture her vigor on paper. She prodded the dreamer inside him, allowed him to ignore his logical, business-man exterior and create again. Could it be true he'd been stifling an important part of himself? Could Gill help make him whole again?

He stared into her wide, blue eyes. She didn't care that his art had no monetary value. She loved it for itself. And, judging from her words, and the deep sincerity in her eyes, she had strong feelings for him, too. She didn't care that he wasn't rich. In fact, she believed he was totally broke, yet it made no difference.

Overwhelming emotion flooded through him. He drew her into his arms and held her close, cherishing her within his embrace. Damn, how had he been so lucky as to have stumbled across Gill? He'd never had anyone accept him so readily before. He ran his lips across her temple in a delicate caress, then shifted them to her full, inviting lips.

Gill slid her arms around Cade's neck, moved by his tender embrace. His lips moved on hers, warm and undemanding yet drawing from her something far deeper than passion. Her heart filled, then overflowed with some emotion she couldn't comprehend.

When she'd seen her own face portrayed in the pencil sketch her insides had wobbled. She'd felt vulnerable yesterday when he'd been watching her sleep, but today he'd been studying her with an artist's eye, intently scrutinizing every facet of her face. And more. He'd captured her from head to waist and when she'd noticed one dark nipple peering over the covers, her face had flushed hotly. Yet, the embarrassment had not detracted from her appreciation of the drawing.

He'd called her beautiful several times before, but with this drawing, he'd proven he really meant it. Somehow he had taken her simple, straightforward features and woven them into a beautiful piece of art. Through his eyes, she truly did look beautiful. She might be embarrassed at the fact he'd been watching her, and the fact that he'd shown her partially nude, but she pushed back that unworthy emotion and allowed a feeling of sheer joy to sweep through her at the realization she had inspired such a stunning piece of art.

She drew her hand through his hair toward his face. Tentatively, she ran her fingers along his cheekbones. Their lips parted and their gazes locked. He seemed to see so deep into her soul that she felt far more naked than she ever had before.

She glanced at his sketch again. Obviously, he did, and he liked what he saw. She couldn't understand how he could ignore this wonderful talent of his. She had to find some way to encourage him to use it more.

"Why don't we go out for a drive today?" she suggested. "If you take your sketch pad, maybe we'll find some view that will inspire you to draw."

His mouth turned up in the sexy half grin she loved so much. "I already know exactly what would inspire me to draw, and we don't even have to leave the apartment." He eased the soft green sheet from her shoulder, slowly exposing her skin.

"Cade, as much as I enjoy making love with you, right now, I'm more interested in encouraging you to draw."

He eased the sheet the rest of the way off her body and drew her to her feet. "Great. Then agree to be my model."

"Model?"

"That's right. I promise to spend all morning drawing, if you'll agree to pose for me in the nude."

Chapter 10

Gill might be lying back, but she wasn't relaxed. Every nerve ending prickled with awareness as Cade's scrutiny shifted from her to his artist's pad, then back to her again. She wondered what part of her anatomy he was working on at this moment.

He busily flicked his pencil over the middle of the page so it couldn't be her face. Could it be her breasts? The feather light sensation of a blush brushed across her breasts, tickling her nipples to harden slightly. She felt color rise in her cheeks. Maybe something relatively innocuous like her navel. Or something lower. Heat pulsed through her vagina. She resisted the urge to cross her legs.

He caught her gaze and smiled. "It won't be long now."

Easy for him to say. She'd been lying here somewhere between an hour and eternity. Her entire body tingled. Her legs insisted she stand up and stretch, and she desperately wanted to put some clothes on. Not that she was cold, she was just ... well ... enjoying this a little too much. There was something intensely erotic about her reclining totally naked on the couch while Cade sat fully clothed across the room watching her.

The more she thought about it, the more her body ached. As she watched him guide his pencil across the paper, she felt as though his fingers were gliding across her skin. Her nipples ached as they hardened to tight nubs. She resisted the urge to shift restlessly, knowing Cade wanted her to maintain her pose. He glanced up and stared in the general direction of her navel--or lower. Her internal muscles contracted and her vagina throbbed with need.

He smiled. "You know, what you're doing is very distracting."

"But I'm not doing anything."

"That's not entirely true. I need everything about your pose to stay the same until the drawing is finished." He stood up and walked toward her.

"But I haven't moved a muscle."

He crouched down beside her and her heartbeat accelerated. She desperately wanted to feel his hands on her.

"I didn't say you'd moved."

He was close enough that his warm breath danced across her naked skin. He stroked his hand across her cheek and she wondered if he referred to her blush, but the drawing was in black and white so that shouldn't matter. His fingers trailed down her throat, lingering on her collarbone, then continuing downward. Her heartbeat bumped up a notch.

"What then?" Her words came out breathy and soft. She licked her lips.

The feel of his light touch under her breasts as he scooped them into his palms triggered a quivering need in her. Her eyelids dropped closed.

"Your breasts. They don't look the same as when we started."

She opened her eyes and glanced down to the focus of his attention. Of course he had noticed that her nipples had tightened into hard peaks.

He touched a fingertip to the end of her nipple, gently exploring the rigid peak. Sharp, vivid sensation jolted through her. She couldn't stand it any longer. She needed him with a fierce intensity. She threw her arms around his neck and dragged him to her, then moved her lips frantically over his.

"Cade, I really want to--"

His lips shifted to her nipple and she punctuated her sentence with a gasp.

"Me, too."

His fingers found the buttons of his shirt and started pulling them open but she grabbed his hands and stilled them.

"No. Stay like this."

Something about him being dressed and her being naked turned her on immensely. There was something illicit about it. She felt vulnerable, yet wicked.

"Like this? Why?"

"I don't know. It's sexy--you dressed, me naked. Like you walked in on me and want to have your way with me."

"Why you dirty girl."

She grinned and shifted her shoulders back and forth, causing her breasts to sway in what she hoped was an enticing manner. From the way his gaze latched onto them, she felt certain she'd succeeded.

"Not dirty, just ... indulging in fantasy."

His eyes glittered as his mouth turned up in a sexy half-grin. "Any fantasy you want I'll totally indulge

you. Anytime."

His hands slipped around her waist.

"Now, come here, you dirty girl."

He nuzzled her ear, then kissed down her neck, totally deflating her intended response. He nibbled the rib below her right breast, then dragged his tongue along her flesh, over the curve of her breast, flicked the tip of her nipple, then continued to the hollow of her collar bone.

"Ohhhh." Gill's eyes rolled back at the delicious sensations he triggered.

"Now, my naked, dirty girl. What have you been doing in here without any clothes on? Your nipples are hard. Have you been touching them?"

"Oh, no," she answered timidly, falling into the role.

"They look like they want to be touched." He licked her earlobe and blew lightly in her ear. "My beautiful, naked, dirty girl." His whispered words--breathed into her ear--tickled and aroused at the same time. "May I touch them?"

"Yes, please. Touch them."

He touched the very tips of each of her nipples, very lightly, making small circles. The tiny motion triggered a phenomenally erotic sensation to spike through the core of her. At the piercing need, heat melted through her, dripping from between her legs.

"Oh, God." The words trembled from her lips.

The tip of his tongue dabbed at one nipple, flooding new sensations through her. She moaned.

She forked her fingers through the opening between his shirt buttons, just above the waistband of his jeans, feeling the crisp, curly hairs below his navel. She freed one button, then slid her hands up his stomach, over tight washboard muscles to his already hard nipple. The bead-hard nub tingled across her fingertip and his molten-gold eyes, already dark with hunger, darkened with even more intense heat. She smiled, loving the power she felt. She stroked his other nipple and delighted at the catch in his breath.

She laid back on the couch, spreading her arms wide to display her breasts, with the puckering nipples, to the best advantage.

He covered them with his hands, the nipples securely tucked into his palms.

"Mmm." She covered his hands and squeezed them so they squeezed her breasts as she arched forward.

She bent one leg so her knee rose, partially opening her legs to his view. He freed one breast to stroke his hand downward, very slowly. He dipped into her navel, then continued lower, until his finger tickled the first curly hairs of her pubic area. He veered around her labia to her inner thighs, teasing the sensitive skin with delicate strokes. She opened her legs, offering everything to him. He dragged his finger along her blatantly wet opening.

"Oh, yes. Ohhh."

He leaned down and licked her.

"My sweet, dirty girl. You taste incredible."

His tongue dove into her and quivered against her clitoris, sending intense waves of arousal pulsing through her, like ripples in a pond. He sucked gently, tugging her tight bud into his mouth, then flicking it wildly with his tongue. Her fingers tangled in his hair as she moaned loudly. His hands found her breasts and the triple onslaught sent her flying into a storm of sensations. Pulsing. Buffeting. Raging. His tongue stabbed erotically deep inside her, sending her over the edge.

"Ohhh," she moaned as an orgasm overtook her. He continued to work his tongue, in and out, flicking over her clitoris, as she soared to heaven.

Finally, she flopped back on the couch and laughed.

"Wow."

She smiled up at him and slid her hands over his fly, feeling the hard ridge of his erection.

"This dirty girl wants more."

She pushed herself to her knees. A wicked grin crossed her mouth as she grabbed his belt, flicked it open and tugged it from the belt loops, then flung it aside. She pulled the zipper down and reached inside his fly, slipping her fingers inside his briefs, until she found hard, hot flesh.

"What's this?" she asked as she tugged his huge cock through the opening of his jeans. A single drop of clear liquid oozed from the small opening on the end of his penis. She lapped it up with the tip of her tongue. "Mmm." She smiled impishly.

"Ohhh," he responded, his eyelids falling closed.

She surrounded the bulbous head of his penis with her lips and sucked with vigor. Her tongue curled around the ridge of him and twirled back and forth, teasing the entire circumference. Her other hand dipped into his fly and she cradled his balls in the palm of her hand. They tightened under her attention. She slid her lips further down his penis, taking him deeper, opening her throat so she could almost reach the base of him, then she slid up again, encircling the exposed part of his rod with her hand to keep it warm. She flicked and teased his tip with her tongue. She felt his balls tighten and his body tense, then she felt his semen spurt into her mouth. She sucked and swallowed, then slowly released him from her warmth.

At his now semi-rigid state--and deflating--she realized he would not be making love to her this time.

"Ooops. I guess we're done for now."

He glanced at his flaccid member, then smiled.

"I don't think so, my dirty girl." He forked his fingers through her hair and drew her face to his, claiming her lips in a loving, tender kiss. When he released her lips, he whispered in her ear. "I'd love it if you'd touch your breasts."

A smile spread across her lips.

"You would?"

He smiled and his gaze fell on her breasts with such intensity she could almost feel it. Her nipples puckered in reaction.

"Dirty girl, touch your breasts for me," he encouraged.

Her vaginal muscles spasmed in need. Damn, but this was turning her on. She set her own expression to one of wide-eyed innocence and brought her fingers to her nipples and dabbed gently.

"Like this?"

"Yes." His dark eyes filled with hunger, encouraging her.

"And like this?" she asked as her hands circled under her breasts and lifted them up as if offering them.

"Yes." His voice had grown husky.

"Look, the nipples are so hard."

"I see that."

She released one breast and licked the tip of her index finger, then stroked it across the other nipple. It glistened in the sunlight shining in the window.

"It's cold now." She glanced from the gleaming nub to him.

He smiled and leaned forward, then drew it into his mouth, then released it and tasted the other. Her eyelids dropped closed for a moment as she allowed the hot, tingling sensations to careen through her.

He sat back again, watching her. She cupped both her breasts and fondled them thoroughly, noticing that his rate of breathing had increased. Glancing down at his crotch, she noticed with excitement that his cock stood at full attention. She smiled, then trailed her fingers down her ribcage to her navel. She stroked inside it, then continued downward. His gaze followed her progress with intense interest. She continued past her curly pubic hairs, then dipped into the dampness between her legs. It was so hot, and silky.

"Mmm. I wonder what it would feel like to have a man push his big, hard cock inside me?" She drew her damp fingers to her breast and smeared them across her nipple. He leaned over her and sucked the moisture from it.

"Let me show you," he murmured.

He knelt over her, his knees flanking hers, and pressed the tip of his cock to her moist opening. He entered her with one quick thrust and she gasped. What an incredible feeling. He started to pump, fast and furious and she wailed her need, so hot and ready she could hardly stand it.

"Yes, Cade. Oh, yes."

Her pelvis rose to meet him with each thrust, forcing him deep, his erection dragging along her vagina in an exhilarating fashion each time he pulled back. Then he'd thrust forward again.

"Gill, you ... are ... so ... incredibly ... sexy," he said on each thrust.

"Oh, God, Cade. So are you."

Wild sensations pulsed through her, super-heating her blood. She moaned as an orgasm overtook her, spinning her to ecstasy. Still, Cade pumped into her. Then, amazingly, rather than tapering off, the profound pleasure heightened to yet another, more powerful orgasm. Her moan increased, then rose to a near scream as the orgasm climbed even higher. Cade tensed and pumped his seed into her. She reached a magnificent plateau then, as Cade increased his thrusting, her pleasure climbed higher still and exploded in the most intense experience of her life.

* * * *

Cade knew he was in love with Gill. She nuzzled his chest and sighed in contentment as he tightened his arms around her. He'd been coming down with it for quite some time. Her willingness, despite her shyness, to pose in the nude to encourage him to follow his dreams, convinced him she loved him, too. He knew she wouldn't share herself as intimately as she had this weekend for anything less.

She accepted him for himself. The man he was inside.

At the realization, joy bubbled through him. He'd fallen into the depths of love, and rather than drowning, he floated on a tranquil pool of pure bliss. Love. He loved this woman. He had no doubt they were right for each other.

He kissed her shoulder, loving the feel of her silky skin under his lips. Now he had to figure out how and when to tell her that the man he was outside wasn't the man she'd come to know. Should he explain before or after he asked her to marry him? One part of him insisted he ask her before, so that he'd know for sure that she accepted his proposal because she loved him, not because of his money, but another part told him that wasn't necessary. She'd already proven it.

Of course, a third part of him warned that she didn't like rich men and telling her he had money could ruin everything, but he ignored it. She'd probably had a bad experience with some arrogant playboy and extrapolated that to a dislike for all rich men. Now that she knew and loved him, he was certain she wouldn't turn him away because of what he possessed.

She stroked his chest, her delicate fingers playing across his skin like a musician strumming a melody of sensual pleasure. He should be exhausted by now--was exhausted--but he knew he would do whatever she wanted, would please her in any way possible. And making love to her--again--would be a pleasure they'd both share.

Her fingers danced down his chest, past his stomach, to his swelling sex. She stroked one finger the length of him and smiled.

"Gee, it seems you're interested again."

He pressed his lips to her shoulder, easing her onto her back. "And you aren't?"

"Well, I could be persuaded, if you really want to."

He captured her nipple and drew it to tight erection then dabbed the tip with his tongue. Releasing it, he glanced up at her, pleased to see her eyes at half-mast. "I don't know. I wouldn't want to talk you into anything."

He started to ease away but she grabbed his arm and yanked him back. He tumbled on top of her and they both laughed, then she wrapped her arms around his neck and planted her mouth firmly on his. Her body arched against his and he didn't know if he'd survive the adrenaline rush.

He heard ringing. Gill's movements stilled beneath him.

The phone rang again.

"Cade, could you, uh, shift a little." Another ring sounded. She tapped his chest with her finger. "I want to answer the phone."

Cade slid to her side. "Oh, sure. I'm just a plaything you can discard as soon as something else grabs your attention."

Gill patted his hand and grinned. "It's okay. We can play again in a few minutes."

She sat up and reached for the phone on her bedside table, wishing whoever it was had waited another twenty minutes or so.

"Hi, Gill, I'm glad I caught you in."

"Oh, hi, Mom." Gill pulled the sheet around herself, tucking it securely at her side, ignoring Cade's chuckle.

"Gill, she can't see you," Cade whispered, teasing her by stroking his fingers along her shoulder.

She clamped her head sideways, pinning his hand between her neck and shoulder, and sent him a warning glare.

Cade sighed. "Obviously, playtime is over."

Gill pursed her lips, sending him an apologetic look. I'm sorry, she mouthed. He smiled and winked, then settled back on the bed.

Gill relaxed and turned back to the phone. Mom had been talking but Gill had missed it. "I'm sorry, what was that, Mom?"

"Gill, is someone there with you?"

Gill glanced toward Cade nervously, afraid her mother would ask more than Gill could handle right now.
"Uh, yeah, I have a friend over."

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll keep it short then. I just wanted to let you know I received a request to hire three new engineers at Farraday. I thought you might consider one of the positions."

Gill's chest tightened at the reminder she was losing her job as a flying instructor.

At her silence, Mom said softly, "I know you'd rather find another job flying, but you told me how difficult that would be."

"I don't know, Mom." Gill wasn't quite ready to abandon her dream yet.

"Look, honey, why don't you just apply? It will be a couple of weeks before I can set up interviews, then a few after that before offers are made. That gives you time to look for something else before you have to make a decision."

A lump formed in her throat and she couldn't seem to form any words.

"Gill, why don't you stop by my office tomorrow with an updated résumé? You can fill out an application form, and I'll take you to lunch. We'll have cheesecake for dessert."

Gill slid to the edge of the bed and eased her feet to the floor. Mom was trying to help. She had Gill's best interests at heart. How could she say no to someone who cared so much about her?

"Thanks, Mom. That's a good idea." She knew her tone didn't really convey the same message as her words.

"Cheer up, dear. Everything will work out. Does eleven sound okay?"

"Fine, I'll see you then."

She shoved her hair back from her face. She felt the receiver being lifted from her numb fingers.

"Bad news?" Cade's golden eyes darkened with concern.

"No, Mom wanted to let me know about a job." She tugged the sheet around her shoulders, suddenly feeling cold.

"Does this kind of thing happen often? As I recall, when I first met you, you'd been to a job interview that wasn't really an interview for a job you didn't even want."

Gill pushed herself to her feet, clasping the sheet securely around herself, and strode to the window. "That was Mom, too."

"Ah, yes. You told me about your meddling mother. So why does she keep pushing jobs at you?"

Gill shoved the drapes apart and stared outside. The day had started out so sunny and bright but the sky had turned gray and a steady rain pelted the window, droplets streaming down the glass like tears.

She saw Cade's reflection in the glass as he approached her. His warm hand cupped her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" His soft words burrowed into her, coaxing her to open up. She resisted, not used to telling her problems to anyone except Mom, but she and Cade had shared so much this weekend. And right now she really hurt inside. Maybe talking about it would help.

"She called to tell me about this job because she knows I need one."

His brows drew together. "But I thought you were happy at the flying club."

She watched a droplet stream down the window and realized a tear also streamed down her cheek. She rested her forehead on the cool glass and swallowed hard, trying to regain control.

"Gill?"

Cade couldn't understand why Gill had suddenly withdrawn. And what was this talk of a new job? When she didn't answer, he cupped her shoulders and drew her back against his chest. The sight of tears rolling down her cheeks made his gut clench painfully. Good Lord, what could possibly have upset her so badly in that one short phone call.

"Tell me, Gill. What is it?"

She turned toward him and wiped her palm across her face.

"I'm ... being laid off." Her words trembled with intense emotion.

"What?" Damn. He knew how much her job meant to her. This must be what Dave Martin had called her into his office to talk about after the ground school class on Wednesday. She'd been keeping this bottled inside for days,

He took her hand. "Why?"

She shifted her gaze to his. "Because I'm a woman."

"No way." The look on her face told him yes way, but he couldn't reconcile that fact with reality. Her boss couldn't just oust her because of her gender. Besides being morally incorrect, in this day and age there was no way he could get away with it. "That's discrimination. You could lay charges--"

She eased away from him and strolled across the room. "I could, but I won't. It's not Dave's fault that students won't sign up with a female instructor."

"Is that what he told you?" He couldn't believe Gill would let Martin get away with this. Not Gill. The fighter. The woman he'd seen strip a man's ego clean in the last class by simply being better prepared and more competent than anyone had a right to be.

"Yes." She sank into the armchair. "And it's true. I've never had a full load of students and I've been there for three years. All the other instructors--male--almost always have fully booked days."

He sat on the ottoman and took her hand. "That's crazy. You're a better instructor than any of those guys."

Her mouth turned up in a small, tremulous smile. "I think you're a little biased, Mr. Smith. After all, you haven't flown with the male pilots." She tightened her hand around his. "And now you've flown with me in a way bound to sway you in my favor."

He raised their joined hands to his mouth and kissed the back of her hand. At least she still had her sense of humor. "True, but I still say you're an excellent pilot. In every way. He shouldn't let you go."

"I'm not going to argue about that but he has no choice. If you ran your own business, you'd understand that he can't afford to keep an underutilized resource on staff for long." She slumped in the chair.

He blinked at her. He did understand. He'd had to lay people off for reasons having nothing to do with their ability to do the job. It was not a decision any boss made lightly. He found it amazing that Gill, looking at it from her side of the pay check, accepted the fact without resentment. She understood her boss had made a difficult business decision. She might have a volatile temper, but she didn't direct it indiscriminately at people she trusted, like she obviously did Dave Martin.

"What are you going to do, Gill? What about your goal to become a commercial pilot?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Without this job, there's no way I can get the hours I need to...." She gulped and he could see she was fighting back tears again.

He knelt down in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Gill, you'll find a way."

Her look of despair touched him deeply. A need to protect her, and restore her shattered dream, surged through him. At this moment, the most important thing in the world to him was to make her happy.

He stroked a stray hair from her face. "Why don't you do the hours on your own? You don't have to do them as an instructor, do you?"

"No, but I don't have the money to rent a plane. You've seen how much it costs."

"So it all boils down to money?"

He could easily solve her problem, since he had loads of money, but first he'd have to explain who he really was. He'd have to tread carefully, though. With her independent nature, it might be tough to get her to accept him providing the money she needed to get her hours.

"True." She forced a smile onto her face. "Maybe I should have listened to my mom when she suggested I marry a rich guy."

Her joking words made him smile. He loved how fate sometimes gave a neat little twist to life. She'd just found the solution to her problem and she didn't even know it. It was also the key to his future happiness.

"That's not a bad idea."

She snorted. "Sure. There may be some advantages to snagging a rich guy, but I don't happen to have one lying around."

He slid his arms around her and drew her to her feet. He couldn't just blurt out that he was a wealthy businessman who'd been stringing her along to see if she'd fall in love with him. She might get a tad annoyed, so he'd have to play his hand as the cards had been dealt.

"He doesn't have to be rich. He just has to be able to support you while you finish your requirements for your chosen career. It's not that much to ask of a husband."

"So you're suggesting I find any old husband, not specifically a rich one, to help with my career?"

He smiled down at her. "No, not any old one."

Her eyes widened. "You're not suggesting...?" She stepped back. "I mean, you don't mean...?" She stumbled as she bumped into the end of the bed, but quickly caught her balance and side-stepped it. "You?"

"Don't I?"

She paced across the room, waving her hand back and forth. "No way."

"Gill, you shouldn't be so surprised. You said we had something special."

She turned a narrow-eyed gaze on him. "Special, yes, but not permanent."

He took a deep breath, reminding himself to be patient. Look how long it had taken to convince her just to go out with him. Marriage was shaping up to be a major challenge. "Tell me one good reason why marrying me would be a bad idea."

She counted on her fingers. "You're broke, you have no ambition, you have no dreams--"

"I said one," he grumbled. "So you won't marry me because I have no money?" Damn, he couldn't believe this.

"Look, Cade, this is crazy. You barely have enough money to support yourself let alone me and my flying habit."

She was right, this was crazy. Here he was proposing marriage to the woman he loved, and she was concentrating on money, which he had lots of--enough to solve all her problems--but he just couldn't tell her about it. Not yet.

If he was going to get anywhere with this discussion, he'd have to switch the focus to their relationship. He stepped toward her and grasped her hand. "Gill, stop worrying about money and flying."

She yanked her hand away. "But that's what we're supposed to be discussing."

"Gill." He drew her close, ignoring the deer-in-headlights look on her face. He gazed deep into her eyes, willing her to calmly accept the natural evolution of their love. "I want to marry you."

Her panic-stricken eyes seemed to glaze over, and her lips tightened. Her head pivoted back and forth in denial.

Damn, why couldn't she accept this? Why did she have to make every step so difficult? Maybe she needed to hear the words. He thought he'd shown her in every way possible this weekend how much he cared for her, but he'd never actually said the three words that always seemed so important to a woman.

He cupped his hands on her cheeks, stilling her shaking head, and stared deep into her eyes. "Gill, I love you."

Her face grew pale and her back stiffened. "No, Cade, what we have isn't love, it's chemistry, remember?"

This was not the reaction he would normally expect from a woman, but then he should know by now that Gill didn't fit the standard mold. She would probably have to fight the idea for a while. It seemed to be part of her nature.

He stroked her cheek. "That was true at first, but it's developed into something much more potent."

She gripped his hands and eased them from her face. "No. You're wrong."

The vehemence on her face disturbed him. "Gill, it's true. I love you."

She hesitated, staring at him intently. A myriad of emotions swirled through her eyes, but then they grew cool. Detached. A horrible feeling of panic shot through him and he tried to shield his heart, afraid of what she'd say next.

"But, Cade, I don't love you."

Those awful words tore through him like a sword thrust through his chest. His heart splintered into jagged shards, shredding his insides.

He shook his head, taking a step back. It couldn't be true. Not after this weekend, after the way she'd reached out to him, after what she'd given him.

Good Lord, he'd never realized how devastating loneliness could feel.

Her expression softened and she put a hand on his shoulder, but instead of feeling comfort, a cold chill shuddered through him. Her words came out a mere whisper. "I'm sorry, Cade."

Unable to speak, he shrugged his arm out of her grasp and strode out the bedroom door.

Cade found his jeans and shirt on the floor of the living room and pulled them on, then sat on the couch to tug on his socks.

Gill had followed him and now stood in the doorway. "Cade, I'm really sorry, I--"

He raised his hand. "I think you've said enough."

Sorry. She was sorry.

He had heard that word so often in his life it had lost meaning.

Memories of his fellow students embraced in heart-felt hugs by family members at high school graduation while Cade stood alone, glancing around, hoping to catch sight of his parents. Knowing they wouldn't be there. The chauffeur had collected him, passing on his father's apology. A meeting at work had kept him late. Mother, of course, wouldn't come without father.

"When I said I don't love you, Cade, it wasn't personal."

His chest tightened and he glared at her. "You'll have to explain that."

"If I could love anyone," she whispered, "it would be you, but...." She turned away. "I don't know how to love."

Her words, raw and laced in anguish, drew him out of his own pain. He stood up and stepped toward her, but her hasty step backwards, a clear indication she wanted to keep distance between them, stopped him. "Gill, you can't mean that."

"But I do. Everyone talks about love being magic, but that doesn't make sense. If it's magic, it could just disappear."

He stepped forward and grabbed her arms, desperate to convince her. "Gill, what we have won't disappear."

"You don't know that." She shook her head, her eyes wide and slightly panic stricken. "How can I risk a lifetime on something that may not even exist?"

"You don't believe in love?"

"No, I guess not."

Amazement skittered through him, quickly replaced by despair. If she truly loved him, how could she deny the existence of the emotion?

His heart shuddered in his chest, like Old Blue's engine on start up. His parents--even if they hadn't found his life important enough to interrupt their busy schedules for--had loved him. In their way. Gill, the woman he had fallen headlong in love with, the woman he wanted to spend his life with, didn't even believe in the emotion. Which meant she couldn't really love him.

Her words billowed through the empty caverns of his soul.

I don't love you.

It's not personal.

I don't know how to love.

She didn't love him.

"Cade, you're hurting me."

Hurting her? Didn't she have that turned around?

But then he realized his clenching hands still gripped her arms.

"I'm sorry." He said the meaningless words, then released her.

She stepped back, claiming the distance she'd so clearly needed. He strode to the front door, shoved on his shoes, then disappeared from her life.

* * * *

Gill watched the door close behind Cade and a numbness settled over her. A gauzy protection from anger and pain.

So she had done it. She'd pursued this dangerous, magical attraction and came out unscathed. No disastrous union would result, no permanent damage would be done.

Except to Cade's heart, a little voice cried from somewhere far away.

And maybe to her own.

Chapter 11

Gill sucked in a deep breath and pushed open the door to the Farraday building. She glanced around nervously, hoping she wouldn't run into Cade. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she walked toward the reception desk. The dark-haired woman behind the desk glanced at her and smiled, not giving any hint of whether she remembered Gill or not. She was the same woman who'd been on duty the last time Gill had been in the lobby of Mom's office building and Cade had swept Gill into his arms and kissed her in front of a crowd of onlookers.

"I'm here to see Claire Jenson."

The receptionist picked up the phone and called Gill's mother. While she talked, a photograph lying on her desk grabbed Gill's attention. It showed an old blue truck--Cade's Old Blue, she realized on closer inspection--with a gorgeous woman climbing out. She glanced at the receptionist again. In fact, it was this woman. And it had been taken this morning, judging from the outfit she wore.

Her heart compressed painfully. Cade with another woman? Jealousy singed her nerve endings, which was totally ridiculous. She didn't even want him. She should be happy he'd found someone else.

But couldn't he have waited a little longer? At least twenty-four hours?

"I know the truck is kind of old," the receptionist said, "but the guy who drives it is a real sweetheart."

Gill's gaze jerked to the woman and she realized she had caught her staring at the picture.

"He drove me into work this morning and the night security guy took that picture to tease me." She picked up the picture and stared at the truck with affection. "He thinks I should be embarrassed being interested in a guy with no money, but the way I see it, if you like someone, it shouldn't matter. Right?" She glanced up at Gill and smiled.

Gill's breath became shallow and all she could do was nod.

The woman handed her a pen. "Just sign in and you can go ahead up."

Gill scrawled her name then hopped on the elevator. Guilt riddled through her at the memory of how she had cut Cade down because of his lack of finances. The receptionist was right that money shouldn't be important, but there were degrees. Anyway, that wasn't the only reason she didn't want to marry Cade.

She didn't love him. And obviously he didn't really love her. A man didn't get over a woman he loved so quickly.

Unless he had picked up with this woman on the rebound. Could it be that he really did love Gill and had transferred his feelings to the other woman? If so, he might wind up proposing to her and....

She rested her palm on her forehead. This whole business was driving her crazy. For all she knew, this woman was an old friend of Cade's and there was nothing romantic between them at all.

The elevator door whooshed open and Mom stood waiting for her.

"Gill, you look awful."

"It's nice to see you, too, Mom."

She followed Mom back to her office.

"Haven't you been sleeping well?" Mom closed the door behind them.

Gill slumped into the visitor's chair and dropped the large white envelope containing her résumé on the desk. The question reminded her of what she had been doing instead of sleeping this past weekend and she felt her cheeks redden.

"And you're flushed." Mom placed her hand on Gill's forehead. "You haven't got a fever."

Gill sighed. Like all mothers, Mom worried about her. "I'm not sick." Not physically, anyway. "I'm just tired."

Mom sat down on the edge of her desk. "Gill, this is your mother, remember?"

Remember? How could she forget? "Mom, I'm fine. Really."

"Honey, I know you pretty well and I know something is wrong." Her voice softened to that persuasive tone she did so well. "Talking about it might help."

Talk about it? She didn't even want to think about it.

And yet, she couldn't stop thinking about it. Thoughts that had kept her up half the night. She'd hurt Cade and that made her ache inside. She'd been so busy worrying about her own potential pain, she hadn't thought about what might happen to Cade if he fell in love with her.

She'd seen the signs, she'd just ignored them, refused to believe he could really be falling for her. Even if it wasn't real love, obviously he had believed it was. He'd been sincere about wanting to marry her and make a life together.

"Talking won't help in this case."

"It's a man, isn't it? You've been seeing someone and he's dumped you. That's why you're so depressed."

It was no use. Mom was going to get something out of her no matter how much she resisted. "Well, no, actually I dumped him."

Mom's eyes widened. "For heavens sake, why?"

How could she ever explain it to her mother? She wouldn't understand. No one would. "He was getting too serious too fast."

"Gill, there are ways to slow down a relationship. You don't have to cut it off at the knees."

She flattened her hands on the armrest of her chair. "It's not just that. He was broke all the time, he had no prospects."

Mom sighed and nodded. "Well, with the way things are with jobs these days--"

Her fingers curled into fists. "Oh, Mom, it just didn't seem right." This whole conversation felt so futile. Mom would never understand.

Mom took Gill's hand. "Is that it, Gill, or did you start to fall in love with him, and that scared you?"

She stared at Mom, those knowing blue eyes staring right back at her. Did these kind of motherly insights take seed at the birth of a child and blossom when needed, or did parents have some kind of operating manual that was a highly kept secret from all the non-parents of the world?

"Great theory, Mom, but no, I don't believe in love."

She continued to stare at Gill, the intensity making her uncomfortable. Then Mom sighed and picked up the picture of Gill's father that sat in a prominent position on her desk. As she stared at it, Gill could see the wistful look in her eyes.

"I do." Mom ran a finger over her father's cheek, then gently placed the pewter frame back on the desktop. When she turned her gaze back to Gill, her eyes had grown serious. "And you do, too. You just won't admit it to yourself."

Gill rubbed her hands along her thighs, Mom's words disturbing her more than she cared to admit.

"Mom, why don't you just give me the forms you want me to fill out, then we can go to lunch? That is why you invited me here, isn't it?"

"All right." She stood up and tugged a folder from a file stand on her desk, then handed it to Gill. "I just have to run something up to Mr. Faraday's office first."

Gill's eyebrows quirked up. "Are you trying to trick me into meeting Jeremy Farraday again?"

Mom feigned an expression of innocence. "Who? Me?"

Gill sighed and shook her head. "Mother, really. When will you ever give up?"

* * * *

As the other board members milled out of the meeting room, Cade gathered up his papers and stuffed them into his briefcase. That had not gone particularly well. When he'd presented the status of the off-shore project to the group of executives, he'd lacked his usual eloquence--and enthusiasm. Losing the love of his life had definitely put a dent in his performance.

All last night, while tossing and turning in his bed, he'd thought again and again about what Gill had said. At first he'd been angry. At her for not being the woman he needed. At himself for allowing his heart to become ensnared. Why hadn't he realized sooner what she was: an emotionless, detached woman who could never fall in love?

Well into the night, the answer finally came to him. He hadn't realized it because it wasn't true. Gill was anything but emotionless.

The memory of her misty eyes as she spoke of her father, and the way she'd tried to hide the heavy sadness he could see so clearly, gave a clue to Gill and her emotions. In fact, her emotions were very strong, but the more vulnerable she felt, the more she tried to hide them.

Sometimes she didn't succeed, however. He remembered the anger that had colored her cheeks crimson and her eyes storm-cloud blue the first time he'd seen her, and several times after. He also remembered her enthusiastic response to his first kiss, and the wild seductive woman she'd become in bed.

Passion drove her life. How else could she strive so vehemently for her dreams? And how could she inspire him to free his own creative spirit if she were emotionless? No, emotion was a big part of Gill's life, no matter how much she denied it. And he'd finally realized her denial of love was driven by

emotion, too. Fear.

He wasn't sure how he would convince such a headstrong, determined woman to admit she was wrong and accept her love for him, but his plan included going to her apartment this evening and telling her he needed to talk to her. With her compassionate nature, and the fact she felt badly about rejecting him, he was certain she wouldn't turn him away. He would convince her he wasn't broke and explain who he really was. She might be annoyed at the deception, but he figured he could talk his way through it. Once he had that all straightened away, he would keep her off balance with one surprise after another, starting with a candlelit gourmet dinner catered by the most elegant restaurant in town. The evening would be glowing with romance and, if that wasn't enough to sway her, he would use passion as his ally.

Luckily, this morning's meeting hadn't started until eleven, so he'd had a little time beforehand to make the arrangements, including one very special surprise for Gill. He planned to drive out to Tennington airport to see Dave Martin in an hour.

"Jeremy, you look awful."

Cade tossed his leather folder into the briefcase and glanced up. "It's nice to see you, too, Dad."

His father's sharp blue gaze bored into Cade as he inspected his appearance. "Haven't you been sleeping well?"

Cade snapped his briefcase closed. "I've been sleeping fine."

He crossed his arms. "Ah, woman problems then. I heard you were after some young thing, but I see you haven't gotten anywhere. That's okay because I've got something to tell you."

Cade stared at his father, waiting for whatever bombshell he would drop.

"Not here. Your office."

Cade stood up and fell into stride beside his father. Once they reached his office, Dad closed the door behind them.

"Remember you told me you hadn't gotten married because you couldn't find a virgin?"

His father's words sent a chill of foreboding through him. Somehow he had a feeling his clever plan to divert his father off the matrimonial path had backfired. Cade sank into his chair as Dad dropped a folder on his desk and gestured for him to open it.

"I decided to expedite the matter by doing a little research and finding some appropriate candidates." He pointed at the manila file folder. "You'll find all the pertinent data there."

Cade opened the folder and saw a clipping from a newspaper under a plastic page protector, with the heading:

"Virgin Wanted,

No Experience Necessary."

He glanced back at his father, curiosity spiking through him. Had Dad developed a sense of humor this late in life? "Okay, what's the punch line?"

Dad clasped his hands behind his back and paced a couple of times. He never could stand still for long. "It's not a joke, it's a well planned approach to solving your problem."

Cade surged to his feet. "My problem? I don't have a problem."

Dad turned toward him, their gazes clashing. "I think any man who has reached the age of thirty-one and still hasn't found a suitable wife, especially with the future of a healthy business and bank account to consider, has a problem. I decided to help you solve it."

"Dad, you can't just pick a wife for me."

"I know that. It's your decision to make. You're a top-notch executive, son, and I know you'll do an excellent job on this, just like you have on every task you've ever undertaken." He sat on the edge of his desk and folded his hands. He expelled a deep breath then stared at Cade with a disturbing intensity. "Look, son. I'm worried about you. You push yourself too hard. You don't take time to enjoy the finer things in life."

Cade never thought he'd hear his father saying things like this. "Thanks for the concern, Dad, but what has this to do with--"

"I'm trying to tell you I missed you these past six months when you were away."

Warmth bubbled up inside Cade and he felt closer to his father than he ever had before.

"I thought, if I can get you to settle down and have a family...."

The closeness faded. "Oh, right," Cade said, with only a shade of cynicism to the words. "We need someone to carry on the Farraday name."

"True, but what I really want is a grandson--or daughter--to spoil rotten."

Bewilderment curled through Cade. "But, Dad, I didn't think you liked kids."

His father's face seemed to sag with years, his face creased in lines of pain. "You know, son, I know I didn't spend much time with you when you were little." He stared at his hands, as though he couldn't stand to see Cade's reaction. "And it's one of the biggest regrets of my life. Every time I missed an important event in your life, I swore to myself I'd make it up to you next time." He stared at Cade, his eyes reflecting a depth of feeling Cade would never have guessed possible in his father. "But next time never came and then suddenly you were all grown up." He placed his hand on Cade's shoulder. "Son, don't make the same mistake I did."

Cade stared at his father in silence for a moment, soaking in the impossible. His father, telling him in the only way he knew how, that he loved him.

Dad pushed himself to his feet, a back-to-business expression on his face.

"Now, about these women. I've already prescreened the candidates and narrowed the list to five." Dad glanced at his watch. "The first one will be here in ten minutes, then the others will follow in half hour intervals. Just let Rita know which ones you'd like to spend more time with, and she'll arrange it."

Cade flipped the folder closed. "You expect me to interview women--virgins?--as potential brides?"

"Why not? You've interviewed enough people for positions in Farraday Financial."

"That's different. These women are--"

"Exactly what you said you want in a bride." He turned abruptly. "Stop by my office when you're done. I'll want an update."

Cade watched him go. He should have known Dad would never give up on pushing him into marriage.

The rightmost digit on his desk clock flicked from zero to one. Nine minutes until bachelorette number one arrived. Although he had to admit to a certain curiosity to see a line of self-proclaimed virgins march through his office, he could not go along with his father's ludicrous plan. It wouldn't be fair to the women, for one thing. After all, he'd already found the woman he intended to marry.

He smiled at the thought that Gill could have been one of the candidates his father intended to parade by him, since she met that very basic requirement his father had underscored in the ad.

At least, she had until that wonderful night of pure magic, when she had become his.

And he had become hers. Irrevocably, and forever.

Chapter 12

Cade flipped open the cover of the folder his father had left on his desk. He noted that the phone number listed in the ad belonged to Claire Jenson, head of personnel. How many other people, he wondered, had been in on this?

He snatched up the folder and marched to the outer office to find Rita. He intended to have her cancel these stupid appointments. He was not going to spend his afternoon interviewing virgins. It would be a waste of his time and theirs.

Rita wasn't at her desk. He glanced at his watch and realized she'd probably gone to lunch, since it was after twelve. As he turned back to his office, he noticed a woman standing in the waiting area staring out the window. Damn, had the bridal candidate shown up early? He paused and debated whether to make a mad dash for the elevator or not. No, the woman had come all the way up here, the least he could do was talk to her and explain.

He walked toward her. "Hello, Miss. Are you here to see--"

She turned around and his heart collided with his ribs as he braked sharply.

"Gill."

Even though it had been less than twenty-four hours since he'd been with her, the sight of her took his breath away. Oh, God, he loved this woman. One restless night filled with depressing thoughts of an empty life without her, interlaced with dreams of making love with her, had been all he'd needed to decide he'd do whatever it took to convince her that love was as real as he was.

"Cade? What are you doing here?"

Her eyes widened as her gaze flickered over him then her eyebrows drew together. She'd never seen him in anything but jeans, so an Armani suit would be quite a shock.

"Are you here for a job interview?" she asked.

He hated the complacent tone of her voice, as though he was an acquaintance she had happened across and now felt compelled to make polite conversation.

"No."

How would he explain why he was here? And why he had lied to her? Now she would think he was telling her only because he'd been caught. Somehow, he had to make her believe he had already intended to own up this evening.

He gestured toward the doorway he'd just left. "Why don't you come into my office and I'll explain?"

Her eyebrows quirked upward. "Your office?"

"Oh, Jeremy, there you are." Claire Jenson stepped off the elevator and walked toward them, then stood beside Gill, sending her a quick smile of acknowledgment. "Good. I see you've met Gill. I brought her up to meet you."

Why would the manager of personnel bring Gill to meet him? Gill certainly wasn't dressed for a job interview.

A weird thought twisted through his brain. What did a woman wear to an interview for a position as bride? He glanced at Gill's attire. Certainly a snug pair of jeans that accentuated her long legs, and the highly flattering turquoise sweater would be a better choice than a stuffy business suit.

But that was a crazy idea. Gill couldn't be the bridal candidate his father had said would arrive momentarily.

"Jeremy?" Gill's eyes narrowed. "As in, Jeremy Farraday?"

"Jeremy Kincaid Farraday," he admitted.

"You ... lied to me." She glanced at the piece of paper hanging from his left hand. "That ad...." Her gaze darted back to his face. "You're the virgin hunter?"

"You came about the ad?" His eyebrows lifted in a doubtful pose.

Gill's chest tightened along with the fingers of her hands. She barely suppressed the urge to pummel him into nonexistence. This man had been lying to her ever since she met him. About his money. About his job. About his identity. For heavens sake, the man was loaded and he'd made her pay every time they did anything together. Except when he'd brought dinner to her house, then after they'd made love....

Damn the man. She had believed everything he'd told her. Had fallen for the whole charade like a total fool.

And he must think she was a total fool because now he actually believed she'd answer an advertisement for a virgin sacrifice. Did he also think--good heavens, could it be that he'd lied to her because he thought she might go after his money otherwise? Well, if that's what he believed, fine, let him.

She stood a little straighter, folding her arms across her chest. "Why are you surprised? You're the one who thought it was a good idea to find a rich husband to support me."

Her mother glanced from Gill to Cade and back again as though watching a tennis match.

He scowled. "So you decided you'll just marry any old stranger who has money?"

She shrugged. "Sure, why not? It's too bad I hadn't known who you were earlier. Then I could have accepted your proposal right off and beat the red tape."

His stormy features flared, then settled into a cold, calm arrangement. "You're right, you should have, because now it's too late." He held the ad facing her. "You no longer meet the qualifications."

The word virgin seemed to blink at her in neon red.

Her chest tightened at the reminder she'd given this man her virginity. A man who advertised for virgins in the newspaper.

"In fact, it seems you're as much a liar as I am," he went on. "If it hadn't been me, the man you came to see today wouldn't know you're no longer a virgin."

"Gill?" her mother interjected. "Did you and Jeremy...?"

Gill felt her face grow scarlet. Damn him. How would she face her mother after this? She spun around and raced for the door.

"Gill, wait!"

She heard her mother's words as she scooted through the outer office to the stairs.

Cade stared after Gill, anger still burning through him. He hadn't meant to embarrass her in front of Claire, but she'd get over it. He wasn't sure about himself. Obviously, he hadn't known her as well as he'd thought. The Gill he thought he knew would never even consider answering an ad like the one his father and Claire had composed.

"Jeremy Farraday." Claire's voice cut through his thoughts. Her finger jabbed him sharply in the chest. "You go and apologize to her right now."

He stared at Claire in complete shock. She had always been so mild mannered. Professional, but sweet. Now she sounded like a mother bear protecting her cub.

"Claire, I don't think you fully understand--"

"Oh, I understand, young man. Far better than you think." She stepped toward him, her fierce expression driving him back a step. "You see, I'm her mother." She jabbed again. "And you're an idiot."

"Her mother?" He felt his face pale.

"She didn't come here because of the ad. I've been trying to get you two to meet for two years now and I coaxed her up here because--"

"Excuse me." A female voice cut in. They both turned to stare at a woman in a sophisticated, white tailored suit with her blond hair carefully coiled at the side of her head. "I'm here to meet Jeremy Farraday. I have an appointment."

Jeremy stared at the woman who was obviously the bridal candidate his father had scheduled an appointment for. Gill hadn't been here to answer the ad after all. Fool. How could he have believed she would? He had to go after her.

But first....

He turned back to Claire. "I'm sorry. When I thought Gill was here because--well, sometimes she makes me crazy. Yesterday she threw my proposal of marriage back in my face and told me she didn't love me."

Claire patted Cade's shoulder and sent him a sympathetic smile. "Believe me, Jeremy, I understand. I've known that girl for twenty-seven years and I know all about crazy." Her smile changed to a grin. "So you proposed to my daughter? Do you still want to marry her?"

He smiled back, pleased to have Gill's mother on his side. "Absolutely. So tell me, Gill says she doesn't believe in love. Why?"

Claire shook her head. "Her stepfather. The damage that man did to Gill's self-esteem...." She grasped his sleeve and locked gazes with him. "Jeremy, she's afraid to believe. Because she's afraid to fail. She has no control over love. She can't make it work by sheer force of will. But I know my Gill. She may tell you she doesn't believe, but she wants to." She squeezed his arm. "Jeremy, prove to her that magic does exist."

* * * *

Gill raced down the stairs to the fourth parking level. Unfortunately, the door to the stairs was locked. She tried the next level down and found the same thing. She worked her way back up, trying every parking level, until she finally gave up and returned to the lobby. She pushed the down arrow between the elevator doors and waited five minutes for an elevator to show up.

Finally, she reached her car and hopped in, but when she reached the exit ramp, a red, sleek looking car blocked the exit. Damn, did everyone have car trouble in this parking garage? She pushed her door open and stepped toward the car, seeing a man's suited back as he leaned against the side of the car.

"Excuse me, what are you doing?" she asked.

He turned around and her temper flared when she saw it was Cade.

"I'm blocking the way out."

Her fists clenched tightly at her sides. "Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Well, Mr. Farraday, I don't want to talk to you."

She stalked away from him, but he grasped her shoulder. She twirled around to face him.

"Let me go, Mr. Farraday."

"Gill, at least give me a chance to explain."

She tapped her foot as she glanced past him to the car, gauging whether she could squeeze around him in her little Neon, but the chances were too high she'd scrape the paint and she couldn't afford a new paint job on a fancy car like that.

"How did you get down here before I did?" she asked.

"It helps when your own the building. I called Hank, who runs the parking garage, and had him lock the stairs doors, then I rode the express elevator from the executive office.

She folded her arms across her chest. "I guess you're used to getting what you want when you're rich."

"No, not always." He stepped toward her. "Right now, what I want more than anything is you, and I know my money won't help me."

"You've got that right."

He stood too close, causing her nerve endings to crackle like live wires, but she refused to back up.

"Gill, I'm sorry I lied. I did it because I wanted to see if you would like me for who I am, not what I have."

"In other words, you didn't trust me."

"I didn't know you. But I wanted to. And what my name is or whether I have money shouldn't be important. Gill, I didn't lie to you about anything important. Right now I'm driving a nice car rather than a beat up truck and I'm wearing an expensive suit rather than torn blue jeans, but I'm still the same man you met. The same man you helped that first day. The same man you fell in love with."

"I didn't fall--"

He grasped her arms and dragged her close, stopping her words with his lips. Passion ignited like a match to paper.

"I don't believe you," he murmured.

With her head spinning she found it difficult to concentrate. "Well, you'd better."

"Gill, the one thing I knew from the moment I saw you, is that you'll never back away from anything. You're strong and determined. That's why I don't understand how you could let a little thing like love scare you so badly."

She flattened her palm against his chest and shoved. "I'm not scared."

"Yes, you are. You're afraid of getting hurt." He drew her toward him again and stroked his fingertips lightly across her cheek. "Gill, you said you knew I'd never hurt you. Did you stop believing that?"

She paused, staring at his gorgeous, golden face. He might have lied to her about some things, but she knew in her heart that wasn't one of them. "No." She shook her head and shuddered. "I know you wouldn't."

"Then why do you think I'd try to convince you of our love if it isn't real?"

"Cade, I believe you think it's real."

"I know it's real. Tell me why you don't."

"Everyone keeps talking about love being magic, but if it's magic, it could just disappear. Look at all the failed marriages out there. All those people believed they were in love once. Whatever magic they had failed them."

"What about the marriages that do succeed?"

"I guess they've found something that works."

"Something other than love? Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Mutual attraction, shared interests, a deep respect for each other?"

"Sounds good. Why isn't that love?" He slid his arms around her and eased her close. "What if they've also found they care more about each others' happiness than they do about their own? What if they believe that taking a chance on sharing a life with someone is worth the risk?" He captured her mouth with his own, determined to use the magic sizzling between them to convince her. "Gill, love isn't some fantasy that will disappear like a candle flame blowing out. It's real." He cupped her face and kissed her again, lightly, tenderly, showing her that passion was only part of what they shared. "Real love requires hard work and a dream of a future together. We both know about dreams. And we're both willing to work hard."

He placed her hand over his heart. "Gill, look into my eyes. I love you. That's real. Look inside yourself and see the truth. Don't let fear blind you to the most important dream of all."

He felt her hand trembling against his chest.

"You said part of love is caring about someone else's happiness more than your own. Is it also feeling the other person's pain more acutely than your own?" she asked.

"Why, Gill?" His intent, persuasive words coaxed her to explain.

"Ever since you left my apartment, I haven't been able to stop seeing your face when I told you I..." She glanced away. "That I don't love you." He cupped her chin and turned her back to face him. "I would have given anything to erase the pain I caused you."

"You can, Gill. Tell me you love me."

"I..." Her hesitation stretched his nerves thin. She sucked in a deep breath and shook her head. He didn't know if it was denial of his request, or of her feelings, or just confusion.

He pulled her into his embrace and clung tightly. "Gill, listen to your heart. Take a chance."

She drew away from him and her eyes, moist and wide, stared into his. She rested her fingertips on his cheek. "Oh, Cade," she whispered.

His heart burned into ashes as he realized she was going to let fear win. She was going to exile them both to a lifetime of loneliness.

He eased away, not sure how he'd recover. Her hand grasped his arm tightly.

"Cade, I..." She stared at him for an eternity, her lips parted as though ready to say something, then suddenly she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her lips moved frantically on his, as though discovering something new and wonderful, and afraid it would disappear before she could learn all she needed to know. When she pulled back, her face wore a look of startled confusion.

Her trembling fingers stroked his cheek. Slowly. Tenderly. "Cade, I don't understand why or how I know, but ... something inside me insists that..." She cupped his face with her hands and kissed him again, a gentle stroke of soft lips against his mouth. "I love you."

His heart swelled to twice its normal size. He dragged her against his body and held her as though he'd never let go.

"Gill, those are the sweetest words I've ever heard."

He reached into his breast pocket and tugged out a flat blue box. Inside, she found a tiny crystal airplane suspended in a delicate silver filigree cloud. She drew her finger across the top of the cloud. Engraved letters spelled Puff.

"I've bought the real airplane. I intend to convince you to marry me, but if you decide to torture me and take your time deciding, I hope you'll agree to take care of Puff for me. She needs to go flying regularly so she won't rust."

She slid her arms around his neck, trying to decide how long to make him wait until she accepted his proposal. As her heart spiraled into a nose dive, she figured she'd be lucky if she lasted another five minutes.

She smiled. "So do you want me to be your private flying instructor?"

"No. I think one pilot in the family is enough. There's only one kind of flying I want you to teach me from now on."

Their lips met in a spectacular kiss that sent them soaring to the clouds--and beyond. To a place where magic exists.

The End